

Philosophize This!

The Podcast Transcripts

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Italian Pre-Socratic Philosophy

Episode #002

This is a transcript of Episode 2 on Italian Pre-Socratic Philosophy. If you're like me, when you hear the name Pythagoras you probably think of, the Pythagorean theorem. You probably have post traumatic stress flashbacks to 7th grade pre-algebra class and all the turmoil he caused you there. you know, $A^2 + B^2 = C^2$. but it turns out, as ill explain in a second, you may have been mad at the wrong guy all along. like all of these early philosophers, not much is known for sure, most of the information we have is hearsay from other future philosophers, most of the time those future philosophers are just 2 guys, Plato and Aristotle. but in the case of Pythagoras, this lack of hard facts and general ambiguity is at an extreme. to history, Pythagoras is known almost as a mythical figure, i mean we know he existed...we know for sure he believed in reincarnation and that he had a thing for numbers, but as far as everything else, saying that Pythagoras the man himself did it, is speculation. see, most of the stuff we know about him was written down by his followers. followers that were vowed to secrecy and saw him as an exalted figure, like a messiah. and all that secrecy fueled a TON of speculation from people that weren't his followers, which no doubt contributed this mythical figure status that he had. But why would his followers see him as a messiah? cause he named himself a messiah. and this is how I remember Pythagoras, I think of him as the "crazed cult leader" from ancient Greek philosophy. cult leader is probably a little unfair, but only because of the modern connotation associated with the term cult leader. He definitely was at the helm of a religious cult back then. His love of mathematics and astronomy probably began when he was young when he visited Egypt and Miletus, and its not farfetched to think that he would've studied under the Milesian school of thought, remember that's where Thales and Anaxamander came from that we talked about last episode. i mean, he grew up right next to them, he certainly would have heard about them and was born into the kind of social standing that would've allowed

him the luxury to travel and study. but around the age of 40, he started gathering together these followers who saw him as a religious sage, and set up a commune in a town called Croton, in southern Italy. a few different sources say when he first started up he had around 300 members of this commune and everything he's known for comes from the work he did when he was inside of this commune, and because of how unclear it is whether he himself came up with any ONE theory or whether it was one of his followers attributing it to his master...the brains behind the operation, historians just kind of lump everything under this one umbrella of Pythagoreanism. And this applies to everything, even the famous Pythagorean theorem itself. Its not hard to imagine a modern day example of this exact situation happening, i mean imagine if tomorrow someone like, Barrack Obama started up a scientific movement called...Obamareanism. and he has a lot of people on this quest with him, so long after he lives a long healthy life and dies at the age of 124, Obamareanism is still going...50 years after his death some guy that still calls himself an Obamarean comes up with a pretty important scientific theorem. 2500 years later when students are learning about it in science class might call it the Obamarean theorem, and they also might mistakenly think Obama himself came up with it. Now, Pythagoras himself wouldn't have been offended, he wasn't doing all of this stuff to become famous, or to leave some legacy. he was doing it simply for the love of wisdom. which reminds me, the word philosopher...means lover of wisdom. 'philo' means love, 'soph' means wisdom, and Pythagoras himself was actually the first guy to coin the term. he came up with the word, philosopher. now, all of his followers may have called themselves Pythagoreans, but they definitely were philosophers. imagine being one of these cult members...imagine Pythagoras convincing you that its a great idea for you to join this commune he is starting up in Southern Italy. It really speaks to how likeable and authoritative Pythagoras must have been. You know how there's IQ which is your intelligence quotient and then there's NQ which is your networking quotient, or your ability to interact socially and influence people? Pythagoras was no doubt a genius in both of these areas. I mean, this commune wasn't like, hey come live in a village with us and study math every once in a while. This was a complete lifestyle overhaul. and a

restrictive overhaul at that. Not only was it dedicating your entire life to the pursuit of knowledge in math, music and astronomy, the 3 areas they saw as the most important those were only half of it. The other half was the religious side of the cult and all the behavioral restrictions. so you may be asking, how can Pythagoras go from a young person that is just generally fascinated with the way the Egyptians did math to thinking he's a messiah for some movement? i think the best way to understand is to put yourself in the shoes of someone studying math at the time. You know when you're in math or science class and you sign your name at the front of the textbook and you can look back at the people that had the book before you for generations, you can actually see this is the same book Abe Lincoln used when he was a kid...they didn't have that thick textbook, let alone one that had been around for hundreds of years. Math was done completely differently. When these people thought about the number four, it wasn't the number 4...it was the essence behind the number four...like the number four is just a representation of a quantity of four things. when these people drew a right triangle on the ground and were thinking about the squares of the different sides of it, they actually drew a square with the side of the triangle being one side of the square and counted the units. math to them consisted of little things, little experiments they could repeat and understand what the world was in a world that was no where near understood. we take so many things for granted today that are explained in modern physics and chemistry that they had no idea about, so to realize that adding together the squares of two sides of a right triangle was equal to the square of the hypotenuse...that was cool. But to realize...that applies to all right triangles and there are no exceptions to that rule...and to feel that you really understand something about the essence of that triangle and the laws that govern the sides of that triangle or any triangle in the universe? That must have been...mind numbing. I mean here's this giant universe with tons of mystery we know nothing about...and here's a formula we arrived at to explain one part of it. They saw these mathematical proofs as the way the universe could be understood, or as they put it, number is the ruler of all forms. So in that sense, they kind of jumped to a conclusion, but its easy to see how back then, these proofs must have seemed like magic, or god given

wisdom...not only that, but its also to see how a man like Pythagoras, the messenger boy arriving at these conclusions could have seemed like a demigod himself. The difference between Pythagoras and what we think of as a modern cult leader is that the modern cult leaders start these things up so they can have money, power or influence, its not crazy to think that Pythagoras actually thought of himself as relaying some sacred information. whenever i think of this concept I love to contrast it with the fact that the SAME information that was so powerful it made a man believe he was a messiah in a religious movement 2500 years ago, is the midterm for 7th grade pre-algebra in today's world. It really is a testament to human progress and just how far we've come as a species. and how about a testament to how far were capable of going. It must have been easy to jump to a conclusion like they did given the fact that there were other conclusions they arrived at in other areas of study that completely reinforced this concept of numbers being the rulers of all forms. They saw math, music and astronomy as three areas of study that were completely interrelated and understanding them was the key to understanding the universe. Pythagoras is said to have stumbled across ...much of the basis for his understanding of ratios and proportions as they relate to numbers... when he was actually studying the relationship between musical intervals and harmonies. It kind of makes sense too, because understanding the difference between two music notes is similar to understanding the difference between two numbers. in every single source about Pythagoras I've read there's this story about him getting a revelation about musical notes while listening to blacksmiths work so there must be some merit to the story...it basically says that by complete chance, Pythagoras just decided to listen to two blacksmiths working...i guess there wasn't HBO back then...he had to entertain himself some way, and the two blacksmiths were hammering on their anvils and one had an anvil exactly twice the size of the other anvil, so when their hammers beat on the anvil, it made the same note...just one octave apart. an octave in the world of music is the same notes, just 8 intervals up or down. so its the same note...for example...and I'm sorry for this "LA! LA!" remind me to never sing in a podcast again...it wasn't just the 8 note difference between octaves of each other, Pythagoras found that harmonies that we hear all the

time, even in music today were just simple mathematical ratios...like in the case of a major scale, a major third would be 3 intervals up or a fifth, five intervals up. numbers governing acoustic relationships, just reinforced the idea that numbers could explain everything in the universe. In 1865, John Newlands used these relationships that Pythagoras found and used it as the basis for his discovery that chemical elements are arranged according to atomic weight, and that those with similar properties occur at every eighth element...like notes of a musical scale. this became known as the law of octaves and it lead to the development of the periodic table of elements was organized.again, you can see how finding constants when explaining things with numbers could reinforce the idea that everything can be understood through numbersWe can't really blame them, though. It's scary to live in a world without explanation..and in a world without explanation, its easy to try to apply meaning to things that really might not have that much significance. But as long as we understand what could have led them to think this way, I think its really interesting to hear what the Pythagoreans thought the best way to live life was. If you lived in this Pythagorean cult, you couldn't eat meat. you were a vegetarian. the reasoning behind this was because Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation, more specifically the transmigration of souls to different species. they thought that by eating other animals, you were essentially eating your grandma who just died and was reincarnated into the body of a chicken. what is this based on? well the story goes that one day some men Pythagoras was hanging around were beating a dog and it cried out in pain... and he told them to stop because he swore he heard the voice of his friend crying out in the dogs yelp. that dog had to be his friend...reincarnated...now I'm not sure if that's true , but how about we take out the reincarnation part and just arrive at the revelation to...not beat dogs? what kind of sick people was he hanging around anyway.when it came to reincarnation, the Pythagoreans believed that this cycle of constantly dying and being reincarnated into a new body was some sort of punishment, and that the goal of life was to end the cycle of reincarnation and finally be set free to live eternally in the blessed realm...either the sun or the moon...i guess you take your pick. for the record I pick the moon.only by adhering to a strict

regimen of behavioral restrictions and thought can you end the cycle of reincarnation. but where did they get this idea? historians say they may have gotten this idea from an OLD mystic ancient Greek religion called Orphism. There's a story that basically conveys the same idea...the story of Dionysus. basically Zeus had sex with his mom and they had a beautiful baby girl...who Zeus then had sex with, once she was of legal age of course, and then they had a kid named Dionysus....you know what? long story short...man is part evil because of some bad stuff the gods did. one night. but the concept that man is part evil and the only way to cure himself of this evil that he is born with is to live a life of restriction and thought was an Orphic concept, and for Pythagoras the thought portion of this was math music and astronomy. so why did he pick those concepts as opposed to something else? because the understanding of those topics led to the understanding of the universal truths that govern the universe. eternal truths...truths that never change. And its pretty awesome to think about it the way they did...they thought that the closest thing a person can achieve to immortality is to understand these eternal truths and to try to live in harmony with them. by understanding concepts that are eternal, that's the closest man will ever get to being immortal. A couple other interesting facts about Pythagoreans, A lot of people claim Pythagoreans established the idea of deductive reasoning...but if you look at the sources where these people get their information...there isn't anything particularly conclusive. You can kind of say they had a rudimentary version of it, but the first use of axioms is obvious in the work of Euclid 500 years later and there is a lot of deductive reasoning done by Parmenides, but not by Pythagoras. Pythagoras and his followers really innovated the idea of studying mathematics solely for the sake of intellectual satisfaction. rather than trying to construct buildings better or some other practical gain. One other very notable contribution is he was the first one to make the statement that arriving to conclusions through reason was greatly superior to evidence gathered through the senses. There have been hundreds of rationalist philosophers that would go on to arrive at notable conclusions themselves, but one of the best examples of this was Plato and the idea of using reason to arrive at conclusions was the BASIS of his super famous theory of forms. Pythagorean thought went on to develop

in small pockets over the years even though the commune was no longer around. The thoughts developed eventually went on to greatly influence Nicolaus Copernicus and Johanness Keppler's treatise on the harmony of the universe among others. I think of Parmenides as the dark, dark cloud of deductive reasoning. To the presocratic philosophers, Parmenides represented this dark cloud on the horizon, because all these ideas great thinkers before him were so sure of, he threatened to destroy everything they thought they knew with his ideas. Parmenides was a huge curve ball in philosophy. a turning point in early philosophy, people like Thales and Anaxamander they tried to explain how the cosmos came to existence, parmenides explained how it couldn't have come into existence in the first place. everyone before him tried to explain the phenomena we saw in the changing world...he seemed to be able to prove that nothing ever changed, that those phenomena didn't exist and that true reality was that everything was one single unchanging blob. Nobody saw this coming...he came completely out of left field with this. One day, he just told everyone a story about taking a chariot ride in the clouds and coming across a goddess who for some reason decides to let him in on the secret that...oh yeah everything that every man has thought before you is completely wrong and let me just give you the real answers. I mean who was this guy, Parmenides, just completely out of the blue he comes up with a single poem that calls into question everything that everyone had every thought they'd known previously? It must have seemed somewhat believable that it was given to him by some goddess, because its not like he was building on the ideas of any previous thinker. This was the first time anyone had ever brought deductive reasoning to the table in any real sense. And it...was...huge. Imagine being the first person to discover some other really effective way of doing something that changed the way the whole world thought about things. Like....imagine if you were the first guy in history to tie your shoes with the two bunny ears method. Old people would be looking at your perfectly tied shoes...resenting you. You'd cast doubt into the hearts of all the loop swoop and pullers that lived alongside you. You'd shake things up in the shoe tying community, that's for certain, and Parmenides did exactly that with his deductive reasoning. The only surviving poem, and thus all we know about

Parmenides is actually really difficult to read because he was one of only two presocratic philosophers that wrote all of his thoughts down in something called hexameter verse. It's a structured poetic style of writing that was pretty common at the time...famous poets like Homer and Hesiod wrote in. Philosophers knew that talking about the nature of the cosmos and existence wasn't the most entertaining concept to the average person. It was by no means a Broadway musical. So to try to make it more digestible to people, he tried to write it in an entertaining poetic way so people would not only be able to enjoy the poem, but also be exposed to his heady concepts. It's actually a brilliant idea...Parmenides in this way reminds me of C.S. Lewis how he wrote this masterpiece of literature...the chronicles of Narnia that people deeply enjoy, and it turns out it was an allegory of Christianity the whole time...like Jesus is the lion and what not. Anyway, onto his deductive reasoning and how it changed philosophy. His idea was actually pretty simple, but he phrases it in a way that makes it a little difficult to follow. He says...what is is....and what is not is not...in other words if something exists it exists if something does not exist it does not exist and its impossible for something to exist and not exist at the same time right? he says that because of this, a point in time where the universe was in a state of nothing existing is impossible because things exist now and nothing can come into existence from a place where nothing exists. In other words, something cannot come from nothing and so the universe must have always existed in some form and is eternal. If the universe came into existence... what caused it to come into existence in the first place? what made it start then as opposed to earlier or later? Philosophers hadn't really thought of this before, they were content with accepting that...they were here and it did exist and everything has a beginning, so lets try to think of some interesting explanations for how it happened that don't involve gods. He also thought that we cannot speak of what "is not" or what doesn't exist. For example, to think about a unicorn is to essentially think about nothing...because it doesn't exist. To talk about a unicorn, to Parmenides is just to be making meaningless sound, because it doesn't exist. The way Parmenides sees it, if change was possible it would first have to be one way and then change into another way that its not right now, but we can't speak of what is not, so we cant speak of change.

Therefore change is impossible. He uses this same logic to say that nothing actually moves either cause it would have to be in one place first...etc. Parmenides thought the universe was one, eternal, unchanging massive blob with no empty space inside that is like a sphere. And at the time Greeks saw the sphere as the most perfect and divine of all the geometric forms. If any part of you is annoyed with Parmenides for coming to all these confusing conclusions, take some solace in the fact that he lived his entire life walking around in a world that he logically concluded to be a complete illusion, a world where change and movement is impossible so doing anything, as far as he saw it was absolutely pointless. The picture Parmenides begins to paint begins to look familiar right? There seems to be a common thread among most of the presocratics where they use this amazing ability to think they've been given to arrive at a fundamental conclusion about all the stuff around them...and then they spend the rest of their time trying REALLY REALLY hard to apply that one concept to as many things as possible sometimes even the entire universe. With Democritus and Leucippus it was their atoms like we talked about last episode, with the Pythagoreans it was numbers and harmony, but in the case of Parmenides its pretty extreme. he basically is saying that although we see motion and change and birth and death...that none of it is actually happening. which completely contradicts what we see. not to mention, hes saying we cant speak of "what is not"...but by talking about the fact that birth, death motion or change, he IS speaking of "what is not". and that just doesn't make any sense Parmenides. he would've said, yeah, you think you're speaking of something that doesn't exist but really you're just talking about nothing, you should abandon these "common sense prejudices" you have. see, the fact you think you're talking about something that doesn't exist is based on evidence you've gathered through the sense organs, if what you think you see with your senses and what reason tells you contradicts each other...reason should always be held in higher regard because the senses are deceptive and cant be trusted. He definitely was a weird guy. but he certainly wasn't a dumb guy. This idea that he is talking about is, in my opinion his greatest contribution to philosophy. It was the fact that all the thinkers that came before him and their perceptions of the world were actually full of contradictions.

We use our senses and think we see changes happening all around us, but reason, at least as far as he saw it, tells us change is impossible. Not only was this a strong victory for proponents of using reason to arrive at conclusions as opposed to the senses, but it gave credence to the idea of accepting the outcome of an experiment despite what might immediately appear to be rational or irrational through the senses. In other words, you have to trust the science. This idea that Parmenides had about the ordinary world that we see just not existing...that contrast with common sense was too difficult for anyone to swallow. Future philosophers wanted to agree with him, but they just couldn't accept that everything they see isn't real. So they took his idea that there is a world where there is an ultimate reality where things aren't born and doesn't change or die, and added onto it an explanation for the seemingly changing world that we perceive. Like Atomism. Empedocles was one of these philosophers that added into Parmenides. He thought that the whole world was made up of 4 elements that were in themselves eternal and unchanging, but added that they had the ability to combine with each other to make up the changing world we see. According to Empedocles, he was an immortal god among men who had been given his divine status because of all the knowledge he had gained through extensive thought during his life. He would walk around everywhere in this ridiculous outfit, a purple robe, a giant golden belt, bronze shoes, and a wreath around his head like he was the Delphic oracle. And he did it on purpose...he said when he walks through a new town, he wants people to see him and wonder what he's all about and follow him around in the thousands...and it WORKED. Anyone that didn't agree with him or questioned him were complete fools. You see, he was a god and he knew of a time a long time ago when man experienced a golden age when all men lived happily together and there was no turmoil in the world. The bad news was all men at first were gods, they just lost their immortal status and were put here on earth. The good news was they all had the ability to become gods again, they just had to live the right way. Only through knowledge and following Empedocles could men can regain the divine status they once had. Like I said before, he agreed with Parmenides that the universe is eternal and that nothing is ever created or destroyed. He just tried to find a compromise that would

account for the seemingly changing world that we see everyday with our sense organs. He claimed there were four elements. Air, Water, Fire and Earth and that all things are just different recipes of different quantities of these four elements. Combine his ridiculous super-hero like getup, with his Earth, Fire, Wind and Water with his views on the forces of love and strife that I'll talk about later and he begins to sound pretty familiar. captain planet theme song Empedocles is Captain Planet. At least that's how I remember him. For anyone that is incredibly confused right now, let me explain. Captain Planet was a cartoon from the early nineties. where a group of teenagers all had the power to summon a superhero named captain planet. each one of them had a ring. there were 5 different things they called out and then a double rainbow of light shot out of their rings and captain planet arrived. these were earth, fire, wind, water and heart. If Captain Planet has any emotional context for you, it is an extremely effective way to remember Empedocles. Like I said, the crazy super-hero like getup, his views of earth fire air and water and heart symbolizing his thoughts on the forces of love and strife that we will talk about in a little. If Captain planet holds no significance to you, i humbly apologize for wasting 30 seconds of your life, and maybe consider checking out a few episodes for comedic value, you just don't see cartoons that deliver a positive message like that to kids anymore. Empedocles thought the elements, earth fire air and water, themselves do not change, they just intermingle and move around and combine with each other. This was the compromise Empedocles made to Parmenides' extreme idea that change and movement is impossible. Empedocles said that the process of the elements intermingling and moving around is what man calls "birth" or death. birth and death are just human constructs, or words, used to define different assemblies of unchanging things. this has a lot of similarities with the idea of atomism that we were talking about last episode. remember, the atoms themselves do not change, just the configuration of atoms. he saw the mixing of the different elements as similar to the mixing of colors of paint that an artist would have, when you look at a cup, you're really just looking at nature's masterful combination of these 4 elements. and this applied to anything you can see around you. what about metals? he had bronze shoes after all. all metals were actually seen as water because they

could be melted down and combined with other metals. "As painters, men well taught by wisdom in the practice of their art, decorate temple offerings they take in their hands pigments of various colors, and after fitting them in close combination, more of some and less of others, they produce from them shapes resembling all things, creating trees and men and women, animals and birds and water-nourished fish, and long-lived gods too, highest in honour; so let not error convince you in your mind that there is any other source for the countless perishables that are seen, but know this clearly, since the discourse you have heard is from a god." i like how, just for good measure he adds on at the end...by the way I'm a god so trust me. Just in case you guys didn't agree with the mixing of paint analogy I just made...as you've probably noticed he was pretty similar to Pythagoras in several ways. He WAS a Pythagorean. He believed in reincarnation. He believed that there were two forces in the universe that were constantly at battle with one another. One of them was love, which not only is responsible for bringing the elements together to make up the everyday items we see, but is responsible for human emotion, this force of love is actually what caused humans to feel sexual attraction towards each other...the other force was strife, which constantly seeks to drive the elements apart and break them down and in the case of humans its what drives people away from each other and creates problems. love and strife are constantly at battle with one another and the result of this constant battle is the changing world we perceive. see, he thought a long time ago, there was a time when love reigned supreme...it had triumphed over strife completely and all the elements were all in one sphere with love protecting them, in the middle of the universe...but then strife started attacking love and the elements got out of this protective sphere and were scatted around everywhere...and then love fought back and started grouping the elements back together, in the process, as these small quantities of elements are drawn together by love, the everyday things we see like mountains, and trees and chairs were assembled. In the current state of the world, love and strife are constantly battling one another..love combines the elements into a human or a dog and then strife tears it apart and makes it into ashes... eventually, a long time from now Empedocles says that one of them, either love or strife, will reign supreme and the entire

process will start over again. well, its a wonderful story and all, but the thing that makes it important to philosophy is that it was the first time anyone had thought of the idea of there being an intangible force responsible for the actions of the elements. before, if the whole world was made up of varying different forms of water, water itself doesn't move right? how can you explain the fact it somehow manifested itself into all this stuff? the idea of a force being behind it was revolutionary and incredibly insightful and similar to what we know of forces in modern physics. He also seems to have accurately arrived at the idea of natural selection as being the way animals survived and adapted. they owe the features that allow them to survive to the fact that there used to be MANY different species of creatures and the ones with characteristics that didn't behoove them died off before they were able to propagate...leaving only the strongest and best adapted. quote" here sprang up many faces without necks One last way you can think of Empedocles as Captain Planet is that he was a huge proponent of recycling, but not recycling cans and bottles...but ideas. He really was a giant conglomeration of several great ideas that were successful for previous philosophers in their own time. He was like Pythagoras being the crazy demigod, and he also had a whole religious message to his philosophy that was similar to Pythagoras...basically it was a positive message about living with the ways of love as opposed to strife and that all men are being punished in their current form because they sacrificed animals and ate meat. His constant battling spectrum is like the flux theory of Heraclitus. His compromise on Parmenides eternal universe being very similar to Democritus' theory on atoms, although he was a contemporary of Democritus. Anyway, legend has it that eventually Empedocles jumped into a volcano to prove that he was immortal, i don't have to tell you how that one worked out for him. but he left the world an accomplished man who came up with a theory of what everything around us is made of that was so successful that Aristotle himself heavily endorsed it with only a few corrections and it was widely seen as the truth until 18th century.

Socrates and the Sophists

Episode #003

This is a transcript of Podcast Episode 3 on Socrates and the Sophists. Try to imagine yourself as a citizen of Athens right around the 5th century BC...the city of Athens at this point is undergoing a massive period of prosperity...and there's this guy named Pericles in charge...he had just assumed the throne and is doing a really good job and this leads to a "golden age" of culture and philosophy. so naturally when things are going really well in one place...people flock to that place from all the surrounding areas... and in this case it was mostly from other Greek city-states...now as an Athenian, you would live in a democratic society that had a LOVE of its legal system. Athenians loved a good argument...they loved to be entertained...and most of the time you could find both of those things in the courthouse. Athenians would have been HUGE fans of Judge Judy...or back then it would've been "Judge Judicles"...i mean, it was exciting, if someone took you to court for something, it could affect the entire outcome of your life! problem was, language and critical thinking was still in its infancy...so defending yourself in one of these trials was not only crucial, but it was incredibly unlikely that you had the ability to argue or speak well enough to do an effective job of it. on top of all this... people were just as ambitious back then as we are today, and it was possible to work your way up the social ladder and earn a prestigious place in government, but no one was gonna vote for you if you weren't educated and well spoken. These two things created enough of a market for self-improvement that an ENTIRE industry of philosopher teachers arose called...the sophists. Now, we talked last episode about the word philosophy...the love of wisdom...but the second half of that word is sophia...which means wisdom. sophists...they have the word for wisdom in their name...they certainly were wise, but as you can see...there was no love involved here. Sophists were a mixture between ITT tech and a taco truck. they were mobile schools. and they'd teach you anything you wanted to learn about for the right price. Music...rhetoric...mathematics...grammar...it actually

does remind me of an ITT Tech commercial...there's always two women in an elevator and they're like "bob lost his job again....WHAT BOB LOST HIS JOB? WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO? I dunno! I despise my current job and i just wish i had the skills to move forward! You should call ITT Tech....they can help you specialize in...paralegal...dental assistant...SCUBA instructor...you know the marquee pops up on the bottom of the screen...ITT tech provides a very similar service to what the early sophists provided and this kind of commercial could be compared to how they used to have competitions screaming at each other trying to draw a crowd and show that they knew more than other sophists. These sorts of screaming matches combined with the just generally sleazy nature of charging A LOT of money for something that was held to be sacred made a lot of people dislike them. Not to mention the actual subject matter they were teaching was pretty shaky. remember how the demand for sophists came about because people were being called to court to defend themselves? well when all those people told these sophists they wanted to win the argument in court and learn to make a case for themselves, the sophists just taught them how to win arguments...they didn't teach them any facts or true wisdom...as a result you had hundreds of people that just became masters of rhetoric...even in cases where they probably should have been guilty they were able to win...the sophists taught these people little argument tactics like...nitpicking insignificant points...or discrediting the source of the information...They taught them to win the argument, even if they had the worse argument. this didn't make people too thrilled with the sophists.They definitely understood the power of language and its ability to influence people...one very notable sophist was named Gorgias and he wrote about language in one of his works called Encomium of Helen. it was basically a promotional flyer for his school. he wrote it with the sole intention of attracting students and getting business and to really try to make a case for why the investment of their money would yield benefits:"Just as different drugs draw forth different humors from the body – some putting a stop to disease, others to life – so too with words: some cause pain, others joy, some strike fear, some stir the audience to boldness, some benumb and bewitch the soul with evil persuasion" You can definitely see in this quote that he not only

UNDERSTOOD the power of language, but in a funny way he was using the power of language to try to recruit people to learn the power of language from him. One common thread among all the sophists was that they were skeptics. They didn't like the idea of accepting something because reason tells us it SHOULD be true...they wanted hard evidence. really, they just wanted a philosophy that made sense through the lens of everyday experience. They didn't like the ideas of Democritus or Empedocles where they said that our senses show us an artificial world and that the real world exists at the atomic level or the level of the mixing of elements. They thought human experience should be paramount...the only question was...if truth is based on a sensory experience, whose sensory experience should be the guide? One of the very first and most influential of all the sophists was a guy named Protagoras. he was friends with Empedocles, the guy that walked around in bronze shoes...if that tells you anything. Like the other sophists...Protagoras made his money teaching people not what right or wrong was, but teaching them how to argue. So it really was conveniently aligned with his job security when he decided that he believes that every argument has two sides, neither of which is more right than the other. he said he could win an argument with a worse argument if he was just more persuasive than his opponent. because of this, he concluded it is the man holding the opinion that is the measure of the worth of the argument, not the actual argument itself or the facts its based on. Or as he put it in the opening line of his most famous work "Man is the measure of all things." He took this idea one step further and applied it to everything. what is true for one person may be false for another...what is hot for one person may be cold for another... but it also applies to morals...what is right for one person may not be right for another etc...he said nothing is inherently good in itself, something is only right because a person or society judges it to be right. This idea of there being no absolutes or moral principles and that everything is subjective... is known as relativism. Protagoras didn't think truth was something that only god knew or that you could only attain by thinking and analyzing things for decades. he thought truth is what any one guy makes it...To philosophy, Protagoras is the ultra accepting, fanny pack wearing soccer mom that hands out Capri Suns at the end of the games. Now, I'm sure

we all know someone or have known someone who agrees with him. It really is a compassionate and accepting way of looking at things and people, so you can't be too mad at them. but relativism always begs the question...so if everyone is right in whatever truth they arrive at, then what about the people that condemn all other cultures and think everyone else is wrong? shouldn't they be right too? and i remember reading something Socrates said and it was something like if relativism is true...and everyone is right regardless of what they think...how can any one man be wiser than another? aren't they all correct? and also...aren't they in the business of teaching people stuff for money? why is anyone buying lessons if they already know all the truth? the sophists would've said they don't teach people anything that is better knowledge...just more useful knowledge...knowledge that can be used to benefit the person like in the courts. All of this stuff...this relativist view on morals...that there isn't a good or bad just different...and their specialty to use rhetoric and language to sometimes make the worse argument win all of this no doubt led to the negative outlook on the sophists. People always think about their argument skills and assume they only used them to do nefarious things...they have this view like the sophists sitting around teaching one OJ Simpson after another how to get off scott free. But don't forget they could have just as easily used their special ability to argue to fight for justice or do what the citizens thought was right. I mean, you can definitely find several examples of how the sophists helped advance philosophy...relativism was a direct assault on the idea of moral principles...or there just being one definition of good, or just, or whatever. and all of this discourse ended up heavily influencing Plato to address the tenants of morality and really try to base it on something eternal or stronger than one man's opinion, and if it weren't for the sophists, Plato may have never taken the time to clarify these things, and its some of his most important work. personally, I like what they had to say because it was open-minded. and, if argument was their specialty, any truly great position would have to suffer the gauntlet of sophist argument, and if it could survive that...no matter how annoying it would have been at the time, it would be a stronger more well crafted argument for the experience. So real quickly, I'd like to tie up some loose ends and help bring together all of the stuff

we've covered so far in the last 2 episodes. Now, we aren't the first people to ever study presocratic philosophy...there have been several really smart people that have categorized all of these thinkers and ideas in detail...and THEY wanted to find a way to remember it more effectively too. As you can probably imagine, they all didn't use the same method of categorizing them. If there is one thing you do outside of this podcast this week, you NEED to look at a graph of the presocratic philosophers that is really common. It's really important guys...you have to see the visual...it will really help you put all the philosophers that we've covered so far into context. We gonna have it up on the website...but it's probably faster for you to just go to GOOGLE images and type in presocratic graph and you'll see it. On the left it shows the years they lived..on the right are the names of them...color coded to a legend that designates the school of thought they came from, and arrows pointed to all of their students or the people they influenced. Now there are different ways people categorize these presocratics...One example is what we've already talked about...the Ionian and Italian classes...those are two geographic regions, so if you wanted to remember them based on where they came from, that would be one method of remembering. But there are other ways...sometimes these historians of the presocratics will break them down by their ideas...and this usually ends with them being separated into 6 or so different schools of thought. Now these will probably never...ever come up in a conversation you're having about philosophy, but think of it this way, if this ever comes up on jeopardy...people are gonna look at you like you are the rain man...then you just stand up and go...is this TEEN jeopardy? no? too easy and just walk out of the room..you will be an instant legend.. but another reason is, you'll see why we learned about the particular philosophers we learned about...each one of them comes from a different one of these 6 schools. and I've even seen a couple guys break down the 6 schools into 2 separate categories further...they divide them into monists and pluralists. monists are philosophers who thought the universe is made up of one fundamental substance. the three schools that thought this way are the Milesian school, you know that's where Thales and Anaxamander came from...the Pythagorean school....the school formed by Pythagoras and his followers...and the eleatic school

whose most notable member was Parmenides. It was called the Eleatic school because Parmenides came from a town called Elea in Italy. So those were the monist schools...the pluralist schools were made up of people who believed there wasn't one fundamental substance...but many fundamental substances that made up the universe. The three schools classified as pluralist would be...you guessed it...the pluralist school...that was the one Empedocles was part of with his earth fire air and water...the atomic pluralist school...which had Democritus and Leucippus at the helm...and then the sophists, who we just talked about. but it is important to note that the sophists weren't necessarily all pluralists, they just lived at the same time that pluralism was very popular...in fact they didn't care at all about what the universe was made of...they just wanted to make money. maybe if the universe was made out of coach purses they would've cared. If you look at the graph...it moves in a pretty deliberate direction towards one guy. Not only was he highly educated from all the conflicting schools of thought that existed at the time, but he took all that he learned from them and created his own completely new way of thinking, a way of thinking that made him one of the biggest names in philosophy. His name, was Socrates. Socrates must have smelled like the dumpster behind panda express. He had famously terrible hygiene. People would say he went everywhere without shoes, never bathed, never cut his hair, not to mention he wasn't very easy on the eyes to begin with. there's a story of him being challenged to a beauty contest as a joke against a guy named Critobulous, where both sides have to make an argument as to why they are more beautiful than the other...they actually went through with everything just to entertain themselves...this is the kind of stuff people did back then...Socrates starts making his case for why he is more beautiful than his opponent Critobulous: "Do you hold, then, that beauty is to be found only in man, or is it also in other objects?" Crit. "In faith, my opinion is that beauty is to be found quite as well in a horse or an ox or in any number of inanimate things. I know, at any rate, that a shield may be beautiful, or a sword, or a spear." Soc. "How can it be that all these things are beautiful when they are entirely dissimilar?" "Why, they are beautiful and fine," [Note] answered Critobulus, "if they are well made for the respective functions for which we obtain them, or if they are naturally

well constituted to serve our needs.”Soc. “Do you know the reason why we need eyes?”Crit. “Obviously to see with.”“In that case, it would appear without further ado that my eyes are finer ones than yours.”“How so?”“Because, while yours see only straight ahead, mine, by bulging out as they do, see also to the sides.”Crit. “Do you mean to say that a crab is better equipped visually than any other creature?”Soc. “Absolutely; for its eyes are also better set to insure strength.”I love this story because it encompasses a lot of what Socrates was. he had a great sense of humor, he was famously unkempt and through asking Critobulous to give his definition of what beauty is, he is able to use the contradictions in his definition of beauty to make a case for why he is more beautiful, even though it is obvious to everyone that is isn't. he lost the contest by the way...but it didn't matter...What he succeeded in doing is that he showed Critobulous that maybe he didn't know exactly what beauty was. Critobulous said when things are well made for the respective functions for which we obtain them...they are beautiful...but by asking him a series of questions, he proved that the answer couldn't be that simple.This...is...what he is known for. He never started a university, he never lived in a castle, he never even wrote any of his thoughts down, he didn't believe written text was the way to do philosophy anyway...to Socrates the ONLY thing philosophy was, was discussion, questioning and argument. His particular brand of it was called The Socratic Method.The best guess historians can make as to how he developed this intense questioning style is in a famous story about friend of his going to the oracle at Delphi, which was essentially a rotation of an older peasant woman that lived in the area that was on drugs, who apparently channeled the god Apollo...and Socrates's friend asked the woman who the wisest man in the world was...she said Socrates...his friend came back and said hey Socrates the oracle said you're the wisest man in the world! Socrates was absolutely shocked by this. he went instantly to work to get to the bottom of it...no victory dance or anything he just started... he went around to all the wisest people he knew and interrogated them to get to the bottom of it. he realized that these people only thought they knew a lot...when you ask the right questions...it turns out their knowledge is false.quote from apology:"I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he

knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know. This method he used to question people and ultimately point out how little they actually know was his greatest contribution to philosophy... there's a quote from a guy named Cicero who was writing about Socrates and said: "Socrates however (was the) first (who) called philosophy down from heaven, and placed it in cities, and introduced it even in homes, and drove (it) to inquire about life and customs and things good and evil." This quote is amazingly insightful for someone who lived almost a half millennium later... before Socrates, philosophy was done only by men, and only by men who were born into or were clever enough to attain a lot of money, so they didn't have to spend their days working, they spent them thinking. Once Socrates realized that the reason he was wiser than everyone is because he can admit that he knows nothing, he set out to correct the citizens of Athens and fix their assumptions and preconceptions. He hit the streets... like those Mormons that come to your house on their 10 speed bicycles... in the market place... a public square... in front of the courthouse... and he just started accosting anyone unfortunate enough to not look busy. He'd walk up to them with a very self effacing manner saying things like... oh please help me i am an ignorant person, and I'm wondering if you can help me get to the bottom of something... what is justice? or what is virtue? people would give their, obviously flawed response, and he would just lay into them... questioning them pointing out contradictions or exceptions and eventually getting to a place where the person was either angry at him because he made them feel stupid or angry at him because he wouldn't leave them alone. either way they were angry. this didn't make him a lot of friends around town. he even did it to judges or prestigious generals or government officials... it didn't take long before he had so many people mad at him for doing this that they started labeling him a sophist. but he didn't care if people liked him or not, his main goal wasn't to make friends, it was to help others discover how little they knew and get them on the path to truth. he compared himself to a midwife, but instead of helping deliver babies, he questioned everyone and helped deliver new ideas into the world. But his midwifery didn't stop in

his lifetime...the Socratic method can also be called inductive argument... this is where a set of premises based on experience is first established to be true and then shown to lead to a universal truth. Inductive argument was used by Aristotle and even Francis Bacon who used it as a major influence in the scientific method. That had a little bit of an impact...Socrates eventually humiliated enough people in public that they banded together and he was put on trial, at the ripe age of 70. The entire story of his trial, his defense, his conviction and his reactions are cataloged by Plato in one of his most famous works, The Apology. And because Socrates didn't write anything down, all we have to go off of are other people's perspectives, in the case of Socrates that comes down to four people, Plato, Xenophon, Aristophanes and Aristotle. Xenophon was an old friend of Socrates but he doesn't go into much detail and often put his own theories in the mouth of Socrates as if to give them merit by association, so we can't really trust him. Aristophanes was a play writer who made a ridiculous caricature of Socrates as a character in a comedic play, so he's not a good source. and Aristotle wasn't even born until after Socrates was dead. so that brings us to the last guy...Plato. Plato was his student and deeply respected Socrates, so he probably isn't the best testimony if we want to know the truth. but he really is all we have, and of the 4 of them, Plato's testimony is usually held in the highest regard, especially because he was the closest to Socrates. but one thing is for sure, although these 4 sources vary considerably about who Socrates was, it's a pretty good chance that the similarities that we find in all 4 of them are accurate right? To understand why Socrates was put on trial in the first place and the kind of biased jury he faced, it's good to know about the political climate that existed in Greece at the time...five years before the trial of Socrates Athens and Sparta ended the Peloponnesian war. Sparta won by the way. So Athens was turned into an oligarchy ...taken over by a nice group of gentlemen known as "the thirty tyrants" in the year 404 BC...they committed such gruesome genocide that they were overthrown only a year later...now, it took a couple years to sort things out, and democracy was finally restored...Socrates was being tried only 2 years after democracy had been restored in Athens...and back then 2 years was nothing...so they were really uneasy and testy

towards anyone who was questioning government or trying to evoke change. The charges that they eventually placed against him.. were corrupting the young and denying the gods of the state and introducing new gods. see, there was no separation of church and state...in fact, quite the contrary... ONLY the state had the power to choose what was a suitable god to worship or not worship, and it didn't look very good for Socrates being a guy that used to walk around claiming to be getting advice from this thing that followed him around called "Diemonionn" or his personal guardian angel or something like that, people started to ask him about it and he was like...what this guy? Diemonionn?? no...its just flying around giving me advice all the time...its not a god or anything...he was treading on thin ice..take all the personality traits we've discussed thus far, and now imagine what you would think of Socrates when an extremely popular play is released with him as a central character. the play was by Aristophanes and it was called "clouds"... Socrates was depicted as a complete moron, it was a ridiculous cartoonish version of Socrates...but it was supposed to be that way, it was a comedy. the goal was to make people laugh. the Socrates in the play would just ramble on about silly things...like...there is one scene where he puts his arms out and spins around in a circle screaming "I'm walking on air! I'm walking on air!" seeing how many people in modern times get their perception of the world through media or entertainment and then take no time to educate themselves about whether its true or not, its not hard to imagine this immensely popular play shaping the public's collective view on Socrates. i mean this kind of stuff happens all the time...like how many movies have you seen where a drug deal is going down...or some two-timing street hustlers are taking people to the cleaners...and for some reason its accepted as the gospel truth that if you ask a cop if hes a cop he HAS to tell you yes...It's IN THE CONSTITUTION MAN!...where? its in there SOMEWHERE man! there's a lot of words in that constitution...sometimes people just accept what they see in movies... and it doesn't seem like it was much different in the time of Socrates. the play also painted him as a sophist and people hated the sophists. The reason it was a common rumor that he was a sophist is because of his lifestyle...although he didn't take money as payment, the guy didn't shower, let alone work or know where his next meal

was gonna come from...he was broke...so he would trade sitting around having good conversation with people for meals and shelter...this is how he made his living...he just didn't take money like the sophists did, but people still saw that as taking payment for teaching people...kind of an unfair parallel to draw...the intentions of Socrates' actions and the intentions of the sophists were COMPLETELY different. all of this ...was what the people of the jury had in their heads as "what they knew" about Socrates when they first started his trial. So, Plato chronicles everything that happened during Socrates trial in his work, the apology, but although it was called the apology...Socrates didn't apologize for anything. He refused to grovel and beg for his life...it was common at the time to bring up your family and try to appeal to the sympathy of the jurors, but he refused to do that too. see, Socrates was all about doing the RIGHT thing...not about trying to get acquitted. like...in the first part of his trial when he needs to address the charges leveled against him..they were like "to the charge of corrupting the young...what say you?" He says:" is that a truth which your superior wisdom has recognized thus early in life, and am I, at my age, in such darkness and ignorance as not to know that if a man with whom I have to live is corrupted by me, I am very likely to be harmed by him; and yet I corrupt him, and intentionally, too" Basically what he's saying is...to corrupt someone is to harm them...it makes no sense to say that id harm someone...because he's younger and stronger than i am...I'm 70 years old...and he could beat me up me...so why would I ever do this? that doesn't make sense....It went down in history as one of the worst arguments ever crafted. but its not because he was incapable of defending himself, he just wasn't making decisions for the sake of staying alive or avoiding punishment. He was just trying to do what he saw as "the right thing to do" which wasn't begging the jury for mercy and manipulating people. and his main focus wasn't on defending the ACTUAL charges...he spent most of his time defending the terrible reputation that followed him into the trial. and really that boiled down to him defending the way he carried himself, like not bathing and not caring about the typical things Athenians cared about like money or status. he had to explain why he questioned people about their beliefs and embarrassed them...and in the process of explaining all this he didn't just defend the way

he lived his life...he didn't just claim he shouldn't be punished for what he does...he actually went so far as to tell the Athenians they should be thanking him for all this questioning he has bestowed upon them. So in Athenian trials there are a few different votes that the jury does in any given trial...the first one is to determine if you're guilty or not guilty...he obviously failed miserably there...the second vote was ...the person accused offers what they think a suitable punishment would be...you'd think he would start changing the unapologetic tune...but instead he decides the best course of action is to insult them a bit more...He went on to say other things in the trial like: "Are you not ashamed of heaping up the greatest amount of money and honor and reputation, and caring so little about wisdom and truth and the greatest improvement of the soul?" when he was asked what the proper punishment would be....he says that he's been doing the Athenians a favor with all of this questioning he's been throwing at them...so he suggests his "punishment" for this "crime" should be free meals for life at the expense of the state. usually this kind of thing was done for people who were victorious at the Olympic games from Athens...after he said this... during the second vote, people voted for the death penalty by a larger margin than they voted him guilty in the first place...he actually turned people from thinking he's not guilty to wanting him dead. he didn't care though...he saw death as just another one of these things people think they are wise about...but really nobody knows whether death is a bad thing or whether it is the best thing that could ever happen to you. and when he said maybe it's the best thing that can ever happen to you, he wasn't talking about going to an amusement park in the sky he was talking about a release from all the things that trouble humans on a daily basis. Quote from apology: "To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. And surely it is the most blameworthy ignorance to believe that one knows what one does not know. Like I said before, Socrates wasn't saying what he was saying to try to get the charges dropped...he was saying what he was saying with the same motives he had for doing everything else in his life...to live a "good" and

virtuous life. He was one of the first philosophers to ask...what is a "good" life? and in his opinion, a good life was getting... a sort of "peace of mind"... as a result of doing the right thing, as opposed to doing things simply because society tells you its a good idea. He didn't agree with Protagoras and most of the sophists who believed morals were relative...he believed morals were absolutes and they apply to everyone in the world the same way, regardless of what country or time period they are from. i think this is very insightful...the morals and laws of then are not the same as now....but which of them is more right? Socrates would have argued that neither of them are right and that we are in no place to even be labeling what is good or bad, because we don't even know what "good" or bad is...how can you philosophize about what is good, if you don't even know what the word good truly means...he thought that life... when you're on earth is not just some preparation for what happens after death, he thought there was a whole set of tasks and problems to tackle when you're on the planet...like thought, self reflection and striving to live a virtuous life...but the catch was, Socrates thought the only way to live a virtuous life is to know what the TRUE definitions of these virtues were...and the only way to find that was through extensive thought...he believed that the key to living a good life was understanding these virtues...virtue was the best and most important trait to have. he thought that when people don't act virtuously, and commit evil acts, that no one actually desires to do evil...if only they knew enough they would never commit acts of evil because that knowledge would then make them uncomfortable and humans all strive by their nature to be as comfortable as possible so they would never do it. now, it doesn't take a genius to realize several counter examples to this...like people addicted to cigarettes want to stop...but they cant...or various other examples where we KNOW what the correct decision is, but choose to act otherwise out of convenience. but at the time, people must have not argued with Socrates that much about it and just thought they had not reached the level of wisdom he was at...he appeared to be walking proof of this life...he was definitely seen as wise, and he seemed to never make an immoral decision. in retrospect his self-mastery was probably just the byproduct of countless hours of self-reflection. through these countless hours of thinking about things you arrive at

knowledge. he famously said there is only one good: knowledge and one evil" ignorance. knowledge is DEEPLY tied to morality...like we just said...if people KNEW enough they would never make a wrong decision, or commit an evil act. one really notable thing that makes him stand out from other philosophers around the time is that he thought that EVERYONE could be a philosopher...not just could be...but should be or must be...his most famous saying was when he was defending himself at his trial saying that "the unexamined life is not worth living." so really he thought if you were a person who just walked around aimlessly, not questioning anything...or why you believe what you believe...he doesn't think that life is worth living.to Socrates...pursuing knowledge WAS the ultimate goal of life. it isn't because it is entertaining to us...it is the reason WHY we exist. makes sense to me...but maybe I'm a little biased...like, from the time we are babies we are just...information sponges...constantly trying to learn more and gather skills that will make surviving later in life easier...but for some reason, at a certain age some people just stop...they're perfectly content with the knowledge they've gained thus far and they just call it a life. you know...honey boo boo and yelling at 12 yr olds on call of duty all day. but Socrates takes it one step further...knowledge is also is supposed to help your soul... he thought the unexamined life makes the soul dizzy and confused...where the wise soul is stable...and eventually through wisdom...all the straying that makes the soul dizzy and confused can be brought to an end. by not seeking truth...you are harming your soul and by pursuing it you are nurturing your soul. so in this case, doing good things...acting morally is in your own self-interest, which is a pretty cool way of looking at it. he said in the apology "I tell you that to let no day pass without discussing goodness and all the other subjects about which you hear me talking and that examining both myself and others is really the very best thing a man can do." Socrates was convicted to death...and with all of his friends around him crying he was forced to drink hemlock...or a poisonous broth made from a plant indigenous to Europe that actually is found in the parsley family...or if you want a modern version of hemlock just go buy a zero calorie energy drink. but Socrates died a martyr for the cause of philosophy, and his dialectical method and the questions he asked would change the way philosophy was done forever.It's really

sad, Socrates had so many enemies, just for asking questions...he really was kind of like an annoyingly inquisitive child; I think of him this way sometimes at least. I'm sure we've all had a curious little kid ask us a bunch of questions at some point in our lives...you know you say something and then they just keep asking...why? why? why? why? because I said so! adults that get angry at that either react with the because i said so or they tell the kid, you know who knows a lot about that? your mother, you should go ask her...but its funny how similar these two reactions are to the reactions Socrates would get in the public square of Athens...the because i said so would be his victims getting angry because he embarrassed them and the go ask your mother would be his victims getting angry because he wont leave them alone. These enemies of his would label him as a sophist, and its that label and the reputation that went along with his name that eventually landed him a guilty conviction to a crime he didn't commit. but Socrates wasn't a sophist. Every source of history agrees that Socrates could have EASILY avoided execution, he even could've easily defended himself, manipulated the jury with his superior intellect and been deemed not guilty. So, if a sophist was someone people despised for their ability to use rhetoric to win an argument even when they should've lost the argument...the Socrates was the furthest thing I can imagine from a sophist. He lost an argument he could've easily won, because of how much he cherished his moral principles. And just think about this for a second guys, he faced death. He knew he could easily avoid it, but to him, living life wasn't good enough in itself...living a noble life was the bare minimum. To go against his basic survival instincts was to go against hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, and I cant think of anything more admirable than what he did. In modern times, most of the characteristics of people that we admire as humans, are characteristics that are gained from going AGAINST our evolutionary instincts. Like, to see the delicious, calorie dense cupcake full of fat and sugar that our brains are telling us we need to jump on in case we cant catch and antelope next week, its an admirable person that never succumbs to that desire. Or to be a selfless person removed from your own ego...an ego that is put there by evolution in the interest of self-preservation...to make ME the most important thing. Make no mistake, what

Socrates did went against the most deeply ingrained of all animal instincts, and forget philosophy for a second, he is an incredible HUMAN BEING for that. Last week I asked you if there is anything you care about so deeply that you would do it for free indefinitely, because its not about the return you get for it. Think about that thing that is really important to you, and philosophize this: Is there anything you believe in so deeply that you would picket on its behalf in the streets? Is there anything you believe in so deeply that you would die for it? thanks for listening.

Plato

Episode #004

This is a transcript of Podcast Episode 4 on Plato. This episode was really close to being a two-part episode. When you're dealing with philosophers that are as influential as Plato and have a body of work as extensive as Plato's, it starts to become very difficult to make one single 45 minute conglomeration of it all. A guy named Alfred North Whitehead famously said that all of western philosophy "consists of a set of footnotes to Plato" and his work. Footnotes! I mean, by the end of this episode ... you're gonna understand why he said that. and you'll understand why it was almost a two-parter. Plato wrote 27 treatises...practically 27 full length books...and the reason I decided to keep it down to one part is because I saw the content that was going to be in the second episode and I asked myself what I would want in a philosophy podcast. I don't think anyone here is listening to this podcast so they can be the...curator of the Plato museum or something, I don't think anyone wants to know what the guy's favorite color was...you want to know the essentials. What were his most notable contributions to philosophy...notable being ones that ended up influencing future philosophers and shaping the world we live in. And now that were dealing with philosophers that have most of if not all of their work surviving to this day, we can't cover everything. Plato wrote a treatise about the nature of the physical world and human beings and the origins of the universe called the Timaeus. Its brilliant. Its fascinating, but not necessarily game changing in the philosophical world. So what I'm gonna do, out of respect to the people that don't care to hear about the non-essentials of these philosophers, starting this week with the Timaeus and any other non-essential work of future philosophers, I'm gonna write up a synopsis of it and send it out as additional content with the weekly email I send out to let people know a new episode came out. Uh, anyone whose interested enough in philosophy to want to expand their understanding of it even further to that level...uh my hats off to you. you are awesome. let me be the guy that digs through dozens of sources to bring you an unbiased

account of it. you can sign up to get an email when a new episode comes out on Philosophizethis.org, onto Plato. Plato experienced heartbreak in 399 BC. He watched from the sidelines in horror as his teacher, friend and mentor Socrates was put on trial and convicted to death... and there was nothing he could do about it. He was angry with the city of Athens, and rightfully so...their witch hunt mentality following the Peloponnesian war killed his best friend ... and he decided he needed a little change of scenery. A 12 year change of scenery. It was like the movie Wild Hogs..He left town crestfallen...went on an extended road trip where he learned a lot about the world, and a little about himself along the way. It was a transformative road trip. It changed the entire way he looked at the world for the rest of his life. You could almost think of this road trip as an extension and finishing of his education...he studied under Socrates for a long time, learning the Socratic method and argument, and then he studied abroad. He studied with Euclides, Theodorus, the Pythagorean...some say he made it all the way to Egypt. Now what happened next is still open for debate. Some sources say he was captured towards the end of his road trip and sold into slavery, uh then his friends rescued him and brought him back to Athens, some say something else triggered the end of the journey, but what is certain is that SOMETHING made him decide in 387 BC to return to Athens and found his infamous school called "the academy" a school that would stay operational for almost 900 years in one form or another, a school whose name is where we get our modern word academic. He took it upon himself with this new school of his to not only catalog the thoughts of his beloved teacher Socrates but to also foster and develop future philosophers. But Plato wasn't satisfied with the definition of the word philosopher. Pythagoras's view that its a lover of wisdom wasn't good enough for him, he felt more was necessary to be a good candidate to go to his school. Plato didn't like how the definition of philosopher included people that just always loved to hear a new fact. I'm sure we've all known someone like who hes talking about...some guy...buys a diet peach Snapple, looks under the cap and sees, did you know your body is made up of 80% water? and then runs around telling everyone about it endlessly. Now, I have no problem with this guy...and neither does Plato, aside from the annoying evangelizing of a random

fact...but Plato didn't think this guy should be considered a philosopher. Plato would see him as a sightseer, someone who enjoys wisdom for practical benefits or for the spectacle of it all, not for the wisdom itself. Plato thought Non philosophers live in a sort of dreamlike state, they see things they think are beautiful and naively think that the objects themselves encompass what beauty is...really, if they looked deeper what they would see is...beauty itself. He didn't think to be a philosopher you should be pursuing wisdom because you love to revel in the fact of the day...a true philosopher is someone who uses their brain as merely a tool in the process of arriving at wisdom. Now, developing future philosophers through his school was only half of his initial plan, he also was committed to continuing the work of his friend and mentor, Socrates. As we talked about last episode, he wrote the apology, which was the story of Socrates's trial, defense and conviction. But he was no where near done preserving his name. See, Plato was another one of these brilliant philosophers that chose to write down their work in an entertaining and sometimes poetic way to try to get people to listen to the ideas underneath the story. And Plato was...really good at it. he was a philosopher, but many historians say that his writing is THE BEST writing in all of ancient Greece...and i agree...you have to read some of this stuff guys...you can even buy them in paperback at Barnes and Noble...even the modern translations keep your interest...which is saying something...considering it was meant to keep the interest of people that lived thousands of years ago. It's really high quality stuff. A lot of what made it so entertaining was that he wrote it as a story, with people just having normal conversations about things, and then eventually casually weaving in a philosophical discussion about some abstract idea. Plato would use REAL PEOPLE...REAL NAMES...Real personalities of people that lived at the time and use them as a mouthpiece to deliver his philosophy. A guy I went to school with said to me once that Plato's writing is like crossover fan-fiction. And its true! This is a great modern comparison...for anyone that doesn't know, crossover fan fiction would be like if a crazed fan wrote a short story about Edward and Bella from the Twilight franchise enrolling in Hogwarts and meeting the cast of Harry Potter. Plato would have different philosophers and public figures having conversations that they never actually had, sometimes even

people that didn't even live at the same time. Plato would, often times, need a character in these stories that people could perceive as the quintessentially WISE person...and whenever that demand arose, he chose to evoke the name of the wisest person he knew...Socrates...He was consciously typecasting Socrates as a WISE person in every book so that the legacy of Socrates would be that he was a wise person...kind of like how certain actors are typecast in modern movies...like if I saw Michael Cera walking down the street, I would instantly jump to a conclusion and assume he is a meek, reserved person even though that's based on absolutely nothing...I don't know Michael Cera...really the only thing that tells me is he plays that character really well...Plato was no doubt deliberately doing this in the case of Socrates, making him the WISE man in his dialogues to leave a legacy. Unfortunately, it led to a little bit of confusion...Socrates was a philosopher himself, and he never wrote anything down...so by making him the central character in a dialogue that's actually conveying Plato's philosophy, it can sometimes be difficult to discern which views are the views of Socrates and which are the views of Plato himself. 27 treatises. And all these are separated down into 3 distinct periods based on when they were written ...and each of these periods mark large changes in Plato's way of thinking and the subject matters covered. see, in Plato's early dialogues he deals with issues that concerned Socrates exclusively ... not only that, he addressed them in the way Socrates would have addressed them...his Socratic method...its almost like he felt an obligation to carry on Socrates's legacy after he was put to death...but then throughout the chronology of his writing, the Socrates in his writing starts dealing with more issues of government...metaphysical claims etc. the fact that Socrates changes and is a completely different person in one writing as opposed to another, it shows the progression of Plato as a philosopher...and really it doesn't really matter that much. Socrates wasn't the kind of guy that had a set of unfaltering beliefs anyway...remember he vehemently swore that he knew nothing and was always trying to get to the bottom of what things actually were. What Plato has succeeded in doing in this case is to keep the spirit of Socrates alive...the ever changing ever questioning spirit of the Socratic method. An example of this continuation of Socrates and the way he did philosophy lies

in one of his treatises from the early years called the symposium...The symposium is one of Plato's most famous works...and keep in mind...all the characters from this dialogue are written by Plato...just revel in the sheer genius of how well he encapsulates each of the characters and the reputation that they had, writing YEARS later probably DECADES later depending on who you believe. And its not like he had a private stenographer sitting in the corner at the dinner party...try recounting a conversation you had 15 years ago! the word symposium means, a drinking party...Plato writes about a fancy dinner party where several different people take turns after dinner standing up in front of the group and giving their thoughts on and trying to get to one of these deep Socratic definitions of the concept of love...how it starts..what the end goal is when you love someone...whether it overall is actually a benefit to mankind or not...All kinds of people were at this dinner party... generals like Alcibiades, playwrights like Aristophanes and most notably, Socrates. Aristophanes, being a playwright that writes comedy gives a quasi humorous and metaphorical account for what love is. he talks about a time when men and women were actually fused together, two heads four arms four legs and we would roll around everywhere...There were three sexes back then apparently..all male, all female, and the "androgynous," which was half male, half female. The all males were said to have descended from the sun, the females from the earth and the androgynous couples from the moon. Apparently we were a little feisty when we had four arms and we tried to take over the god realm, and Zeus was JUST ABOUT to throw lightning at us and kill us all, but he decided...he wanted to, but he didn't want to deprive himself of all the offering and sacrifices that humans were giving him, so he just set his lightning bolts from kill to stun mode and separated us in half. That way they could get TWICE the offerings they were getting before.Aristophanes refers to sexual attraction or erotic love as the desire humans have to find their other half...they may seek it out for their entire lives without finding it, but the urges and feelings that attach us to people is our way of trying to get back our other half that was taken from us. Apparently this is also why people often say that they feel "whole" when they are in love with someone. To put it another way, Aristophanes believes love is actually a quest...a pursuit to fill areas that you're lacking in

that were once yours. Later on in the dinner party, Socrates doesn't agree with him...he agrees that it is a quest, but he doesn't think we love something because at one point it belonged to us...he thinks we love something because we find it beautiful or good. Socrates breaks down the concept of love and tries to distill it down to its essence, as he would ...he claims to have gotten his enlightened account of what love is from a conversation he once had with an older priestess ...he explains it like this...man seeks immortality...we cant live forever...that is certain...so what we all do is seek other alternative forms of immortality....and Plato saw these alternative forms as coming down to one of 3 things...firstly, through children you know, a little piece of you is passed on through them and then again through their children, secondly, by doing some really noteworthy thing that gets you famous and written down in the history books, or thirdly you can create some body of work that is evergreen or important enough that future generations hold it up in high regard, like Plato's symposium ironically enough. all three of these things are creating offspring...either physical offspring made with someone you love or intellectual offspring where we use our desire for being loved to motivate us to achieve these things...almost like we're peacocks... and the things we accomplish intellectually are colorful feathers we're adding to our tail. now these people that we want love from, we think they are beautiful, but to Plato they're just inferior copies of an IDEAL form of beauty, which we will touch on later, but what hes basically saying is that we accomplish what we choose to accomplish in life, our careers, our cars, our children all out of a love of beauty that we then transmute into motivation to get things done.I know some of you are saying...well that isn't love...that is lust, or whatever you want to call it. You're right. Plato thought that this was only the first step on a staircase of love. love can be broken down into a few different stages, each stage leading to the next stage and eventually coming to a head at the appreciation of the IDEAL form of beauty itself. it starts with a love of the person's body, or as Plato put it "eros"...or exotic love..both sexual attraction or thinking that person is an attractive person that's what we just talked about. he says that after a while of this, you eventually realize that someone you think is beautiful has a lot in common with all other people who are beautiful, therefore making

this really hot person, not as much of a rare Pokemon. There's tons of them. Then once you realize this, you realize that all the variance that the body can have that makes it beautiful is nothing in comparison to the variance and things that make the soul beautiful, or more simply to us modern folk, their personality. then, the yardstick you use to measure whether someone is beautiful or not has everything to do with their personality, even if that personality exists inside of a mangled or ugly body. Eventually, you begin to transcend EVEN the personality and stop loving individual people that inhabit an individual body, and you start to love even broader things like concepts themselves. You fall in love with things like the arts or laws, or biology or things like that and then finally, at the end of the staircase, you fall in love with the ideal FORM of beauty itself. Socrates says that if it is possible to live life anywhere, it is here. because when you are in love with a single human being, you are vulnerable. They could leave you...or die...or go live on a farm upstate like my dog did...it is a PAINFUL life of servitude this person, whereas loving the form of beauty itself you never feel vulnerable because it is eternal and unchanging. its never gonna give you up OR let you down. But here's the problem, it will NEVER love you back...and you know this. It is a perfect, eternal structure...it doesn't have any use for love...a quest searching for something you're lacking or whatever your definition is. This is what is known as, Platonic love. And it wasn't just intended to be used to find a life partner, we have e-harmony for that now. it was also supposed to be used to look past superficial properties of laws or people in government or even things like bridges. do these things just appear to be beautiful...or of substance...or should their worth be judged by the qualities that actually vary between them and other things. I could dress up like a UFC fighter...i could wear the affliction shirts and i could stack some encyclopedias on the bill of a hat so it is as flat as a UFC fighters hat...but examine me a little closer, and I DO MEAN A LITTLE, cause I'm not fooling anyone and you'll find that i don't know how to fight...at all...and Dana white is never gonna book me for a main event fight, because there is no substance behind the look.eventually he got tired of dealing with just moral issues and started trying to answer questions like the presocratics were trying to answer...about what the cosmos is made

out of and how did it get here. in a funny way, he arrived at the same conclusion about both. morals and concepts like justice and beauty, are eternal and not defined by the perception of the person seeing them...and he thought that nature and the things we saw were the exact same way...eternal, unchanging and not based on perception. Plato agreed with Socrates that finding the eternal definition of things like justice was an extremely important thing, because how can you philosophize about something accurately if you don't even understand the definition of the concepts you're philosophizing about. how can you talk about justice, without knowing exactly what justice is. to Plato, the entire quest of trying to find the definitions about these things should be done through the Socratic method...two or more people discussing something, with no malicious intentions or horse in the race, but just giving their best guess based on their own experiences and having the other guy nitpick it relentlessly. but he also asks the question, my guess is after being completely frustrated after years of wondering what anything actually is, that...if we arrived at the perfect, eternal definition of justice, beauty or whatever, how would we even be able to recognize that it was the end all, be all perfect FORM of it, and not just some flawed perception like we usually have. But not just the perfect FORM of moral concepts, how about the perfect FORM of everyday objects...what is a tree? exactly? what is a photograph? exactly? right? is there a perfect definition of what the essence of a tree is? Plato thought just as there's an illusive difficult to define version of what justice is, there's an illusive difficult to define version of what a tree is, or all physical objects for that matter... a PERFECT tree..and that all the trees we see around us are just inferior copies of that perfect tree. To put it another way, He describes it like this, when we see a tree, we know its a tree and can recognize a tree when we see one, but trees are all very different...no two of them are they same...one may have a knot here, or a random branch there...some trees have one kind of bark or one kind of leaves..there's a lot of different kinds of trees , but we still recognize it as a tree because it has a sort of a... "tree-e-ness"...uh, for anyone wondering... if it means anything, I'm the moron that decided to use "tree" as an example so id have to say the word tree-e-ness...Plato in his work used dogs and dogginess as an example but anyway, we

can recognize tree-ness, you know that thing that makes a tree a tree. We recognize it at some level and attach a definition to a tree. So if we analyze what the essence of a tree is long enough, we can understand what a "tree" is by definition. right? We can conceive of what the "perfect" tree really is, but does it actually exist anywhere in the world? no. Plato thought that that perfect tree, along with the perfect forms of EVERYTHING else that exists, including the concepts of justice and beauty, exist in a magical world of forms, that is completely separate from the material world that we live in. Humans cant see or smell or touch the world of forms, but they can think really hard for a really long time about the definitions of one of these things or concepts and access the world of forms through reason. Not only that, but to Plato, the world of forms is the TRUE reality, and that the entire world we live in and everything in it, including people, and trees and dogs ...they're all inferior copies of the quintessential person quintessential tree and quintessential dog that exists in the world of forms. This concept is known as his Theory of Forms, its a pretty strange way of looking at the world and all the things in it, so to try to put it into context and to explain what he means, This is usually the point in the podcast where I go into some long winded example that no one understands trying to relate the material to you guys, but luckily for me...Plato did it for me! except, his isn't incomprehensible at all, it's actually so genius its the thing he's most known for. It's called his Allegory of the Cave. Here's a quote from it: "Behold! human beings living in an underground den, which has a mouth open towards the light and reaching all along the den; here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move, and can only see before them, being prevented by the chains from turning round their heads. Above and behind them a fire is blazing at a distance, and between the fire and the prisoners there is a raised way; and you will see, if you look, a low wall built along the way, like the screen which marionette players have in front of them, over which they show the puppets. "To Plato, typical human existence is a pretty depressing thing. So, imagine if from the moment you were born you were tied up and held prisoner inside of a dark cave, being forced to face the dark back wall of the cave. Now, some translations say the light source is a fire, some say it is the sun, but either way

shadows are cast of you and the other prisoners tied up around you onto the back wall of the cave...now also, for the sake of including all the other things in the world, Plato includes that there is also a pathway between you and the fire where people walk by every so often and hold up everyday items, like a tree, or a dog...etc...so that the shadow of the tree or the dog is cast on the back wall of the cave. Plato says that if you talked to the prisoners, they would have no idea about the world that's going on behind them...from birth the only thing they've ever seen or known about are the shadows of the actual items being cast on the cave wall...he compares the everyday experience that humans have...seeing a tree or a dog in the real world is like seeing the shadow of the actual item on the cave wall. He continues by saying that if a prisoner manages to untie himself and turn around and look at the actual items and see the fire...or in some translations he would leave the cave and eventually see the sun, which symbolizes complete truth... he would be confused and his eyes would strain at the sun, and most likely he would turn back around and stick to the shadows because its the existence hes known for so long. Not mention he'd probably feel really dumb that hes been sitting there since he was a baby and could've untied himself this whole time and didn't realize it. Plato thought that everything on earth that we had the ability to perceive with our senses had a corresponding Form in the world of forms. When we use our senses to perceive something, like when we see it, smell it touch it, we are essentially seeing shadows on the cave wall. The only true way to know what something is, is to "untie yourself" and turn around to see them for what they actually are, and the way you do that is through reason and thought. Remember how philosophers like Democritus and Empedocles were just trying to find a compromise that accounted for the changing world we perceive, as opposed to Parmenides idea that the world is eternal and unchanging? Well, with his theory of forms, Plato was basically doing the same thing. The material world that we live in and perceive, or the shadows on the cave wall...is seemingly changing, but true reality is in a completely separate, eternal and unchanging world, the world of forms. He thought it was a philosophers job to identify as many of these forms as they can in life. Being able to untie yourself and see the truth for what it actually is

gives that person a unique perspective of understanding that no one else around him possesses. It's kind of like watching a football game with a pro football player sitting right next to you. You guys are both watching the same exact game, but he sees SO MUCH MORE than you do, he understands subtleties and strategy that you are completely ignorant to. Plato thought true wisdom did this with everything we see. here's another quote from the republic about a prisoner that manages to untie themselves: "while still blinking through the gloom, and before he has become sufficiently accustomed to the environing darkness, he is compelled in courtrooms or elsewhere to contend about the shadows of justice or the images that cast the shadows and to wrangle in debate about the notions of these things in the minds of those who have never seen justice itself?" Now, it's important to note that a lot of really smart people that don't think Plato LITERALLY thought that a separate world existed with perfect forms of everything just floating around everywhere. They say he probably was just stating in a melodramatic way that concepts like justice or beauty exist independent of just actions or beautiful things...human beings commonly mistake just actions and definition of justice as being the same thing. I mean, he did speak of a different heaven like world...but really he may have just been marking a contrast between considering what is a just action here and now and what is the eternal unchanging definition of justice regardless of time and place. But there is one glaring problem with his ...theory of forms and the ...allegory of the cave...how can we even know what the ideal form of anything is? how can we know the difference between reasoning to an imperfect form of a tree or reasoning to a perfect form of a tree. Plato says that even though we don't realize it, we are all born with knowledge of everything in the world of forms, or as he put it, what we call learning is only a process of recollection. He thought that human beings could be broken down into two separate parts, the body and the soul. the body is responsible for the inferior senses, the things we use to perceive the world around us in a flawed way. the soul, on the other hand, has the ability to reason, and we use the soul to perceive the world of forms. He thought that our soul is eternal and at one point lived in the world of forms before we were born and really wants to go back. so, when we see a tree with our senses in the

everyday world, we can recognize that it's a tree but we need to use our soul, or reason to remember exactly what a tree is. "Come now, try to tell me how long each side of this will be. the side of this is two feet. what about each side of the one which is its double? Obviously Socrates it will be twice the length. you see Meno that I am not teaching the boy anything but all I do is question him and now he thinks he knows the length of the line on which an eight foot figure is based do you agree? I do. And does he know? Certainly not. He thinks it is a line twice the length. Yes. Watch him now recollecting things in order as one must recollect, tell me boy do you say that a figure double the size is based on a line double the length? Now I mean such a figure as this not long on one side and short on the other but equal in every direction like this one and double the size, that is, eight feet..." He goes on for a while never teaching the boy anything, but asking questions and getting the boy to arrive at new conclusions all on his own. This is a great example of the Socratic method of questioning at work, and a great example of Socrates being a midwife for ideas like we talked about last episode. You can really see in this story that the boy had no idea what the answer was before he questioned him, and then Socrates gives birth to new ideas, just as he claimed to do when questioning people on the streets of Athens. Plato thought this story and the fact that the slave boy was told nothing, but was able to arrive at new understanding was proof that we were born with total knowledge of everything in the world of forms and that understanding the world of forms is just a process of using your soul's ability to reason to remember them. The theory of forms may seem a little weird. That's because it is. If you gave him enough time, Plato himself may have agreed with you. The theory went through several different stages where certain aspects of it changed throughout his life...no doubt because other philosophers would argue about it with him...he'd recognize there was a problem with it and try to adapt to account for it. but He was the first one to designate what the path to having true knowledge was. Yeah, he was addressing the sophist idea of relativism which led him to base his thoughts on something eternal like the theory of forms, but this was a breakthrough in Epistemology. Epistemology, simply put is what do we know and how do we know it, and Although we've heard several other philosophers echo the concept of

the senses being inferior to reason when trying to arrive at knowledge of the world we live in, his explanation for why it is better really sets him apart from them, and because of this he is usually credited with single-handedly laying the groundwork for 17th century rationalism. Now, Plato wasn't done changing philosophy yet. He even had a lot to say about the role of government in a civilized society. Plato was an aristocratic elitist that hated democracy, the conviction of Socrates probably added to this..his thinking was just like there's an ideal form of justice, or beauty, Plato says there is an ideal form of government, and he crafts a sort of utopia laying out exactly what the ideal government would be and why it should be that way. The biggest problem he saw was with the leadership that is typically elected to office...here he is giving his account of why leaders never seem to get things done. "Such was the conviction I had when I arrived in Italy and Sicily for the first time. when I arrive and saw what they call there the "happy life" a life filled with Italian and Syracusan banquets, with men gorging themselves twice a day and never sleeping alone at night, and following all the other customs that go with this way of living I was profoundly displeased. For no man under heaven who has cultivated such practices from his youth could possibly grow up to be wise, so miraculous a temper is against nature or become temperate or indeed acquire any other part of virtue." People that are born into a rich lifestyle of indulgence, in Plato's eyes were among the worst that could possibly govern a population. "I saw clearly in regard to all states now existing that without exception their system of government is bad. Their constitutions are almost beyond redemption....Hence I was forced to say in the praise of the correct philosophy that it affords a vantage point from which we can discern in all cases what is just for communities and for individuals, and accordingly the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control are led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers." Plato's idea of what an ideal city is starts at the beginning of the republic where the character Socrates comes across a guy named Thrasimachus...who tells Socrates that morality is nothing more than a set of rules forced upon the weak by strong people who have the power to impose them. he

thinks if you can break the law and get away with it you should and if you can change rules and get a bunch of people to follow suit, you should do that too. He finishes by saying that a man who acts morally always ends up worse off than a guy who acts immorally...or to put it in modern terms...nice guys finish last. Socrates doesn't have much to say and then, but in the interest of getting to the bottom of it, after Thrasimachus had left, his friends play devils advocate and try to argue against Socrates and get him to explain why it isn't true. Socrates explains not by pointing out the merits of an individual that acts justly, but by pointing out the merits of a just state...or a system of government that acts justly, he says that it'll be easier to understand if looked at on a broader scale. So... Plato is not only going to point out what the ideal form of government is, but also make a case for why it is in your own self-interest to act morally. Simultaneously, in A SINGLE WRITING tackling two gigantic tasks that have plagued brilliant humans ever since. This is why Plato is amazing, BTW. right there. So first, Plato defines what the ideal city would need to have. It would need a police force or some sort of protective enforcement to protect it from invaders and to prevent civil wars from breaking out. but then he goes on to say that everyone should work in the area that best accentuates the individual gifts they have, for example if you are naturally gifted at math you would work in the math field, if you're naturally gifted in the arts, you'd be an artist etc....honestly, I know were talking about a utopia here and it isn't necessarily viable in the real world, but doesn't it GREATLY benefit society to have things this way? It really makes you wonder how many super geniuses that could've cured diseases ended up being the dishwasher manager at taco bell. The potential of a society with this idea in place is endless, and whenever I think about it in action, I think of a scene from a movie about another area of Greece that was facing conquest. 300 video In that scene king Leonidas, or if you're on NPR, Leonidas, comes across the Athenians who marvel at the fact he only brought 300 soldiers...and then as you heard...he points out that the Athenians didn't bring soldiers, they brought blacksmiths and potters...BY having specialization in a society that accentuates the natural gifts of the population, how can you lose? And those 300 Spartans would've stopped Xerxes EASY if Quasimodo hadn't led them through the

mountains. In his utopian government Plato even said women would have the ability to work their way up in the city just as much as men do, which was an unprecedented belief back then, but I don't really see why...why does it make sense to forfeit 50% of your brain power right off the bat? all I'm saying is it was obviously unfair subjugation and not some calculated move that people that designed cities made back then..Plato's city would be made up of a hierarchical class structure that would consist of 3 classes. the producers, which were like farmers, blacksmiths...artisans...you know working class...and the other two were the guardians and the rulers. the rulers would be chosen from the best guardians and the guardians would be chosen from children that looked like they would be good rulers with the right training and guidance. Plato noticed that its always when the rulers act selfishly or immorally that the problems start to arise for the population, so if all the rulers are chosen from the guardians, and the guardians are in a sort of interim boot camp phase, they would have a much better stock to pull from. but the training and guidance of these guardians needed to be perfect. they were cultivating their future president after all. all the guardians would live a communal lifestyle with no private property which even goes for their wives and children. they were forbidden to touch or own silver, gold or other riches. all of these precautions were taken so they didn't have a horse in the race...the only motivating aspect should be the improvement of the state. they would be strictly regulated when it came to diet, exercise and even the types of songs or poems they heard in their malleable years. they would make sure all the stories they heard had the main character or hero of the story acting in the way they would want one of their leaders to act. In short, his utopia would involve spoon feeding only positive influences to children from a very young age in an attempt to remove them from their ego, fabricate a moral compass and teach them to think rationally all in an attempt to eventually yield a leader that would be flawless. Plato says that this would be the ideal form of a city. Specialization...each person using their natural gifts and capabilities to their highest potential. he continues making his case by saying that a just city has all of its parts working together well and this is comparable to a human being who has all of their parts working well. and just as the city has 3 classes, the human soul has 3 parts as

well. firstly, the appetitive, which is the desire for sex or money which is comparable to the producers who live as they do to make money, secondly, the spirited which wants honor, fame or notoriety and is comparable to the class of guardians...and lastly the rational part of the soul which desires knowledge. he compares the ideal state of a city to the ideal state of a human being...the human shouldn't let his desires for sex or food or fame or glory overtake him, he should make decisions based on reason. this is the same reason why cities should be ruled by reason, or people cultivated to think purely rationally. Plato thought that the only way for this system of government to ever be implemented would be for the public to elect philosophers as their kings or for the current kings to educate themselves in the area of philosophy. These people that used reason to "untie themselves" from the back wall of the cave and see the absolute truth, Plato thought that wisdom earned them "the stamp of the ruler" . The way he saw it, who better to rule everyone than someone who understands the exact definition of moral values or what justice or fairness is...instead of flawed people ruling everyone that always impose their biased and often times corrupt views on the entire populace. This supreme form of government that I have just laid out is what Plato would call an Aristocracy. Plato thought the less excited people were to be leader the better things would inevitably turn out. An Aristocracy is ruled by a philosopher king, and therefore is managed by wisdom and reason. Plato thought there were five main types of regimes that could potentially govern a society and they were on a hierarchy from best to worst...and he explains how each form of government subsequently devolves into the next worse form of government on the hierarchy. The 5, in order, were an Aristocracy, Timocracy, Oligarchy, Democracy and Tyranny. Now, The meanings of these 5 types of governments is not even close to the modern definitions of them, but there are enough similarities for us to understand what he means and see his brilliance. The aristocracy is the best form of government and devolves into a Timocracy when, someone misjudges who a good candidate for the guardian position would be...so instead of getting someone who's completely removed from their own ego and rational, you get someone who may still be incredibly smart and rational, but their main driving force is not the acquisition of knowledge...its the

acquisition of honor. still pretty noble, but not as noble as knowledge. also known as a military dictatorship. This love of conquest causes them to allow themselves to own property. Usually through military conquest right? and this was actually the system of government in Sparta...Then the Timocracy devolves into the oligarchy. uh and Plato saw that happening because as the desire for honor comes into play... doing something in ones self interest always keeps going and doing things in desire of money is the next logical step... the people in power want to protect their financial interests so they make it a rich ruling the poor sort of dynamic and that's what an oligarchy is...they still have some morals, they're thrifty, but only for the cause of saving money, not being wise or for the benefit of the city necessarily... the people in the oligarchy admire power and money, so they put the rich in office and despise the poor...this form of government is destined to fail because eventually class warfare will erupt and the rich will be against the poor and there will always be more poor than rich...so then what inevitably happens is the poor revolt and the oligarchy devolves into a democracy, or a society ruled by the masses...uh...in a democracy, freedom is seen as the supreme good...and back in Plato's time people in a democracy were seen as self indulgent, focused on immediate gratification, of food, sex and other short term pleasures and he saw the democratic state, as an undisciplined pandemonium. when freedom is the most important tenant of society, eventually, Plato thought, through policy dictated by the masses laws cease to exist and then democracy devolves into a tyranny where there's still all the self-indulgence of democracy, but then there are no laws either...society is in chaos... and then a tyrant seizes power.

Aristotle Part 1

Episode #005

This is a transcript of Episode 5 on Aristotle's Ethics. Hello everyone, it's me Stephen West this is Philosophize This! Today we're talking about Aristotle. Now, it's not crazy to think that some of you guys have heard some stuff about Aristotle before, he's a man of great stature in the philosophical world. Maybe you even started listening to this thinking, "Aristotle! We're gonna learn about biological classification, his system of logic, his scientific method" and you'd be right. We're just not gonna learn about it today... that'll be next week's episode in part 2... that's right, as you probably guessed because I just said it, Aristotle will be broken down into 2 parts. And THIS WEEK we're gonna learn about what Aristotle thought the best way to live life was. By the end of this episode, you're gonna know exactly why you're miserable. You're gonna know all the mistakes you've made up until this point. Obviously, I'm joking. But Aristotle wasn't, he really thought he came up with THE WAY to live life, and even if you're happy in your current existence, if you follow Aristotle's plan, you could be even happier! It all starts when you're really young... most people spend their days in their teens and early twenties with no real direction. You know, there's no definitive end goal in mind or if they have one it's pretty uncertain... or vague and they spend most of their free time doing recreational things, having fun gaining experiences.. being young. If you were an exception to this rule, more power to you, but realize that people say things like "what are you worried about.. you're young!" for a reason. Young people might make a plan to go to the movies.. or a plan to ride quads around in the sand dunes.. you know recreational things that don't have much to do with bringing some distant master plan into fruition. In other words, Most young people are concerned with short term plans...not their 401k plan. But for the most part what ends up happening is the older you get the more you begin considering your future...you start putting more thought into the decisions you make... even down to random everyday things... like, you know, your posture or how you

treat people..you start to do things for a specific purpose, and although you may still slate aside a couple weeks for a vacation once a year, its a far cry from your days of getting drunk, staying up all night and waking up in your friends bathtub. So, Aristotle thought we needed a plan for our life if we wanted to achieve a certain level of mastery for living life. And I'm sure all of us can understand what its like to try to get good at something. I think whenever you're achieving mastery at anything, the more proficient you get at something, the more purpose you have behind every individual action you take. for example, i was watching a video of Gordon Ramsey cooking scrambled eggs the other day...and naively I was thinking... I cook scrambled eggs everyday... I mean he may know how to cook a crunch-berry souffle or something but I've probably made scrambled eggs as many times as he has...cause I've made them every day of my life. i mean I have a whole system...like I crack the eggs into a bowl and whisk them i add salt and pepper... I put a little grass fed butter in the bottom of the pan... you know I leave it there for a while... usually come back with a fire extinguisher to try to prevent damage to the house things like that. Watching Gordon Ramsey do it... I felt like a complete moron. Firstly, he doesn't put butter at the bottom of the pan, he just cracks the eggs into the pan and puts the butter on top of is because it gives it a "lovely velvety finish" to the eggs... also, he doesn't add salt and pepper to the eggs beforehand because the seasoning starts to break down the eggs and turns it into "something quite watery and dreadful" Look Gordon Ramsey my eggs may not have had a velvety finish to them but they weren't watery and dreadful. I am offended at this point. He says to never whisk the egg beforehand, you whisk it in the pan because you don't want to "break it down" beforehand. And then he has this super advanced method of cooking where he just keeps putting the pan on the stove and then taking it off...constantly stirring it "like a fine risotto... on the heat ...off the heat...on the heat...off the heat" Then he adds some stuff called creme fresh to his eggs so they don't overcook...what is creme fresh? with my newly lowered scrambled egg self esteem I Googled it... and apparently its like a french version of sour cream with a little more fat. All these things that I take for granted... all these things I do completely mindlessly while cooking scrambled eggs for no real purpose, Gordon Ramsey, through

experience and wisdom has achieved a much higher level of mastery at cooking scrambled eggs and is therefore much better at it. The same rules apply to becoming better at life. Or better at living life. You start to develop priorities, you find out what is important to you... and eventually you do almost everything for a purpose...and usually the purpose you do any random thing for is to nurture the positive growth of your goals... like being healthy... living a long life, making a lot of money...etc. eventually we combine all these various things we prioritize as a sort of rulebook for living... a set of values that we live by. Aristotle calls this "a plan" and encourages people to make one of these plans...Aristotle was born in 384 BC...15 years after Socrates had been put to death in Athens...but when Aristotle arrived in Athens and enrolled at Plato's academy as a student, he no doubt heard all about Socrates's final days from Plato, as well as his famous saying that "the unexamined life is not worth living." in response, Aristotle did Socrates one better. he said that an unplanned life is not worth examining. what point is living a life if we don't know what we're trying to do and why or how we're gonna to get there? we need a plan!but not just a set of priorities... we need to find out how to use these priorities to distinguish certain goals that we want to achieve and figure out how we're going to achieve them. but even that's not good enough for Aristotle....not only should you have a plan...but you should have HIS PLAN. THE PLAN. To Aristotle, There is only one fully correct plan for life, and if you don't follow it then you may be happy, but not as happy as you could be. Now, The idea of there being one... single ultimate plan that every human has to follow is a relatively foreign idea in modern times...and for good reason. I mean to us, It seems like a waste of time to agonize over what the ultimate goal of life is, because its obviously a glaring and important question that all of us ask at some point...and if there was a right answer, we probably would have figured it out by now, probably thousands of years ago. so we end up just applying our own meaning to our life and deeming it to be the best for us. but when we use terms like "what is the BEST end goal to life?" we're implying that there are better and worse end goals, but what makes them better or worse? what metric are we using to determine what is better?if one person deems the purpose of life to be the pursuit of knowledge and a completely different

person thinks the purpose of life is finding a way to use your brain as little as possible, how can these two opposite world views have the same end goal? Aristotle thought they did if you analyzed them deeper. Aristotle thinks the ultimate end goal of life...what we should all shoot for... is "living well". Now real quickly lets establish a few things about living life...There are a variety of things we do, solely for the sake of staying alive. Like eating, drinking, exercising, things like that. There are other things we do because we think that if we do them, well be able to make living life easier or better in some way. For example, you could educate yourself, its not necessary to stay alive, but we think that by expanding our mind and knowing about a variety of different subjects, we can use that knowledge to live a better life, not to mention the satisfaction we get from constantly growing as people. We can think of these two different types of things... as things that we do just to Live and things that we do to live well, and we can think of both of them as end goals that we hope to achieve that are in line with the priorities we developed earlier...In fact, we could even break it down further, you only really need one of these things...right? living well. you can't live well if you aren't alive, so things we do just to stay alive...really are all requisites on our path to achieving the goal of living well. Aristotle talks about how everything we do is either an end...or a means to an end...we either do something for the sake of getting something else, or we do something solely for its own sake. Now...if "living well" is one of our goals in life, is there anything we want after that? Are we living well for the sake of achieving some further goal? Aristotle didn't think so. He thinks that we live well just for the sake of living well...therefore, living well, to Aristotle is the ultimate goal of life. Some people may disagree, but I think its pretty reasonable. Almost everyone I've ever asked what they want in life they say they just want to be happy, and I know that evidence is anecdotal...but the plural form of anecdote is data. Aristotle says that there are a lot of things, as humans, that we desire in this world...or things that we think are good...like we said in our earlier example...one person may say "the pursuit of knowledge"...one person may say the pursuit of using your brain as little as possible"...and all of these things we think are good are really just our own little personalized path we're taking with all the paths eventually arriving at a single final

destination, which is what you actually want "living well". Modern translations of Aristotle's term for Living well say the best modern translation for what he was talking about is our concept of "happiness". Living well is happiness and happiness is what we all seek, whether its through pursuing knowledge or not pursuing knowledge, both of those people still want happiness. the difference is what brings them happiness. Aristotle didn't just think this was the case... he thought that it was self-evident that this is what the ultimate end goal of life is, because when you ask someone why they want happiness, they can never really give you an answer. so they're obviously not doing it for the sake of getting something else. the only way you could really say that you wanted happiness for a REASON is if happiness was a requisite for achieving some OTHER ultimate goal, but the way Aristotle saw it, there was no such thing...happiness or living well WAS the ultimate goal. Now, as I was saying before, what brings us happiness varies from person to person. I mean, by and large, we experience happiness when we get what we want. so because one person might be made happy by pursuing knowledge and someone else might be miserable pursuing knowledge...there's no cookie cutter recipe for happiness right? Aristotle thought that even though our paths to happiness were so astronomically different, if you distill it down enough, we really all want the same things too. And before we continue, real quick, its important to know that Aristotle thought that things we think of as "good" are the same as things we think of as "desirable". The two terms were synonymous to him. Aristotle thought as humans we are all individuals. We have individual upbringings individual experiences and individual perspectives. Its Based on our experiences ...that we determine what is desirable. This is how you can explain the difference between someone who thinks its desirable to pursue knowledge, or not to pursue knowledge, or to be the greatest tennis player in the world, or to strap dynamite to yourself and glorify god, all of these things are based on things we've deemed to be desirable because of our individual backgrounds. But even if most of these desires differ from person to person, as human beings, we all have similar desires...like being able to eat or drink or sleep, etc. On that same note, we all desire things that we don't actually need to stay alive. I mean...we desire to have the double bacon cheeseburger, but we

don't need it. We desire to get a big promotion and date a supermodel, but we don't need it. we think if we had these things they would be good for us and enrich our lives...so we desire them...hence Aristotle idea that if we see something as desirable we see it as good. But like in the case of the double bacon cheeseburger, which is also my favorite Nancy Drew book BTW, the case of the double bacon cheeseburger... what we desire and we see as good, is not ACTUALLY good for us. The double bacon cheeseburger is a good example of how easily something can seem like its good for us at a particular time or place, but at a later time and place it may seem... completely terrible for us. and this dynamic applies to most things, even your worldview...like if the guy that relentlessly pursues NEVER using his brain or learning anything as the most desirable thing one day..lets say some other day hes trying to memorize the ingredients of different alcoholic drinks so he can pass his bartenders exam...pursuing knowledge and using his brain turns out to be really good at that time and place. Aristotle uses this fact to mark a distinction between things that we think are desirable that may vary from time to time, and things that we think are desirable that never vary...like things we need to survive. This is another way of marking the contrast between two different types of desires, wants and needs...both are things we desire, but they're not the same thing. Aristotle referred to these things as either acquired desires, or wants....desires we've acquired based on our experiences during our lives...and natural desires...or needs which are desires we were born with because we are human and all humans have them regardless of background. He says that the only things that are really "good" for you are things that fulfill your natural desires, because these things we need whether we are conscious of the need or not, whereas everything else you desire falls into the acquired desires and only appear to be good at the time. The one correct ultimate end goal or plan for living well...the plan that brings us happiness is a plan that includes us attaining all the things that are actually "good" for us to have. and because all of these natural desires we have are the same for everyone...because we are all human and share the same natural desires of things like food, shelter, water, sleep...what is truly good for one person is actually truly good for everyone. that's why Aristotle says happiness is the same in the case of all

human beings and that's why he refers to all of these things that fulfill our natural desires as "real goods". Now remember that term, real goods. We all have our own unique individual paths that we take to try to acquire all these real goods...i mean Donald Trump's plan to secure things like food clothing shelter is obviously much different than a panhandling homeless guy...and Aristotle would say these differences definitely make some plans better than others. But remember...Aristotle thought there was one ultimate plan that was the best you could do. Its one that involves getting every real good in the right order and quantity while simultaneously making it possible for us to seek things we want, but do not necessarily need that will enrich our lives. So, if we want to achieve true happiness by using Aristotle's plan, it seems pretty important to figure out what these real good are. I mean, if the main thing we need to be happy are all these real goods, we should at least make a list of them...we should have them laminated or something. Aristotle separates these real goods down into a few parts. He says..."Human beings are animals with the unique ability to think and reason." Because we are animals with a machine like body that needs maintenance, some of these real goods help us with our bodily needs. These ...bodily goods are made up of...vigor, vitality, health and sensual pleasures. Aristotle says that even though we go about getting these things in different ways, we not only share all of these desires with every other human, we actually share all of these desires with every other animal in the animal kingdom. Animals avoid pain and seek pleasure, as well as vigor vitality and health. Now, if living well is the ultimate end goal then Vigor vitality and health are three requisites on the road to living well...they're means to an end...but to achieve even one of them is a goal in itself, so there are requisites for achieving these things too. To have vigor, vitality and health, you need five things... food, drink, clothing, sleep and shelter. Now, when you break vigor vitality and health into these 5 tangible or easily identifiable things, its easy to see how they're extremely interrelated...like it doesn't matter how much food or drink you have, you cant be healthy if you don't sleep...and it doesn't matter how much sleep you have, you aren't going to have much vigor if you're walking around naked with no home to go to at the end of the day. So... because it makes sense... and seemingly to make it easier for people

like us studying him 2500 years later, Aristotle groups all of these EXTERNAL things that we need to achieve the bodily goods, he groups them all together and calls them external goods or wealth. Now, I could've just said wealth was a requisite for living well, but that would've been misleading. I wasn't trying to waste your time there, this was the definition of wealth for Aristotle...and if I just said wealth, you'd think it meant getting some generic burlap sack with a green dollar sign on it but wealth is no where near the same thing today. When I think about Aristotle and these needs that correspond with goals that we need to achieve on our path to happiness, It may be kind of dumb, but I remember it by thinking of the quote, early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy wealthy and wise. we've all heard our grandma tell us this before, but just in case it helps you remember, the early to bed and early to rise part reminds me of the 5 external goods, because "sleep" is in there and when I think of sleep I think of being in a house with a sleeping cap on, so it reminds me of the other four external goods, and then the "makes a man healthy wealthy and wise" part reminds me of the goals that harnessing those external goods is going to give me. Healthy reminds me of vigor vitality and health...Wealthy reminds me of the 5 external goods and the Wise part, represents the next part were gonna talk about, because what we've talked about so far isn't all you need to be happy. Remember, He says Human beings are animals with the unique ability to think and reason. Because we have the unique ability to think and reason, there are some real goods that we need to supplement and nurture our ability to reason. Instead of bodily goods, or external goods...he grouped these into the "goods of the soul". Remember, at the time, this phenomena known as conscious thought wasn't connected to the brain, they thought that humans have a soul that controls our ability to think and reason, among other things. Now, when it comes to the goods of the soul, Aristotle thought to be truly happy we need to pursue a certain amount of knowledge. Were thinking, curious learning creatures by nature, and it seems like without acquiring knowledge, something would be lacking. Another one of these goods of the soul is the desire to be loved, or the desire for friendship. We are social creatures, like we talked about in the first episode...you lock a guy in solitary confinement for six months and he

goes crazy. We need interaction with other humans and Aristotle realized this. He thought that our desire to be respected for our favorable characteristics, like our skill at a particular thing, or our six-pack abs or whatever ...is closely related to being loved. Because of this, He said that as long as we are honored for a legitimate reason he would include the goods self-esteem and honor as part of the goods of the soul. He makes this distinction for good reason, this wouldn't apply to people that delusion of instant fame. Aristotle realized that all of these real goods are end goals in themselves, and when you're creating a road map for eventually arriving at living well and achieving happiness, it can be unclear as to how you even get to these end goals, so that you can then start your path to the ULTIMATE goal of living well. So Aristotle developed a way for us to consistently make correct decisions, too. Have you ever had a bad habit before? You ever eat something while driving and then when you get to where you're going you just leave the trash in your car? Ah...I'll get it next time...but then you don't? And then the next time you leave the trash in your car it just piles up over and over until your passengers seat looks like a yard sale? If you had a time lapse of your passengers seat it would be really obvious it was just one bad habitual decision being made over and over. It takes conscious effort to stop a bad habit, no matter what it is. Aristotle knew we were habitual creatures, when you have a bad habit, to stop doing it, you really are just training your mind in the direction of a more productive behavioral habit. It helps to have your mind on auto-pilot sometimes. But he knew this wasn't just restricted to negative habits, positive behaviors can be worked on too. Behaviors that end up making your life better and leading to the real goods we just talked about. It could be something as simple as eating in your car and not leaving the trash on the passengers seat...if you see the banana peel on your seat, just take the initiative and throw it away, because each time you do it...the next time you're staring down the banana peel and trying to find an excuse to leave it there, its slightly easier to just throw it away the next time. And if you leave it there, you are slightly weaker and it is slightly more difficult to throw it away next time. But Aristotle didn't restrict this to just things like banana peels. He thought to live well and be happy we have to make habits out of virtuous behavior so that it comes

almost as second nature. An example of this would be like if you're on a diet. You know you're not supposed to eat at McDonalds you're supposed to go into the woods and eat tree bark on your lunch...and every time you're on your lunch break and you pull into the McDonalds drive through and concede to those impulses, the easier it is for you to do it the next day. Aristotle called these sorts of bad habits "vices" and thought that if you made a habit of acting virtuously, eventually it would be such an ingrained habit that it wouldn't take any effort at all to act virtuously. Aristotle thought this applies to all virtuous behavior, and that by making the habit of acting virtuously we will be naturally moving on the path to achieving these goals of things like "honor or wealth" and on our way to living well. He thought that we Needed virtuous behavior. and it makes sense. McDonalds is food, food is one of the 5 external goods, but without virtuous habits telling us what type of food to eat, how much of it to eat, at what time to eat it, etc...we could technically stuff ourselves so full that we die. Although he didn't give the McDonalds example, he thought this same dynamic applies to most decisions in life. Controlling yourself to not eat at McDonalds and stick to your diet is an example of Aristotle's virtue of temperance. The dictionary defines temperance as "moderation". And its easy to see that we run into most of our problems as humans, health wise or with relationships when we do things to excess. Moderation or temperance is a virtue. Temperance was one of two primary moral virtues Aristotle wrote about...the other one was courage. Now, if you're like me, you hear the word courage and you think a soldier charging into battle...or a kid going on a scary roller coaster.. but Aristotle thought of courage a little more broadly than that. He thought that doing things that cause us temporary discomfort or pain to ultimately achieve some higher good, is just another form of courage. Going to the gym and pushing yourself to the next level, would be courage to Aristotle. Challenging your brain, learning...have you ever read a book that is just...challenging? like your stomach hurts when you're reading it challenging? and you want to just stop and watch TV instead? Achieving mastery at anything is HARD WORK...Aristotle called this courage. Both temperance and courage involve using our ability to reason to distinguish between things that just look like they're good for us, and

things that are ACTUALLY good for us. These were the two primary virtues that Aristotle laid out in his writing, then he laid out several other more minor ones but qualified them all as well as the real goods we are pursuing by acting virtuously with the idea that achieving them was based at least in some cases around luck. You know, if there is a mass drought or famine, you didn't do anything wrong to make that happen, it was just a bad roll of the dice that made you unable to get the external goods of food and drink. This applies to the goods of the soul too, to acquire a certain amount or kind of knowledge, it may just come down to whether you were lucky enough to have a teacher that could relay it to you effectively. Not having that isn't necessarily your fault. And how about diseases like cancer? Aristotle makes a case for why acting in a virtuous way is not good enough on its own...acting virtuously may ultimately put you in a lot more favorable circumstances that allow luck to go your way, but luck definitely plays a role. But I don't want to misrepresent what Aristotle talked about as luck... its not just something that squanders virtuous behavior...its not just something that takes someone who lives a perfectly moral life and starves them to death making good actions worse. It can also make people who are not virtuous temporarily happier like if a criminal wins the lottery, or it can even make bad decisions worse. Imagine if there are two people going through the McDonalds drive through...both of them decide to eat their McChicken sandwiches on the way home, and for the sake of the example imagine they are really bad at eating and driving...like holding the sandwich in front of their face so they cant see the road. One of them swerves off the road and crashes into a tree. The other one swerves off the road and crashes into a tree, but there happened to be a mother walking with her baby in a stroller in between them and the tree, and they kill both of them. BOTH DRIVERS have committed the same act of negligence, but because of bad luck, one of them has a completely different life than the other moving forward. This is an extreme example, but you guys can see how on a smaller scale this same dynamic can exist with non-virtuous behavior. And as a society, we would view justice in these two scenarios completely differently. Which brings me to the last thing Aristotle points out as things we need to make us happy...justice. We cant pursue living well alone. We need other people and

social interaction. Aristotle breaks down justice into two types...distributive justice, which simply put, has to do with the elements of whatever system of government you are born into...like, if you are born into a life of slavery or a society with tons of unjust laws it becomes really hard to live well. And the other kind is corrective justice, which involves correcting unfair distribution..like when individuals make non-virtuous decisions and don't exercise temperance, taking more than they need at the jeopardy of others. As you can probably see, it starts to get difficult to know what the correct thing to do is when trying to incentivize human progress with things like capitalism. A great quote by Aristotle that I use on a consistent basis that really sums up a lot of his ideas for living a good life is "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act, but a habit". It really is an inspirational quote. It puts our own egos into context. It doesn't really matter what you've done in the past...like if you have a long list of accomplishments and successes, but you spend every day now doing nothing and making bad decisions...Who are you exactly? On the other hand, you could've messed up every single day before today...you could've been the type of person that leaves trash on the passengers seat of their car, but if for two weeks you take that trash to the trash can, what kind of person are you now? We've all heard the stories about the people that smoke cigarettes for 30 years and then one day decide they're never going to touch them again. I realize it doesn't usually work that way, but if you looked at those people even one minute after they had made that decision to never smoke again...do we consider them a smoker? Aristotle's quote is empowering. It really makes you think about who you are not from the standpoint of what you SAY your values are, but what you actually do consistently every day. A long time ago I read a book on the power of self-confidence...and in the book they ask you to do an exercise that is really eye-opening when it comes to determining what kind of person you actually are, and I still try to do this exercise on a monthly basis. Philosophize This! If you knew you were going to die tonight, and you had to write your own obituary that would appear in the newspaper the next day. What would you write? What would your actions portray as your true values and how did you make the people around you feel?

The Hellenistic Age Pt. 1 - Epicurus

Episode #010

This is a transcript of Episode 10 on Epicurus. Have you guys ever heard of a stoa? A stoa was a common structure in ancient Greek architecture that served a wide variety of purposes...but most of the time it was just a place that people gathered. Imagine Two huge lines of Big...Doric or Ionian Columns holding up a massive roof usually hundreds of feet long and positioned right in the middle of town...offering people a little shelter from the elements while they do business...merchants would sometimes set up shop...artists would lay out their work for people to see...people would sometimes hold religious ceremonies or hold a gathering in honor of some local prestigious war hero. In the second century AD there was a guy named Diogenes, and he was incredibly rich. The richest man in the town of Oenoanda...the Mitt Romney in fact. He was so rich and believed so much in the philosophy of a guy named Epicurus who lived almost 500 years before him...that he paid to have a giant wall built onto this stoa that was right in the middle of town. He built it where he knew everyone would be walking past it and they'd all have have no choice but to look at it all day long...and on this wall he carved in 25,000 words...that's about 260 square meters of text...and the text he chose to carve into this wall was the philosophy of Epicurus. Metaphysics...epistemology...ethics...imagine going about your daily business and constantly having to look at some antiquated view of how to be a happier person written by a guy that never knew you and lived hundreds of years ago who is telling you that you're doing everything completely wrong. Must have seemed pretty pretentious by whatever guy thought ...yeah I'm gonna carve some stuff into this WALL...that's a good idea. On one of the sections of the wall...at the very beginning there was a sort of prologue written by Diogenes explaining why he even put up the wall in the first place. He writes about being extremely troubled in his youth and that by studying Epicurus and his philosophy, he turned his life around... he achieved a level of tranquility he didn't even know was possible. He writes that the older he got, the more gratitude he

had for the teachings of Epicurus and it was this gratitude that drove him to put up this wall...He said he did it "to help also those who come after us" and "to place therefore the remedies of salvation by means of this porch." because the wall he built was adjacent to a portico of this stoa. He said that if there were only one or two people who were lost or had been led astray in this human existence... He would just go and talk to them personally about Epicurus. Instead, he built a giant wall in the middle of a public place...because as far as he saw it, everyone was lost. Hello Everyone, I am Stephen West, this is philosophize this! and today we return to western philosophy, at least for a while...and this episode is part 1 of a mini-series that months from now people will probably see as one block. And if you're listening to this months from now, in sequence, one after another...this next part may seem kind of repetitive or contrived, but please be considerate of the fact that we're releasing one episode every...two weeks almost and I need to re-up my gratitude for the love and support of the last two weeks. This show is growing rapidly and this audience is the nitrate fertilizer. Thank you for the donations. Thank you for following me on twitter and posting kind words on Facebook...Thank you for the emails. Just know that I'm constantly trying to find ways to become a more efficient person and shave time off of other obligations so that I can spend MORE time improving my craft and trying to bring you guys better shows. Your compassion makes me want nothing else in this world. Ten episodes ago we started talking about the Presocratic philosophers...this group of really strange guys... with really strange ideas even by today's standards. None of them really knew what to think of this whole "philosophy" thing. Nobody really had anything figured out that well. You had all different kinds of approaches...Some of them like Thales just taught people informally, Pythagoras started a cult and super restrictive lifestyle...Heraclitus buried himself in up to his neck manure for god's sake... but despite all their different methods of philosophizing and the different results they arrived at, they were all, generally speaking, talking about the same stuff...the building blocks of metaphysics and epistemology. Then Socrates was born... and for the first time in the west you had someone using this tool of philosophy to try to discern what the most effective way to live life was. Then came Plato

and Aristotle, two polymath geniuses, diametrically opposite in most ways but similar in the sense that philosophy as they pursued it was nearly impossible for the layman to relate to. There wasn't much salvation from your everyday problems in Plato telling you that there is a magical world of forms where a perfect form of everything exists...you know...some ruthless dictator may have just rode into town and sold you into slavery...but don't worry! somewhere up in the sky there is a perfect form of that shovel you're gonna be using for the rest of your life... Keep in mind...it really helped the longevity of your philosophy as well as its ability to even get off the ground in the first place if it had a popular following...and not just popularity among aspiring philosophers of the day, but of the average person. And really... part of what makes Plato and Aristotle so remarkable today is just how foreign the things they talked about were from the average thought process. I mean, Both of them had schools you needed to attend for years to fully grasp some of these concepts they were talking about. When it came to philosophy being useful to the average person, it must have seemed like it skipped a couple generations. So goes the infamous quote by Cicero that: "Socrates however (was the) first (who) called philosophy down from heaven, and placed it in cities, and introduced it even in homes, and drove (it) to inquire about life and customs and things good and evil." But When Aristotle died in 322BC, he wasn't the only supremely important figure to keel over and die recently. Just one year earlier, Alexander the Great died...ending an uncharacteristically stable time in the life of the average citizen of Athens. The life of the average citizen was changing. Philosophy was changing, and the Hellenistic Age was beginning. The death of Alexander the Great is one of those moments in history where it's crazy to think about what history would look like today if things went down differently. He died very mysteriously and unexpectedly. And apparently Alexander the Great wasn't watching much daytime television in his day...or he definitely would've seen the hundreds of commercials from insurance companies and law firms telling him ...he's gonna fall off a ladder and die someday...so make sure your family is protected. nope...he died so suddenly, he hadn't even named a successor...and nobody knew what to do. In the year 323 BC, suddenly the LARGEST and most powerful empire known to man at the

time was just...up for grabs...and everyone was scrambling just trying to hold on to this really good thing they had going. Opinion was divided on what to do...some people thought Alexanders half brother was the best way to go...other people thought they should wait around for his unborn child to come of age...long story short...some people got murdered and chaos ensued. Constant War. Four Giant Dynasties made up of many kingdoms each, many of which just grasping at straws in this battle for succession. Even a couple hundreds years later, people were still reeling from the death of Alexander and jockeying for their own geo-political position. The life of the average person during this time period changed dramatically with the death of Alexander. I mean...depending on where you lived...you might have a guy ride into town one week who tells you...you guys are all under my rule now...you are subservient to me. and the people would say OK...and then the guy would leave and a few weeks later someone else would come into town and say, I killed that guy...now I'm your ruler you're all subservient to me now...and so on and so forth. Things were very uncertain...and uncertainty breeds fear. People were scared...they didn't know what their future was gonna look like. And when this paradigm of the average life changed, so too did philosophy. This whole period is known as the Hellenistic age...Philosophy was shifting from a focus on metaphysics and epistemology to a focus on ethics. Philosophy was changing from something that resembled the works of Plato and Aristotle to something that more resembled the work of Socrates.

Remember, Socrates was the guy that didn't have time for all those pointless abstract questions about what the universe is made of...he was more concerned with finding what the best way to live life was or how to be happy. With all the stress of the political climate of the time, Its no wonder why all of these new schools of philosophy that were cropping up were much more heavily influenced by Socrates than Plato or Aristotle. There were three main schools... but also a fourth which is worthy of note. These were Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism and later, Cynicism. Much like the four dynasties of the political landscape...these four schools were constantly battling with each other trying to assert their dominance. Throughout this Hellenistic Age series...we're gonna be talking a lot about the relationships and battles between these schools. And in the end.. when

we're left with the winner, the king of the Hellenistic Age hill, we'll realize just how important the politics of the day are in determining which Philosophical Schools emerge victorious and which fail. A concept that will be crucial in understanding the next 1500 years or so. There aren't many people throughout history that can claim to be as misunderstood as Epicurus. I think most people think of Epicureanism as being synonymous with a life of indulgence, but this actually is very far from the truth. The entire goal of his philosophy was to increase your "Ataraxia", it was a word at the time that meant tranquility or more specifically a complete freedom from pain. For Epicurus, it was a very literal struggle against pain. Apparently he spent most of his life with chronic severe pain in his stomach and gut and it's commonly thought that he died of very bad kidney stones. I mean, he writes a letter on his death bed where he tells his friend that he knows he is going to die and that he's unable to urinate and he is in EXTREME pain. It's terrible.. But the freedom of pain that he talks about in his philosophy...the freedom of pain that someone could relate to very well in the Hellenistic age, was a completely different kind of pain. Seven years after the death of Plato, Epicurus was born...341 BC. Every account seems to agree that he was born and raised by poor parents on a small island in the Mediterranean sea that would have been considered a relatively insignificant colony of Athens at the time... so it's important to note that for all of his childhood...all of his formative years...Epicurus lived a...maybe not a constant poverty stricken existence...but definitely a very modest and humbling existence. And much like Siddhartha Gautama... both spent their malleable years in a place that would offer an invaluable insight into what happiness truly is when developing their philosophy later. Both had access to an extreme end of the spectrum that they could contrast... their future more realistic lives with, so as not to fall victim to the common delusions about what people think they're lacking...Palaces and riches for Siddhartha...abject poverty for Epicurus...and when he finally left the island he spent all those years on...it's interesting to consider that he studied under philosophers who were direct students of two people...Plato and Democritus. When you compare the two as philosophers...they're not even in the same galaxy...If you compared innovating philosophy to the task of getting off

a deserted island...Plato would be Tom Hanks in Cast Away...and Democritus would be his volleyball friend Wilson. Plato did EVERYTHING...and Democritus just kinda...floated there with that creepy smile...But for Epicurus, it was the opposite. Democritus was the guy that he really attached himself to...he laid the groundwork for all of his metaphysics. Now, just to recap, Democritus is the guy that believed that everything we see in the world consists of atoms and void. Epicurus agreed with him. They both believed that because things we see are able to move around...they must be moving into empty space right? or else they wouldn't be able to move. So they call this empty space...Void. They also both believed that the things we see around us are composites...they're made up of many things smaller than the thing itself...because if they weren't, then we wouldn't be able to break them into smaller pieces or cut them down to size. But on that same note, they both don't think that that process of cutting things in half can go on forever...and there must be some fundamental, unchanging, eternal building block of stuff that can explain the uniformity of the world and everything in it. That building block is the atom. So they love each other. They agree on many things. But obviously not everything...and the differences between the Metaphysics of Epicurus and Democritus, as far as atoms go... lie in three main areas. The first one is that Epicurus believes atoms have a weight, and naturally move downward. There's all sorts of multi-generational drama at work here...let me bring you up to speed though...Previously on General Hospital: Democritus said that ALL atomic motion...all movement of atoms throughout the void...is the result of previous atomic collisions...like this atom got hit by that atom and they collided and hit that atom that went flying over there...etc....then years later Aristotle threw Democritus a curve ball and said...well...that's great and all, cool story but how did they begin moving in the first place? Then Epicurus responds to Aristotle by saying that atoms have a weight, and therefore...in this pre-sir Isaac Newton world they are living in...atoms naturally would travel downward...so this explains why they started moving at the beginning of time. But then you gotta be thinking...and I'm sure Aristotle WOULD have been thinking...well why didn't the atoms just move perfectly downward and never collide into each other?

How do you explain them running into each other in the first place? Well the answer to this is the second of three differences between epicurean metaphysics and Democritean metaphysics...The swerve.Simply put, the swerve is Epicurus's way of explaining how atoms originally collided with each other... and its just that every so often...at random times...in random intervals...an atom will kind of "swerve" to the side a bit.....That's it. Now everyone tries to compare this to modern quantum physics and how there is some infinitely small percentage chance of an atom shifting position on its own...I think it's safe to say Epicurus didn't stumble across this in 300 BC...but that's not to say there is nothing profound about this idea. The implications behind the swerve theory fueled a philosophical debate that still exists to this day.Here's what I mean...Democritus believed in a sort of cosmic determinism...he thought that based on his theory of the universe...pick an atom...if you followed that atom...right now somewhere in the universe...and it is moving...eventually that atom is going to run into another atom and combine with it and maybe those two atoms will run into a rock or something.....the universe is so constant and predictable that you could've known the future of that atom...you could've known it was going to combine with the rock...and for that matter...you could know EVERYTHING that was EVER going to happen to that atom if you were willing to do the calculations far enough out. Humans, like rocks and planets are ALSO made up of just atoms...so everything, including human action, to Democritus were just atoms colliding and moving around in space...and in that sense that everything was already pre-determined.But Epicurus didn't agree...he agreed that our bodies are made up of the same atoms that celestial bodies are made up of...but if this determinism was true, we would all be hopeless spectators to our bodies and their actions...passengers not in control.... You know...you'd just be hopelessly watching your atoms go to the bathroom and forget to put the toilet seat down...MILLIONS OF MEN AROUND THE WORLD WOULD HAVE AN EXCUSE...and you can't really be held accountable. And not just that... this would make morality absolutely pointless because you could never hold anyone accountable for any of their actions...it was just an unfortunate sequence and collision of atoms...he agreed with most of what Democritus said...but he held that there

must be at least some small amount of free will at work here...and that's how he rationalizes the "swerve" doctrine...A Roman Poet and staunch Epicurean named Lucretius puts it well in his poem *De Rerum Natura* "Again, if all movement is always interconnected, the new arising from the old in a determinate order - if the atoms never swerve so as to originate some new movement that will snap the bonds of fate, the everlasting sequence of cause and effect - what is the source of the free will possessed by living things throughout the earth?" The third difference between their theories of atoms involves his thought that the causes of our sensations come from something outside of the sensations themselves, but I think it will make the most sense and be the most memorable if we cover it in a future episode. Let me just say...the first half of his philosophy is natural philosophy...or what in modern times we would probably just call science...and even though he got a lot of things wrong...he didn't do too badly...considering...but make no mistake his aim was to find a rational way of understanding the world that had nothing to do with gods or supernatural forces...this was extremely important to him...and if he didn't have one, ALL THE REST of his philosophy becomes much less effective. Throughout the years epicureans railed against any sort of magical or supernatural or fate driven account for some phenomena happening. Sometimes they got a little carried away. Just how you can stagnate scientific progress by blindly accepting that a supernatural force is behind something you don't understand...You can also stagnate scientific progress by prematurely accepting a rational account for why something happened without any evidence...simply because you want SOME explanation that's not supernatural. The epicureans were definitely guilty of this. Just to make this clear...The two halves of Epicurus's philosophy fit together beautifully, but in order for the second half to work properly, Epicurus thought you NEEDED this rational explanation of the world without gods. So he naturally approached it more comprehensively than just making a few updates to Democritus and his theory of atoms. He was an empiricist. On one hand he had to refute the rationalist descendants of Plato...and on the other he had to refute one of the major rival philosophical schools of the time...the skeptics. In other words, not only did he have to

make a case for why information gathered through the senses is the BEST way to arrive at truth, but he also had to make a case that TRUTH was something that could be obtained at all. Not exactly an easy task...but he came up with some pretty interesting ideas. He believed that we COULD arrive at the truth, but in order for us to get there...we needed three things: sensations, preconceptions and feelings. He thought when we see any object...that object is constantly sending off a layer of atoms...one atom thick...think ripples in a pond...except the ripples are atoms and they are moving in every possible direction...and those atoms...SLAM up against our eyes or into our body...and our sense organs READ this layer of atoms and create a picture in our minds of what the world around us is. But he made it VERY clear that we need to proceed with caution. He heard the arguments from people...He heard when they said that the senses lie to us and are crude, biological instruments that deceive us all the time...why should we trust them? Well, Epicurus thought that it wasn't the SENSES that were deceiving us...our MINDS were deceiving us. And this is where the preconceptions and feelings come into play...the way Epicurus saw it...how can we blame the sense organs? The eyes or ears or nose are just transmitting information...it is purely mechanical...the EYES aren't making judgments that the world IS a certain way or ISNT a certain way. That's YOU doing that. That's your mind. At the same time, he recognized that the senses weren't perfect...he just thought it was dumb to go against EVERYTHING the senses tell us...because if you went extreme and discounted EVERYTHING the senses told you...you would have no reference point to relate other information to...He says it in number 23 of his principal doctrines: "If you fight against all your sensations, you will have no standard to which to refer, and thus no means of judging even those sensations which you claim are false." He gives a great example about seeing a tower in the distance...If you were half a mile away from that tower and it looked round...you would assume based on that input that the tower was round in shape...but then if you walked towards the tower and it slowly started to change...and eventually when you were only a couple hundred yards away the tower looked square...at which point were your senses lying to you? Well, he gives us an atomic explanation for distortions between your senses and the waves of atoms coming off of an

object and gives us a general rule of thumb that the CLOSER you are to something the more accurate of a representation you are getting...but that's probably delving too far into it...the important rung on the ladder of epistemology is that...yeah...the senses are far from perfect...but he thought they're the best and most reliable thing we have...so really what you should do is realize the faults and limitations of them and the things they are good at. No matter what the senses tell us there is at least SOME basis in reality...they're never COMPLETELY lying to us. And THIS is the nexus of epicurean philosophy. This is the JUNCTION STATION of the two halves of his philosophy that we were talking about earlier...we perceive the world in a flawed way because of our mind...our mind's flawed way of interpreting what the senses tell us. In the same exact way, we perceive our happiness in a flawed way because of our mind...our mind's flawed way of interpreting the situations we live in. It's not the input...it's the mind's interpretation of that input. and if you ask me...THIS is what Epicurus should truly be remembered for. I mean...people have this misconception that Epicurus was a guy that preached constant indulgence and vice...these people have this idea that the guy was walking around telling everyone to drink a thermos full of clam chowder everyday...become 900 pounds...come on...really? It couldn't be further from the truth...but in a way he suffered the same fate of rampant gossip that Pythagoras did years earlier...because after Epicurus studied under and wasn't really happy with the way he was teaching...he set up his own philosophical schools in and then in before finally settling back down in Athens at the age of 34 where He bought a house on the outskirts of Athens and started the school he would become famous for...the Garden. Now the Garden was very special...it accepted women and slaves as members and advocated a very communal simple life...a collection of friends all reveling in the production of Epicurus's teachings...leaving behind all the politics and ambitions that come with being a citizen living in the busy city that lead to nothing but disappointment or dissatisfaction. The only problem was...it was precisely that...a commune. The secretive cult-like atmosphere where they secluded themselves from the population... led to tons of gossip and over-simplifications of what Epicurus taught. It was kind of a perfect storm of

several things all coming together. People love to draw comparisons between Epicureanism and Hedonism...they love to attach the two. Hedonism is a school of thought where pleasure is seen as the only intrinsic good and not only was it not CREATED by Epicurus...it would have been well known by the time of Epicurus...I mean Hedonism goes all the way back to even Ancient Sumeria in the Epic of Gilgamesh. You know...it says "Fill your belly. Day and night make merry. Let days be full of joy. Dance and make music day and night. These things alone are the concern of men." The problem is that the definition of pleasure varies between all of the hedonist philosophers, so it is unfair to classify Epicurus with people like the Cyrenaics and think of them all as the same. But years later, the hedonism of Roman times...when they were conquering and looting the world, would have been associated with Epicureanism. But he wasn't an advocate of just ANY pleasure, or anything anyone could possibly perceive to be pleasure. He thought it was OBVIOUS that PLEASURE is the goal of life...i mean we all start from birth with the knowledge that pleasure is a positive experience and pain is one we should avoid, but the important distinction he makes is that there are two kinds of pleasure. Kinetic pleasure and Static Pleasure. Kinetic pleasure is also known as "Moving" pleasure...and it's what most people think of when they think of pleasure...an example of kinetic pleasure would be like eating a half gallon of ice cream when you're hungry...you experience kinetic pleasure when you are actively in the process of satisfying a desire...like hunger in this case. Your senses are stimulated in a pleasurable way...most people see this as pleasure. But once you've actually ladled the half-gallon of Rocky Road into your stomach... you aren't hungry anymore...once your desire has been fulfilled... a certain state of being overcomes you. You are satisfied. You are no longer DESIRING that thing anymore. Epicurus says that this state of tranquility is also a type of pleasure...a static pleasure...and whether we realize it or not, it is the BEST kind of pleasure and the kind we should strive for. So in other words, pleasure in its purest form is just the absence of pain...and when we desire something, we see ourselves as lacking in some way...which also counts as a form of pain. As humans were constantly thrown back and forth on a crazy ride between these two states. In number 8 of his principle doctrines

he says: "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves." On this same note, he thought a lot of people wrongly believe that once they've reached this tranquility...this static pleasure...that by treating themselves to a kinetic pleasure... THAT will increase their level of happiness. For example...lets say it's really cold outside...and you want a jacket. You desire warmth. What Epicurus is saying is that once that warmth is satisfied...lets say with a 20 dollar jacket from Target...there's not much difference in pleasure between that 20 dollar jacket from Target and a \$3000 jacket from Nordstrom. There's a point of diminishing returns, and for Epicurus it is that point of static pleasure...the absence of pain. If you don't agree with the jacket example...if you're thinking it's not true...just think of how ridiculous it would seem if you tried to increase your pleasure with a kinetic pleasure while you were in pain. Imagine if you were riding your bike...and a car hits you and breaks your leg in six places. You're just lying on the ground writhing in pain...screaming for help. And then the ambulance comes...the EMT comes up to you on the ground...looks at your leg and says "I know what you need...here's a nice vanilla ice cream come little guy there you go!" and pats you on the head.....NO! that's not what I need...I want to go to the hospital! I want this pain to go away...In the same way the kinetic pleasure is USELESS when it comes to actually increasing your level of pleasure in THAT context...Epicurus thinks it is equally as useless at actually increasing your pleasure when nothing is wrong. He expands on which desires are good and bad in number 26 of his principle doctrines: "All desires that do not lead to pain when they remain unsatisfied are unnecessary, but the desire is easily got rid of when the thing desired is difficult to obtain or the desires seem likely to produce harm." So, pleasure is really about removing things that cause pain. And we have to be careful about choosing what we THINK will bring us pleasure that might in the long run bring us pain. And besides...all these physical pleasures and pains are secondary anyway. The really important part is achieving a state of MENTAL static pleasure...or mental tranquility. It is the more powerful, more useful and ultimate form of pleasure. The goal of life. Now when we have the broken leg...its very obvious to us which pain needs to go

away...but how do we figure out what is preventing us from MENTAL tranquility? Epicurus thought that people live in a constant state of irrational fear, anxiety and superstition. The biggest causes of these fears are the fear of death or the fear of being trapped in some really terrible afterlife for all of eternity...a fear of the gods. But Epicurus wasn't too worried about the gods...as far as he saw it...for some reason everyone thinks of these gods as existing in some blissful...tranquil state of being...but also believes that they are perpetually concerning themselves with all the troubles and woes of humans living on planet earth. He thought that the gods must exist, but they just...don't want anything to do with humans...too much trouble. And it certainly explains why they're working so hard to conceal themselves from everyone all the time. We should view the lore surrounding them as a lifestyle to emulate...not as something to fear after death. So great...we don't have to fear the gods anymore...that's a weight lifted off of our shoulders. But what about death? Certainly were justified in being anxious and scared about death right? Well...no. And this is why understanding his metaphysics and epistemology is so important, because having that knowledge, the rational explanation for the mechanics of the world works so well with his ethics and his view on "what is the best way to live life?" According to principle doctrine number two of Epicurus: "Death is nothing to us; for that which has been dissolved into its elements experiences no sensations, and that which has no sensation is nothing to us." "Death is nothing to us. Human beings consist of only atoms. The human mind or soul is just another component of a human, and must also consist only of atoms. So therefore...when you die...the atoms that make up your mind...just like the ones that make up your body...will disperse and all go their separate ways...and you have no sense organs...so you are incapable of sensing anything. See... people got it all wrong....the STATE of death isn't unpleasant...maybe the PROCESS of dying will be...but once were dead... we don't exist anymore...Death is nothing to us...the Roman poet Lucretious would later say: "the mind must be made of matter and suffer same fate as the body" Epicurus says in his principle doctrine number 10 that: "If the things that produce the pleasures of profligate men really freed them from fears of the mind concerning celestial and atmospheric phenomena, the fear of death,

and the fear of pain; if, further, they taught them to limit their desires, we should never have any fault to find with such persons, for they would then be filled with pleasures from every source and would never have pain of body or mind, which is what is bad."Remember, the goal of life is pleasure...but the only way you can achieve true pleasure, ataraxia... is by first understanding the nature of things...the rational explanation for the physical structure of the universe. Then once you realize that you're just atoms and void like everything else...and you're not going through some... obstacle course constantly trying to earn your spot into Andy's toy Box in the sky...you know...like in toy story...because the gods have new toys to play with, alive on planet earth...and you're just a relic of the past in a constant state of limbo...I thought it was clever...once you understand all that...then you can ACTUALLY set out to achieve happiness in this life. We don't NEED immortality to have a good life...in fact...constantly worrying about it just wastes time in the short stint we DO have on this planet. It's really interesting how as humans we agonize over the quantity of our life so much. I was talking to a woman from France one time and she told me that Americans and French people see food in two completely different ways. In France, it's about having just a couple bites of the most high quality, delicious, most excellently prepared food possible...and in America it's about eating as much low-quality, overly salted fat filled stuff we can...we love to feel stuffed. Now obviously both are generalizations, but in the same way a wise person would want a couple bites of really high quality food as opposed to a mountain of french fries...Epicurus thinks that a wise person would want a couple bites of super high quality life...as opposed to an eternity of dissatisfaction. Elimination of all these mental fears is the ultimate form of pleasure, and thus the goal to life. And to experience these fears and superstitions is a form of pain. The medication for this pain...was philosophy. When we think about anxiety and fear we don't really see it as a form of pain...but Epicurus did. He almost approached his philosophy as though it was medicine. He famously said:"Empty is the word of that philosopher by whom no affliction of men is cured. For as there is no benefit in medicine if it does not treat the diseases of the body, so with philosophy, if it does not drive out the affliction of the soul." His medical themed approach to ending

pain and achieving a state of tranquility completely devoid of fear and anxiety was called Tetrapharmacos...directly translated it means...The four fold remedy...Don't pay attention to the similarities between his plan to end pain and achieve tranquility by following his four fold remedy and Siddhartha Gautama plan to end suffering and achieve tranquility by following his eightfold path. He thought philosophy was medicine for the soul. he thought if we can understand four things, it would dramatically help us on our quest towards a happy life. The four were God holds no fear...Death holds no worries...Good can easily be attained...and Evil can be endured. The first one... God holds no fears we've talked about this one... once you realize the nature of the universe...you realize that no God living in a state of bliss would ever be worried about you as a mere human. The second one...Death holds no worries..Again we already touched on this...the soul is made of atoms and... just like the body...will find itself in a state of dissolution. Death is nothing to us. The third one...Good can easily be attained...If the only intrinsic good is pleasure...and pleasure is just the absence of pain and the satisfied feeling you get when your basic natural desires are met..then it seems... pretty easy to feel pleasure. The last one is that evil can be endured...or more specifically...pain can be endured... remember I said maybe the PROCESS of dying might be terrible...well this is the contingency plan if that's the situation you find yourself in. There are a few different strategies...some involve reliving good times in your past but the more fool proof one is to realize that the more severe the pain is...the less time it's going to last. Basically he's saying you know that stabbing pain in your chest? Don't worry about it! If it's bad enough...you're gonna die soon anyway! Hooray! So I want you to imagine yourself as an Epicurean...your life would be a simple one...living in the commune on the outskirts of Athens...away from the hustle and business of the city...with no ambitions other than to remove your desire of ambitions and increase your ataraxia. It was Athenian Culture to have aspirations of one day... making a bunch of money...or gaining military prestige...or succeeding in politics and making a difference...you know it was all about being a citizen and contributing to society. That's just what you did. But as an Epicurean, you wouldn't care about any of that stuff...you would focus on the complete removal of pain and all you

needed for that were your basic needs met. He says in his principle doctrine number 15: "The wealth required by nature is limited and is easy to procure; but the wealth required by vain ideals extends to infinity." Remember the example from before...if you've already had dinner and you aren't hungry and you decide to have a bowl of ice cream, it doesn't increase your level of pleasure much at all....well just like that, Epicureans would focus on meeting their basic needs and not worry about changing the world or making tons of money...all that stuff is really just like a bowl of ice cream...it's not increasing your pleasure much at all. It's actually really consistent with the way statistics seem to be heading in modern times...Have you guys ever seen those studies where it's like a happiness index...and the difference between the level of happiness people experience in relation to their income? The ones I've seen always show the difference in happiness between \$0 in income per year and something like \$50,000 a year in income is MASSIVE...no comparison between the two...but the difference in happiness between \$50,000 a year and \$50 million a year is almost nothing. The point of the study is that once people make enough money to pay for their basic needs, it doesn't matter how many cigars you light with \$100 bills...you don't get that much happier. This seems to be the idea that Epicurus had when he set up the Garden. As an Epicurean...Politics and Prestige were not important....in fact Epicurus often said things like "withdraw from public life and focus on a private group". And this "private group" he was referring to...were the fellow members of the commune...your friends! If meditation was the way you cultivate happiness in Buddhism...then in Epicureanism...friendship was the way you can cultivate the steady and long lasting joys that counter the inevitable pain of life. He famously said:"Before you eat or drink anything, carefully consider with whom you eat or drink rather than what you eat or drink because eating without a friend is the life of the lion or a wolf"See, pleasure was the goal of life...and Epicurus thought that friendship is one of the greatest ways to gain pleasure. Friends contribute in a number of ways to the complete removal of pain from our lives. Firstly, they make us feel secure, not just emotionally secure...but they always have your back. I remember when I was thinking about getting married, I was asking people, "In today's modern society, in a

world where your church doesn't label you as a social pariah for NOT getting married...and in a world where women are perfectly capable of being self-sufficient...in a world where there's no risk of dying of Typhoid Fever at the age of 25...other than a slightly increased tax return...why would anyone get married?" And everyone I talked to said the same thing...it's just nice to know that no matter what happens...no matter how bad things get or seem, you can ALWAYS count on SOMEONE being there for you. Epicurus saw that level of security as one of the perks of having friends. Another way friends help to remove pain from your life is that they help you to reason properly. Throughout your day to day life...when you become emotionally attached to things...it is really easy sometimes to deceive yourself and convince yourself that something is true that isn't. If Epicurus was alive today and saw the show American Idol, he would DEFINITELY think that the first few weeks of the show...the audition phase...is full of people that don't have very many good friends. One of the biggest mysteries of the known universe...right next to finding a link between quantum physics and string theory...one that I'm sure Stephen Hawking is working on right now...is how these people go from singing in the shower to singing on national television completely unscathed. I mean, does anyone love these people? Don't these people have mothers that care about them? These people are a good example of when friends in the epicurean sense could help out. They've convinced themselves they can sing, and a true friend can shine light on their delusions and help remove or prevent the future pain of Simon Cowell telling them "that was dreadful". Friends, in this way, provide an objective interpretation of ourselves. In Buddhism, it was a life of constant self-reflection...removing yourself from your own ego and thus removing the delusions we cloud ourselves with or at least finding which ones were destructive. In Epicureanism, our friends act as a neutral third party that calls us out when we're fooling ourselves. But the type of friendship Epicurus is talking about is not the type of friendship we are accustomed to in modern times...in order to truly benefit from friends...you couldn't just...send them a text every now and then...or see them sporadically...you needed to LIVE with them...be with them all the time...and that was the life you would have lived in the commune. Friendship was about trust, and you

needed to consider the well-being of your friends as equal to your own well-being. I mean, after all, sometimes being a good friend means sacrificing yourself in some small way so that your friend receives benefits. And this is one of the most controversial points of Epicurus's philosophy...and one I'm sure countless academics over the years have wished they had more of his work to dissect to... find, authoritatively, his true feelings on the matter. It all centers around an interpretation of one quote...principal doctrine number 5:"It is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely and honorably and justly, and it is impossible to live wisely and honorably and justly without living pleasantly. Whenever any one of these is lacking, when, for instance, the man is not able to live wisely, though he lives honorably and justly, it is impossible for him to live a pleasant life."On one side of the fence you have people that say that Epicurus was completely amoral...meaning that there are no good things or bad things in themselves...just things that add to or detract from your level of pleasure...or ataraxia. So...in this case...the idea of altruism wasn't his favorite thing...because if you're making sacrifices or forgoing potential pleasure so that someone else, even your friends, can be better off for it...then you are by definition...at least in some small way...in pain. And based on his egoist hedonistic philosophy, if you are in pain, you are doing the wrong thing. And I'd like to direct your attention back to the quote by Dr. Epicurus..."it is impossible to live a pleasant life without living wisely."On the other side of the fence you have people that respond to this with principal doctrine number 8...we said it earlier "No pleasure is a bad thing in itself, but the things which produce certain pleasures entail disturbances many times greater than the pleasures themselves." You can smoke a cigarette now, and maybe it will relieve stress and make you look super cool in the short term...but eventually...years from now you will get lung cancer and die. Epicurus would not condone this behavior because the pain you receive in the long term completely overrides the pleasure you get in the short term. Conversely, the sum total of ALL the benefits that having close friends give you in the long term, completely override whatever insignificant amount of pleasure you would get in the short term from not acting altruistically. These people argue that Epicurus really thought that acting altruistically is a

self-serving venture and that the benefits of having friends actually increases your net pleasure overall. For Epicurus, all the different forms of virtues that other philosophers laid out are actually all forms of prudence, or expertly choosing what is best for you.

The Hellenistic Age Pt. 2 - The Early Stoa and the Cynics

Episode #011

This is a transcript of Episode 11 on Stoicism and the Early Cynics. Stoicism is typically broken down into 3 parts Logic, Physics and Ethics...The chronology of its initial development in the Hellenistic age is also typically broken down into 3 parts...the early stoa...middle stoa and late stoa. Each phase of its development made notable breakthroughs in different areas....but its important to note a few things. By far, the most popular and most notable thinkers of the Stoic school are three people...Epictetus...Seneca and Marcus Aurelius. Unfortunately, they didn't live during the early or middle stoa periods....all three of them made their contributions during the "late" stoa...and they didn't drastically change Logic or Physics...all three of them made their greatest contributions in the field of ethics. To talk about the ideas of these three men alone would be a very pigeonholed view of Stoicism, but on the other hand, doing an entire episode on each one of them would be filled with redundancy because two-thirds of their entire philosophy is almost exactly the same as the other two guys. Because of this, next episode will be almost solely dedicated to understanding Stoic Ethics and the great ideas the three of them laid out. In the mean time, it is impossible to understand where they are coming from in their ethics without first understanding the other 2 parts...Logic and Physics. The Stoics saw Logic Physics and Ethics as completely interrelated and dependent on each other. They compared it to an egg, with the three representing the shell, the egg white and the egg yolk, all three combined serving a more complete purpose than any one in isolation. The things stoicism is most known for are stoic ethics and stoicism as a bridge to a western world dominated by Christianity. Think of today's episode as a first encounter with Stoicism, a coat of primer, and an explanation of the VERY important groundwork of the founding of stoicism, how it evolved from cynicism...and once it matured and reached the end of the early stoa...how its well defined and well tested ideas acted as a springboard for the great Stoic ethics that were to

come and made it possible for Stoicism to ascend above the ashes of its rival philosophical schools and become the dominant philosophy of Rome. That said, there's something else I have to say, and the closer we get to modern times the less I'm going to have to say this...but the exact sourcing of a lot of the ideas that came during the period of the early stoa are a little shaky. The IDEAS definitely were there, we can definitely attach these ideas to the period, the problem is assigning a particular idea to a particular philosopher. Three big Stoic philosophers make up the early stoa: Zeno, Cleanthes and Chrisyppus. We don't have a single COMPLETE work of any of these guys...just fragments. And the sourcing we DO have on them come from either non-philosophers or later hostile Christian writers. In a perfect world, we would have their complete works, but the three of them combined make up a pretty solid picture of what the founding principles of stoicism really were. We've all seen some depiction of a post-apocalyptic world in this giant media landscape we're immersed in...and we've all heard those really tough guys that stack encyclopedias on the bill of their hats so that they're super flat...we've all heard them talk about how THEY would be the ones to THRIVE if some huge disaster happened. But the fact of the matter is that...you cant know that. You never know how you're going to respond to pandemonium until you're surrounded by it. Some people DO thrive...some people curl up into the fetal position. The same thing can be said for chaos and adversity that isn't as immediate, like the kind that the people of the Hellenistic age found themselves in politically. My dad, for the very short time I knew him always said that if he ever found himself in some zombie apocalypse...or volcanic eruption...that he'd just grab a lawn chair...sit up on his roof with his friends, crack open a beer and watch it all go down, watch everyone scramble. Well, when you put it that way it sounds like an incredibly white trash thing to do, but if everyone finds their own way to cope with the zombie apocalypse, removing yourself from all the stress of the rat race that probably, when it all comes down to it, is gonna be completely futile anyway...and just hanging out with your friends trying to relax and enjoy the spectacle of it all, it really doesn't sound too bad. In fact, it sounds a little like the Epicurean approach to the "zombie apocalypse" of the Hellenistic age...remember you would live in a commune

with your closest friends...away from the busy city...not concerning yourself with things like amassing wealth or changing the world, all that stuff wasn't gonna matter much anyway...you should just relax and pursue real pleasure. Well if the Epicureans were the people sitting up on their roof, then the Stoics would be the survivors, if there were any. They wouldn't be the people running around flailing their arms in a panic...they would recognize that their situation wasn't looking good, but wouldn't be emotionally effected because they've accepted their fate, whatever it is and realize that even if it doesn't seem good on the surface, it ultimately is for the best. They wouldn't be the people with no plan...the people just following orders...one member of a mass exodus of people all heading towards a military base...they would use their natural ability to reason to make the wisest and most virtuous decision, because at least that decision would be in harmony with nature. See, because when it comes down to it, a lot of people talk about Epicureans and Stoics not just as rival philosophical schools of their time, but they even go so far as to say they are Two different kinds of people. I don't know if I entirely agree with the idea that they can be seen as opposites, after all they were both schools, both descendant of Socrates, interested in the practical philosophy of the "good" life and there actually are some huge similarities. But at the same time I understand where these people are coming from, There was an article published in 1869 that talks about the two different kinds of people and their common personality traits: "There have ever been stern, upright, self-controlled, and courageous men, actuated by a pure sense of duty, capable of high efforts of self-sacrifice, somewhat intolerant of the frailties of others, somewhat hard and unsympathizing in the ordinary intercourse of society, but rising to heroic grandeur as the storm lowered upon their path, and more ready to relinquish life than the cause they believed to be true. There have also always been men of easy tempers and of amiable disposition, gentle, benevolent, and pliant, cordial friends and forgiving enemies, selfish at heart, yet ever ready, when it is possible, to unite their gratifications with those of others, averse to all enthusiasm, mysticism, utopias, and superstition, with little depth of character or capacity for self-sacrifice, but admirably fitted to impart and to receive enjoyment, and to render the course of life easy and harmonious. The first are

by nature Stoics, and the second Epicureans."When I'm reading that, I'm almost reading it like it's a horoscope...I'm just trying to find little bits of it that I relate to so I can say..."that's me, that's the type of person I AM!" There were similarities and differences, like most things you can compare. Both schools offered a way to cultivate a tranquil state of mind, but they laid out completely different ways to get there...Epicureanism was about living a simple, self-governed life aimed at feeling pleasure...but stoicism was more of a challenge people put themselves through...an obstacle course. Both schools agreed that we don't really need much more than our basic needs satisfied to achieve a state of true happiness... or ataraxia...the difference lied in where to focus your efforts ONCE those basic needs were met...epicureans thought you should dedicate your time to attaining pleasure...the stoics thought you should dedicate your time to living more virtuously. Both schools thought you shouldn't go throughout your life scared about what might happen to you...or scared of death or the gods or whatever...there's nothing to worry about. Epicureans said you had nothing to worry about because you're just a collection of atoms anyway...a collection that was randomly thrown together and eventually will break down and go on to form something else, so there is no afterlife to fear. The Stoics thought you had nothing to fear because you didn't have the slightest bit of control over it anyway. They preached the idea of resigned acceptance. The universe has been created and destroyed a seemingly infinite number of times and things pan out in the same way...the absolute perfect way each and every time. You have a fate, whatever it is... and it's pointless to be worried about it. To find the origins of stoicism, you have to start with a story of a guy named Zeno and a guy named Diogenes. Both of which are names we've mentioned on the podcast before, and both of which are not the same people. This is actually the THIRD Diogenes we've mentioned. I've always said it, if I could go back in time I would just go back to this general period of Greco-Roman dominance and just become a psychic. I mean how easy would it be? You just go up to everyone and say "I see a Diogenes in your life"! Oh my god I have 12 of them! This guys amazing! Anyway, the founder of stoicism is a guy named Zeno, more commonly referred to in history books as Zeno of Citium. Actually, let me just start here. Have you guys ever

heard of a stoa? Well of course you have I talked about it last episode. Plato set up his Academy to the west of Athens...Aristotle set up his Lyceum to the East of Athens...Diogenes was to the south of Athens...and Zeno ...you guessed it...right in the center. But hey! he was on the northern side of the Athenian agora...he taught in a place known as the Stoa Poikile or the "Painted Stoa". See, if you were walking around the agora at the time and walked into the stoa, you would've walked into a place with a crazy energy all around you...there was a lot of history in this stoa. years before Zeno...right after the Peloponnesian war when the thirty tyrants were in charge of Athens, 1400 people were sentenced to death in that stoa. On the the back wall of the stoa you would've seen tons of beautiful paintings...of gods...or Greek military conquests...one by Polignotus showcasing the great victory of Marathon over the Persians...and right in the middle of all of this you would've seen a tan-skinned, tall, thin man walking back and forth, gesturing with his arms, lecturing a group of people standing or sitting around him. And this man would've been known as Zeno, the founder of stoicism. In fact, their pastime of holding lectures in this painted stoa is how they got their name. The Stoics...that and their original name of Zenonians just didn't have a good ring to it. I mean, would you rather be a Zenonian or a Stoic.Zeno was born in 334 BC...thirteen years after the death of Plato...and early in life Zeno went to an oracle ...the oracle of the Greek god Apollo....and asked the oracle how do I get the best life possible? The oracle says back to him..."You should take on the complexion of the dead" Well I didn't get it at first...so I looked up the word complexion...and Merriam Webster has two definitions...the first one is the color or appearance of the skin...especially on the face...now call me crazy...but I don't think the oracle was giving him beauty secrets...telling him to make his face look more dead...so the second definition is the general appearance or character of something. Now, That makes little more sense.I mean, why would it benefit a live person, to take on the general character of a dead person? In what area does a living person envy a dead person? He thought about it for a while...then he decided to read a bunch of ancient books, ancient in 300 BC so that's saying something... and then the next truly conclusive page that we have out of his diary is that in around 311 BC Zeno just survives a

terrible shipwreck... and swims up onto shore and goes to Athens... Now...why did he just suddenly decide that his life of being a merchant was over and going to Athens and studying philosophy was a good idea... right then. Surviving a shipwreck in 300 BC... the odds must have been like Normandy beach. I mean it had to have been intense...there's no helicopter rescue...there's no life jackets... not only would it have been terrifying and probably something you've never experienced or even SEEN before... but it also would have been an extreme test of physical endurance if you wanted to live. Zeno almost DIED in that shipwreck, he was clinging to life...just Michael Phelpsing it to shore... and now... of all times...THIS is the time you choose to make a complete career change into answering questions about the nature of existence? He'd found the complexion of the dead alright...no doubt he probably thought he'd gotten a little too close to the general character of the dead. After a close call like that, Zeno was ready to go skydiving...rocky mountain climbin'... 2.7 seconds on a bull named Fumanchu! This near death experience CHANGED his outlook on life. And quick aside, if you want to take something from Zeno's life...go get in a shipwreck. The sentiment of what I'm about to say has been hijacked and squandered by cliches for the last I don't know how many years, but it's worth saying. You want to dramatically improve your life? Find a way to actually think of each day and each moment as a gift. Fabricate the feeling state you gain from a near death experience without actually having one and you'll live a thousand lifetimes. So Zeno survives the shipwreck...shows up in Athens...and sits down at a bookstore. He starts reading a book by Xenophon, you might remember that name from our episode on Socrates...he was one of the only four sources historians have that talk about Socrates in any depth...and Zeno...was reading his book about Socrates...way back then. He instantly loved the guy... so much so that he went up to the bookstore owner and asked him where in the world he could find a man like Socrates, he wanted to learn from him. So the shopkeeper just looks outside of the shop...and like a scene out of a movie... he points to a scraggly man walking past the shop and says "There". The man was Crates...Cynic philosopher... staunch admirer of Socrates...and all around a well-liked guy for his time. For Zeno, the decision was easy. He would become his student and learn the philosophy

of Cynicism. Now, as we've said before Stoicism and Epicureanism were heavily influenced by Socrates and his piratical approach to philosophy... Cynicism was another embodiment of the Socratic lifestyle. In fact, the first Cynic was a guy named Antisthenes who was actually a STUDENT of Socrates...and there were other Cynics that achieved immense popularity like Crates... but no Cynic is more memorable or more...devoted to the cause...than Diogenes of Sinope. To somebody that didn't know what Cynicism was, this guy would look ABSOLUTELY CRAZY. Imagine Charles Manson living in a tub on the streets. Diogenes lived in a tub. He'd yell out at people who were just minding their own business in the marketplace...he would heckle Plato at his lectures and try to ruin them... some stories tell about him carrying around a lantern in the daytime... the original Greek word that was later Latinized into cynic meant "dog-like". Really, it was just referring to an extreme animalistic rejection to human conventions... but Diogenes took it literally. he would bark at people...he would lay around in public completely nude... he would do other activities in public that are not appropriate for a family show like this one... there's a story of people messing with him and when they were eating at a banquet they threw him their bones as though he were a dog... so he does the natural thing...he runs up and starts peeing on them...like he's a dog. He was so well known as a philosopher and social miscreant that Alexander the Great wanted to meet him...and Alexander walks up to him laying on the ground and introduces himself and asks him "is there anything I can do for you" and Diogenes goes "yeah, move to the left a little...you're blocking my sunlight" Then after that Alexander says "If I were not Alexander, then I would want to be Diogenes" and then Diogenes says "If I were not Diogenes I would also want to be Diogenes". Now when I hear this story, my first reaction is "Diogenes...what a character" and then my second reaction is "Why did Alexander the great say he would want to be Diogenes?" and I think I understand now...Alexander the Great was the most powerful man in the world, constantly surrounded by guards...anything he wants he gets...even entire empires...there's nothing any normal man can do to him. In a strange way, Diogenes is the same. He's so devoid of any pride, possessions, relationships...there's a freedom in having nothing to lose... and I think this is what

Alexander was getting at. But it's not like Diogenes was doing all this stuff simply for the sake of being strange...his lifestyle was a representation, albeit a very extreme one, of Cynic philosophy. Cynicism was also about achieving a tranquil state of mind, the difference it and something like Epicureanism... was the method of getting there. This tranquility can also be thought of as self-sufficiency, because you are completely unaffected by things like...unfair rules or unrealistic desires...external restrictions. Cynics believed that the "good" life...or the life that is worth living is a virtuous life, and a virtuous life is one that is in agreement with nature. But they aren't talking about...recycling or not dumping toxic waste into the ocean, at least not exclusively...they're talking about being in harmony with our own human nature and our place within nature. Part of our human nature is having the ability to use reason to better understand our nature. and if you were to live in perfect harmony with nature, there wouldn't be any external restrictions... you would be... self-sufficient... Happiness is living in accordance with our rational understanding of nature. Now what Diogenes says is that Human nature isn't to be part of this society with all it's little conventions and restrictions and rituals. All these desires, the desire to be a movie star...or to have a giant vault of money... or to be President of the United States... all of these desires are things that society has IMPLANTED in us! Diogenes just took this to an extreme and said that we shouldn't care about whether we live in a tub or not...or whether we look like Charles Manson carrying around a lantern at high noon...we should live a life in accordance with nature and do whatever we want to do... whenever we want to do it. The more we do that, the closer we will get to achieving this tranquil state of mind. There's a famous story about Zeno where he is a student of Crates...learning the ropes of Cynic thought...and apparently he was a really good student when it came to learning the philosophy...but Crates thought he was way too modest...I mean, to be a true Cynic you needed to give up any semblance of pride imaginable. you needed to be able to have the mindset where if something mortifying happened to you or you were forced to sleep in the gutter...none of this would matter to you because you reject the idea of social conventions. So to teach him a lesson, Crates gives Zeno an assignment...he forces him to carry around a pot of

lentil-soup everywhere he goes. Zeno, embarrassed of having to walk around with a pot of soup, tries to hide the pot underneath his robe so that no one will see....and Crates...with a move that in retrospect was completely uncalled for...takes his staff and smashes the pot, so now Zeno is REALLY embarrassed...lentil soup running down his legs looking quite similar to diarrhea. Zeno's humiliated...he runs off to hide and to clean himself off and Crates yells after him, "Why run away, my little Phoenician?", "nothing terrible has befallen you. It's these sorts of traumatic situations that probably led to Zeno not being entirely on board with the Cynics...he liked a lot of what they had to say but he wasn't totally satisfied...if he was...he would've just become a cynic. Cynicism was an evolution of Socrates...and stoicism was an evolution of cynicism. So these cynics like Crates and Diogenes were around for a long time...kind of echoes of Daoism in there....you know the idea that a lot of society that most people see as progress is actually regression and we should return back to our more natural state. It's clear that Zeno and Stoicism for that matter...was heavily impacted by two main ideas from Cynicism. One is the idea that the only thing you need to live a good life...a happy life...is virtue. The other is the notion that the best way to live life can be found by looking to nature. But Zeno thought something was missing.... one of the main things that is missing from cynicism... that's a key element in stoicism is the idea of physics and metaphysics... an explanation of the universe. Where is it? The Cynics were direct descendants of Socrates... it's understandable for them to think that these questions were too abstract to be productive. But for the Stoics and Zeno it just wasn't good enough. Remember? A big part of his method of achieving a state of tranquility is the idea of fate. When you believe in fate, you realize that worrying about all these things you can't control is pointless. But in order to PROVE that fate exists, you NEED to ask all these abstract questions. There needs to be some scientific explanation for WHY you shouldn't be worried. It's similar to the way the Epicureans NEEDED the explanation that you're just made of atoms and void to justify their belief that there isn't some afterlife you should be scared of...you're just gonna dissolve one day. So Zeno didn't see it like the Cynics...he didn't see it as pointless speculation...it may be speculation, but it definitely has a place even in practical

philosophy. So he left Crates. He decided to try to get a different perspective on everything...maybe try to further his education about how the universe was formed. Some people say he studied at Plato's academy...obviously after Plato had been dead for a while...some people say he just studied the curriculum of the academy under a guy named Xenocrates. either way, he was obviously influenced by the ideas of the academy in many ways. And ultimately, he combined elements of both his time with the Cynics and his education from the academy to make the most successful school of thought in the Hellenistic age. The idea that something bad may happen to you, and even though initially it looks like there is nothing good that can possibly come from it...when its all said and done EVERYTHING happens for the best. This idea was a key element Plato laid out in his work "The Timaeus" and it seems obvious that in his education Zeno was heavily influenced by this. But there were a lot of differences between Plato's universe and Zeno's. Zeno, like Epicurus and unlike Plato...had a materialist view of the universe. He believed that the only things that existed were material bodies. There is no immortal soul or afterlife or transcendent world of forms...all that exists is right in front of our eyes. Nature and the entire universe for that matter... should be thought of as an all encompassing whole, all animated and governed by a divine logos, which can also be thought of as god's will, reason, providence, fate and other things....all wrapped up into one...and humans should be thought of as parts of that whole, our reason...all fractions...or sparks of that divine logos. The important thing to take from that is that everything happens the way it is supposed to and according to a plan governed by this divine logos. Stoic physics really begin with Plato and the teachings of the academy that Zeno no doubt was privy to...There's a scene in a book called Sophist written by Plato where he's asking some people... what is real? how do we know something is real? and one answer someone gives is that something is real... if it has the capacity to act or be acted upon. Stoicism likes this definition, but they add that only bodies can act or be acted upon...thus only bodies exist. However, they make it very clear they recognize the fact that it is possible to be part of nature without actually existing...non material things like love or justice or time these things are imaginary. Called them figments of the

mind. The key to achieving a state of mental tranquility is virtue. The key to virtue, is living a life that is in agreement with Nature, hence the well known stoic maxim that "Virtue consists in a will that is in agreement with Nature." Alright, so what is nature? Words don't mean the same things today that they did back then...just like we talked about with the Cynics...being in agreement with nature does not mean to go to Yellowstone national park and pick up trash. Nature is god. The Stoics were a Pantheistic philosophy, Pantheistic means that God IS the universe. Now, as you can see the definition of God is not how people typically think of god in modern times. God isn't a Homo Sapien up in the sky controlling things, God is the universe which is a material substance that has the ability to reason and uses that reason to structure and control matter to fit its plan. Chrysippus talks about the Stoic view of God here: The universe itself is god and the universal outpouring of its soul; it is this same world's guiding principle, operating in mind and reason, together with the common nature of things and the totality that embraces all existence; then the foreordained might and necessity of the future; then fire and the principle of aether; then those elements whose natural state is one of flux and transition, such as water, earth, and air; then the sun, the moon, the stars; and the universal existence in which all things are contained. Stoics believed that God or nature is inside of everything and effects the outcome of everything even down to the smallest detail. To avoid future confusion i'm just going to refer to it as nature from now on. This nature is then further bisected into two types, active and passive. When you're making anything... whether its a chair... or an iPhone... or a universe...you need materials to make the thing out of... and then you need someone to assemble it. The passive element of nature is the raw materials... the matter... the physical stuff that things are made up of, but they would just lie there and do nothing if you didn't have something to set them in motion. The active element of nature is the divine logos, also known as reason....also known as FATE. I swear the stoics TRIED to confuse people with this stuff. This divine logos is the vehicle by which nature does its bidding and effects the outcomes in the universe, so you can see why the stoics thought of it as fate. They thought the universe is made up of four elements... earth water air and fire. The passive elements

were earth and water... and the ACTIVE elements were fire and air. After the early stoa, Stoics had an extremely detailed account of how the universe was created, but the central themes of their story is that in the beginning everything was made of a mixture of fire and air, the active elements...which then transform in various ways to make the passive elements earth and water... and then things keep transforming and being guided by the divine logos or reason to form the world that we're more familiar with. Then eventually everything reverses... the world we're familiar with turns back into elements and the elements turn back into the mixture of fire and air. It is an endless eternal cycle. It's because everything is governed by reason and the fact that THAT reason has had an infinite number of tries at creating the universe that fate exists. There's only one perfect way to do it, nature would never choose to do it in an inferior way, so things are very predictable. Destined if you will. This mixture of fire and air, the fundamental substance that's in everything is called Pneuma. Pneuma is a vehicle nature uses to implement the divine logos, do its bidding and effects the outcomes in the universe, so you can see why the stoics thought of it as fate. There's a quote by Stobaeus talking about Chrysippus' views on the elements and how they make up various things. "Fire, air, water, earth, since all other things are composed by means of a particular one of these or more than one of these or all of these -- all four in the case of animals and all terrestrial compounds, two in the case of the moon, which is composed by means of fire and air, and just one in the case of the sun, which is composed by means of fire, for the sun is pure fire" It all comes full circle. Remember stoics think that to live a good or happy life, you need to live a virtuous life. And remember the stoic bumper sticker from earlier: "Virtue consists in a will that is in agreement with Nature." Well nature is god and god acts through the divine logos or the reason that governs all things. So humans, with their very unique ability to reason, can think of this reason as a spark or a miniscule fraction of that divine reason. The more you use your reason in accordance with nature the more virtuous you become, and the more virtuous you become, the more in harmony with nature you are. It's a very nice circle. And the goal of life is to live in harmony with nature. This emphasis on humans and their unique ability to reason marking them as distinct from other animals reminds

me of a scene from the show LOST. And actually, this crazy elaborate theory of the universe with fire and air and mystery as though it's just trying bait you into watching six seasons on the edge of your seat...and then they never explain anything...that also reminds me of LOST. I mean come on, Polar Bears?The scene that I'm talking about is between John Locke and Charlie the drug addict rock star... Charlie is trying to quit drugs. he is struggling, John Locke has his drugs to try to act as a barrier between Charlie and relapse. And I love this scene because there are deep implications here. Charlie is sitting around barely even able to strum his guitar...sweating...his bones are obviously hurting... he looks like he is sick. John Locke comes up to him and tells him he should go for a walk and that the fresh air would do him well. Charlie starts walking and he's by himself in the middle of this thick tropical woods and he hears something behind him, it's obviously an animal it sounds like an angry wild pig of some sort and it's chasing him. so he starts running and the pig keeps chasing him ...its very dramatic...and RIGHT WHEN the pig is about to get em...do whatever pigs do when they kill humans... the pig flies up in the air in an elaborate net trap that John Locke set up to try to catch it. Now Locke planned everything out...he set up TWO traps. One for charlie to be walking and get pursued by the pig...and then charlie would unknowingly run the pig into a separate trap so that he could catch it and eat it.Now charlies a little upset about being bait for the pig but then he flips out, he starts demanding his drugs saying that he's sick asking Locke Why can't I have my drugs? Why do you do this to me...to torture me?And Locke says No. To give you a choice because being able to make choices based on something other than instinct is what separates you from him...and he points to the pig suspended above them in a net trap, obviously not doing too well.The idea of cultivating your ability to reason in harmony with nature in Stoicism is very similar to what John Locke is talking about in this scene. The goal of Stoicism was to be completely free of suffering by using our unique ability to reason to make decisions that are in harmony with nature. This state of being was called Apathea, and next episode is going to be all about these kind of things but the important thing is that as humans, the thing we are the best at is thinking...or reasoning...and we should use this reason to figure out the way the world

actually is, not what we first think it is. Once we know that, we then realize that the best way to live within the world is to realize that insignificant problems in our everyday lives don't matter...each human is an infinitely small part of an infinitely large universe that is created and destroyed an infinite number of times...all the little things don't really matter that much if you use reason. Rational is the opposite irrational and humans are most irrational when they are consumed by their emotions or impulses. Charlie in this scene represents a human that is in a state of suffering. He made poor decisions, not using that ability to reason very well because if he had he would've realized that doing drugs would've brought this suffering...and yet he still continues...overcome by his emotions and impulses, to try to relapse and get his drugs back from Locke. Locke represents the Stoic way of looking at things. Not just the obvious example of reason when he doesn't give Charlie his drugs back, but he is a perfect example of someone living with a reasoned outlook as the Stoics would see it...multiple traps? using reason to know exactly how the pig and Charlie would react to his traps? He practically saw the pig's fate before it happened. Not to mention his character on the show is incredibly tranquil and happy despite his plane crashing on a deserted island....I don't think the political unrest of the Hellenistic Age would've shaken him too much. There's a quote by Sextus Empiricus that talks about this dynamic of Stoicism: "the stoics say that man differs from irrational animals because of internal speech not uttered speech for crows and parrots and jays utter articulate sound. Nor does he differ from other creatures in virtue of simple impressions--for they too receive these--but in virtue of impressions created by inference and combination. This amounts to man's possessing an idea of "connexion" and he grasps the concept of signal because of this. For signal itself is of the following form: "If this, then that" therefore the existence of signal follows from the nature and constitution of man." We need to start wrapping this up, so let's get back to the early stoa. After the death of Zeno the next big name in Stoicism was Cleanthes...he was a philosopher by day..manual laborer by night...and he somehow found a way to moonlight as a poet. He wrote a great poem called "Hymn to Zeus" where he lays out the next evolution of articulating stoic ideas...Four of them...God provides providential care The life of virtue is

essential to happiness. There is a harmonic unity to the universe. Universal reason...or logos...governs all things. This was a nice step forward in the organization of ideas, but Cleanthes was easily overshadowed by his student Chrysippus who some accounts say wrote over 700 books. He was the Godfather of stoic logic. Now remember, the three main pillars of stoic philosophy are Physics, Ethics and Logic. Now we've talked about physics, and made a reasonable case for how it relates to Ethics, even though next episode is going to be tying things together much more, but where does Logic fit into all of this? Firstly, Stoic Logic was definitely a huge accomplishment. They have a lot of interesting ideas...and to even be spoken in the same sentence as Aristotle is a massive compliment for a system of logic, but because they lived in a time in such close proximity to Aristotle, they are usually seen as rivals. And most of the discussion usually devolves into who had it more right in what area. But all the arguments aside, the two systems actually work pretty well together. Now, I've tried to read syllogisms and indemonstrable on here before and it just doesn't work well on a purely audio form of communication, but what everyone should understand is that Logic was considered one of the three pillars of Stoic thought because the stoics thought that understanding Logic was understanding the divine logos or reason that governs all things. Logic for them was a very wide topic, it wasn't just syllogisms and being able to analyze arguments...it included all kinds of things like rhetoric, grammar and even their epistemology. Think of it as understanding and practicing the most efficient ways of sharpening and honing your ability to reason and live in harmony with nature. They thought that being able to reason well and being able to refute bad arguments that other people attack you with is a sure fire sign of a wise man, and that if you could master this art...you would never be fooled or misled by anyone. Diogenes on stoic dialectic: "The reason why the Stoics adopt these views in logic is to give the strongest possible confirmation to their claim that the wise man is always a dialectician. For all things are observed through the study conducted in discourses, whether they belong to the domain of physics or equally that of ethics. As to logic, that goes without saying." He goes on later... "Without the study of dialectic the wise man will not be infallible in argument, since dialectic distinguishes the true from the

false, and clarifies plausibilities and ambiguous statements. without it, moreover, it is impossible to ask and answer questions methodically. Precipitancy in argument extends to what actually happens; so people who do not have their impressions trained veer into states of disorder and carelessness. Only in this way will the wise man show himself to be penetrating, sharp-witted and someone who, generally, is formidable in argument. For the person whose job it is to discuss and to argue correctly is the very person whose job it is to discuss debating topics and to respond to the questions put to him, and these are the functions of the man experienced in dialectic."There's one more thing I want to leave you with this week and it is an early stoa view of stoic epistemology. We gather information through our senses...But sometimes these sense experiences deceive us...how do you explain those? Zeno gives a VISUAL demonstration of how to think about stoic epistemology. Zeno said that to truly KNOW something... means that you have grasped it in a way where it's impossible for you to be dissuaded by argument. He would be giving one of his lectures...pacing around the stoa...and he would stretch his arm out in from of his and show his open palm...and he would point to his hand and say "this is perception". then he would SLIGHTLY close his fingers...just a little bit...so now he looks like Zeno with arthritis...and he points to his hand NOW and says "This is assent" you know.. agreement or belief in something. then he closes his fist tight and points to it and says "This is Comprehension". Then he takes his other hand and grabs his fist...holding it closed and says "This is Knowledge."

The Hellenistic Age Pt. 3 - Hallmarks of Stoic Ethics

Episode #012

This is a transcript of Episode 12 on Stoic Ethics. Most Philosophy curriculums at Universities don't go into Hellenistic Stoicism in very much detail, especially the Roman Stoics, the big three... Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius...and there's a couple reasons for this. One... is that there is a rebirth of Stoicism in the 1600's, it becomes widely discussed, and if you're an academic and you're gonna choose whether to study ambiguous re-translated fragments from ancient times or a relatively modern wealth of debate, the choice is easy. The second reason is that the Stoic Ethics that those three men are known for...many philosophers wouldn't even consider them complete Ethics... they're not similar to what we'd read if we read Aristotelean Ethics or Platonist Ethics. Usually ethics consists of someone recommending or making a case for what the good life is. This is the RIGHT way to live. Here's why all these other guys are wrong in what they think the best life is, Here's why I am right. Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, they don't really talk about that stuff at all. They don't dedicate much time to arguing why other people are wrong or introducing a new system of ethics that they created...they all seem to adopt the requisite understanding that Stoic ethics are right...and they spend most of their time saying... OK, well once you've accepted that...what does this mean for you...what does it mean to be a stoic in everyday life, and at MOST this is only ONE branch of Ethics as far as a modern philosophy teacher would see it. Stoic Ethics can be thought of as a means of protecting us from any external adversity that can possibly be thrown our way. If you were doing a late night infomercial for Stoicism during the political trouble of the Hellenistic age, trying to convince people that Stoicism is for everyone, no matter what walk of life you come from...you can't really ask for three people with more diversity between them than Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius to plead your case. Coming from three COMPLETELY different backgrounds gives them three COMPLETELY unique types of adversity to deal with that were completely

different from each other. See, Epictetus was a slave who spent most of his life crippled, he spent his life teaching other people to apply Stoicism so they wouldn't be enslaved within their minds. Stoicism helped him overcome the tribulations of being a slave. Seneca was a Roman statesman who later became the tutor and then political adviser to the murderous crazed-emperor Nero, where despite trying to get out of politics, was forced by Nero to continue working for him and later was forced by Nero to commit suicide. This sort of terrifying existence at the mercy of a crazy person obviously presented its own unique set of adversity that Stoicism helped him through. Marcus Aurelius was the most powerful man in the world...the emperor of Rome, often cited as the last good emperor of Rome, and he didn't really add anything to Stoicism as Seneca and Epictetus did, but he was seen as a great example of stoicism when applied to a unique set of problems... and the stuff he wrote down gives us a peek behind the curtains into the thoughts of a dedicated practicing stoic living back then. Now at first you might think..."He was the emperor of Rome, what kind of problems could he possibly have to be dealing with..." How about the problems of an ENTIRE EMPIRE!? Like most emperors of Rome, constantly at war dealing with border disputes or just outright enemies...I mean he had Germanic barbarians to the north...Parthians to the east. He had plagues wiping people out...he was sick most of his life...all but one of his kids died during his lifetime...not to mention an entire empire to run. There's a reason your hair starts turning grey when you're the king of the world. Stoicism was kind of the Just for Men that Marcus Aurelius dabbed around his temples to keep his youthful appearance. Plus, have you seen the movie Gladiator? WAKEEN FEENIX was pretty annoying. The passage of time between Zeno of Citium and Marcus Aurelius is a long time. The variance between their opinions on individual issues can also be pretty big, and as a podcaster I have to make a judgment call on where to draw certain lines. When you guys are talking to other people about the stoics, or trying to apply stoicism in your lives or comparing the Stoics with future or past philosophers...you probably aren't interested in the difference between small things that are only relevant in a very narrow context, for example me rambling on about something like Seneca's view of virtue in comparison to Epictetus's

view of virtue...and I think even if I did do that...what you guys would ultimately have...is an idea of who each man was, what contributions they made to Stoic Ethics and a general idea of who the Stoics were and what the Stoics were all about. All three of these men had areas of strength within Stoic ethics where they made larger contributions than the other two guys, and in those areas we will dedicate more time to what they had to say on the topic, but because there is so much overlap between them, I think this episode is going to work best if we talk about the tenets of stoic ethics, the common threads among them all that forge the definition of what a Stoic is and then refer back to quotes from each man to not only embellish what we've already laid out, but to offer insight. That said, the central point...the thing that all stoic ethics are centered around is the idea of Oikeosis. This word is an adaptation of the Greek word oikos...which roughly translates to house...or orientation...it was referring to the idea that each thing, whether its an insect, an animal, a plant...a human...all of these things have a disposition assigned to it by Nature. Certain things that it was put here to do. For an animal like a...skunk it was easy. survival. self-preservation. eat, sleep, reproduce...but for humans, it was more. it included all that, it included self-preservation... but it also included rationality...we have a very unique ability to reason, and we should use it...we were put here to use it. there are TV shows out there like the Real World...or Jersey Shore...where the cast is made up of young people going out drinking and partying most nights...with about as many priorities set in their proper place as they have IQ points combined between the group of them. And there's a recurring character on these shows that shows up once every couple seasons where they're living in the real world house...but they have a boyfriend or girlfriend at home, and yet they still feel compelled to go out drinking and start flirting with other people. and right as they're about to do their 8th shot of the night the show cuts to them in an interview earlier in the day where they say something like "Hopefully, I don't cheat on my boyfriend...Hopefully nothing happens..." you know...where they're shrugging as they say it just looking at the camera with a blank stare. Behold everyone! The stoics would see this human as one that's acting like it has the oikos of a skunk, or any animal for that matter. These people don't see themselves as creatures with an oikos of reason...with the

ability to make rational decisions that are in harmony with nature...they see themselves as passengers...whatever happens...happens. This is the same point I was talking about last time with the scene from LOST. The pig trapped in the net has a different oikos than Charlie the drug addict rock star...and John Locke was trying to help him realize this. Marcus Aurelius says that everything, a horse, a vine, is created for some duty. and that man's true delight is to do the things he was made for. Alright so remember this concept of our oikos, cause we haven't fully discussed what it is yet, and we will be returning to it a little later, but this sets a nice base for talking about Stoicism applied to our everyday lives. One of the most important topics of Stoic ethics, one that they repeatedly hammer home and make it clear that it's very important is understanding the distinction between things we CAN control and things we CANT control. The stoics thought that out of all the areas we dedicate thought to, this is the one that we get wrong the most. Let me give you an example of someone you might know: Some people are die hard sports fans. Some people have a team that they're loyal to, they know all their players, they know the stats...they wear their autographed jersey to work on casual Friday...and when they watch a game and their favorite player hits the game winning shot, or the team is playing well together...they're walking on sunshine for the rest of the day...but when their team is playing bad...or the referee makes a bad call against their team and their team loses...they'll yell at the TV, slam doors, get angry...make the rest of the people living in the house uncomfortable. These people are allowing themselves to be made either happy or angry by the decisions of a select few people that don't know that they're a fan, they don't care about their opinion, and they would trade their favorite player in a heartbeat if it meant a better bottom-line for them. The stoics would say, they have ABSOLUTELY ZERO control over anything that's happening there...why would they allow themselves to be so negatively affected by it? Now most of us come to this conclusion without the help of the stoics, but this same concept applies to everything, no matter how small. Like I said, the Stoics separated all things into two categories, things we do control and things we don't control. The things we do control are our thoughts and actions. The things we don't control are...well...everything else. See, as humans, we are

survival oriented creatures...we like stability. we like predictability. this is why people typically say we have a fear of the unknown. we like to have a particular way we react to a particular circumstance...we don't like the fact that at any point in time we could get hit by a city bus, or someone could stab us...or a friend could betray us. we don't like it, but its reality. we don't actually control anything that happens external to us. but that doesn't mean we should walk around being scared of this stuff all the time, the stoics thought we should recognize how out of our control it actually is. We like to think that things like our body...our bank account balance...our car...our reputation...we like to think that were in control of these things. But the stoics make the case that all of those things really ARENT in our control because at any time someone could steal your car...someone could destroy your reputation...your body could randomly have a brain aneurysm and to base your happiness on something that you have no control over is a recipe for disaster. They called all of these things...even things that happened in your past...all of these external things that we have no control over...they called them Indifferents. Being in a state free of suffering because you understand which things are in and out of your control was called apatheia. But don't mistake this with the modern word that sounds like it...apathy...which would mean not caring about what happens one way or another. They DID have a preference. There were preferred indifferents and unpreferred indifferents. Let me explain. Even though we want these indifferents...like to be healthy or to have a good reputation...these things aren't good in themselves. This is an idea that goes ALL THE WAY back to the Cynics...the only thing that is intrinsically good, or good in itself, not requiring anything else to be considered "good" are wisdom and virtue. And even the idea of qualifying something as intrinsically good goes all the way back to something Plato said in his Phaedo that if something is truly good...it would never even assist something that's bad...so to the Stoics, even something like health was an indifferent...because its only good in relation to the person who its making healthy...like...the health of Adolph Hitler in 1939 wasn't a very good thing. Good Health, and many other things would be considered PREFERRED indifferents, outcomes that are typically good for us, but we have no control over. But just because we didn't control

when or if they happen to us, doesn't mean that we can't make choices about how we perceive them. Remember the things we DO control...our thoughts and actions. The stoics thought all of our thoughts and actions about the things that happen to us in our lives fall somewhere on a large spectrum between what they called virtue and vice, but in modern times what we would think of as a spectrum between rational thinking and irrational thinking. The guy from the sports analogy we were talking about before...the guy that puts a trashcan on his head and runs into the nearest wall because his team lost...that guy's thoughts and actions are leaning towards the IRRATIONAL side of the spectrum. Our goal as humans is to be as close to the rational side of the spectrum as possible. Have you ever heard someone say...there's no manual or handbook for living life? Well, Epictetus would beg to differ...his students collected a ton of his most insightful and wise statements and compiled them into a book called "The Enchiridion", or the handbook. He contributed a lot to this discussion about things we can control and things we can't control...and it makes sense. He was a slave...for years of his life he had no choice but to grin and bear the fact that he was shackled and forced to do manual labor. He talks about the importance and potential gain when you understand the things you can and can't control here in his Discourses...and we pick up the quote right after he just got done describing something terrible happening to someone that was completely out of their control: "What then should a man have in readiness in such circumstances? What else than "What is mine, and what is not mine; and permitted to me, and what is not permitted to me." I must die. Must I then die lamenting? I must be put in chains. Must I then also lament? I must go into exile. Does any man then hinder me from going with smiles and cheerfulness and contentment? "Tell me the secret which you possess." I will not, for this is in my power. "But I will put you in chains." Man, what are you talking about? Me in chains? You may fetter my leg, but my will not even Zeus himself can overpower. "I will throw you into prison." My poor body, you mean. "I will cut your head off." When, then, have I told you that my head alone cannot be cut off? These are the things which philosophers should meditate on, which they should write daily, in which they should exercise themselves. "Once we realize what is in and out of our control, then

the Stoics say that we can use our ability to reason to not walk around expecting things that are out of our control to happen or not happen. recognize these things for what they really are...once your perception of reality is closer to reality...then your expectations will be closer to reality.If some guy that lived on the other side of town from you, who you don't know at all, suddenly decides he is going to change his career from the president of a bank, to a circus performer...would it bother you that you cant control his job situation? you wouldn't be at all...knock yourself out! but that same guy, if when he was on his way to his new job as a circus performer cuts us off on the freeway...and all of a sudden..were angry about that. The truth is...We have about as much control over his decision to change from bank president to circus performer as we do over his decision to cut us off on the freeway...why do we react differently? well, its an expectation...we have an expectation that that guys gonna follow some unspoken set of rules that all drivers have consented to... without exception and he is never going to make a mistake. the stoics would say that this isn't realistic...this isn't a realistic expectation because we don't have any control over what he does anyway so what good is being upset about it.Marcus Aurelius talks about the idea of expectations a lot in his Meditations:"If you work at that which is before you, following right reason seriously, vigorously, calmly, without allowing anything else to distract you, but keeping your divine part pure, as if you were bound to give it back immediately; if you hold to this, expecting nothing, but satisfied to live now according to nature, speaking heroic truth in every word that you utter, you will live happy. And there is no man able to prevent this."He also said:"Get rid of the judgment, get rid of the 'I am hurt,' you are rid of the hurt itself."You may be saying to yourself that so far, Stoicism sounds a lot like Buddhism. Well you're right, this is actually a very common thing that people notice. There are a lot of similarities between the two...not the least of which is the whole idea that there aren't any things that are inherently favorable or unfavorable to us in themselves...it's our interpretation of those things that determine what they are...not to mention...Siddhartha Gautama suggested that people practice meditation to stay in the present moment and assist you on your quest to happiness, AND SO DID THE STOICS! They just had a much more proactive

and pessimistic approach. Remember, I said in the last show that Stoicism was kind of like an obstacle course or a training regimen. Epictetus said: "What then should each of us say as each hardship befalls us? It was for this that I was exercising, It was for this that I was training." The stoics thought of it this way...it wasn't good enough just to KNOW what stoic beliefs were...or to understand their ethics...philosophy was an Active process...one where you constantly remind yourself of tenets of stoicism and by always having them on the top of your mind, you create new habits of thinking that are in line with the tenets of stoicism. One of the practical methods of doing this that the Stoics suggest is a sort of pre-meditation. Marcus Aurelius describes it here: "Begin each day by telling yourself: Today I shall be meeting with interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill-will, and selfishness – all of them due to the offenders' ignorance of what is good or evil." Let's go back to the sports fan example from earlier...the way it stands now, this guy watches his sports games and at some level doesn't expect anything bad to happen at all, despite the fact that every weekend when he watches the game...something bad happens. What Marcus Aurelius is talking about in that quote, and many of the Stoics talked about this, is that every morning this sports fan should prepare himself for what inevitably will come...bad calls. He should tell himself: Today my team WILL lose the coin toss....today my team WILL have a terrible injury that ruins our chances for the rest of the season...today the refs WILL make a terrible call...and we WILL lose the game because of it...Marcus Aurelius said: "Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible." What are you accomplishing by saying all of that...what are the stoics teaching you to do? They're teaching you to lower your expectations. If you approach the big game on Sunday pessimistically, if you truly expect that all of those terrible things are gonna happen, then when they DO happen, it was to be expected...when they don't happen...you're pleasantly surprised. Well this practice isn't just useful for sports games...the stoics thought you should start EVERY day with this sort of mentality, and that same guy that gets upset about things he can't control while watching sports, probably gets upset about things he

cant control on the road, in his office, in his marriage, etc. This is the area of Stoicism that Seneca really excelled in. He famously said "That which Fortune has not given, she cannot take away." He has a book called "On the shortness of life", where it's all about the common human misconception that life is too short where Seneca says that it's not that we weren't given enough life to live, it's that we waste so much of it. He tells a story about a prisoner who was locked up in his cell, awaiting his punishment for a crime...and the emperor of Rome at the time, Caligula, sentences him to death and when the guards come to get the prisoner from his cell to kill him...hes playing a game with a guard that was assigned to watch over him...and these other guards show up and tell him he's sentenced to death and they start dragging him away to be killed and as these guards are dragging him away he says to them..."You guys are my witnesses...I was up by ONE PIECE there! I beat him!" This sort of calmness in the face of problems is a hallmark of stoicism. When we think of the word stoic in modern times we think of someone who is unaffected...or ostensibly unaffected...and that may be true but it's important to note that it's not like the stoics didn't FEEL emotions...they were just complete MASTERS of their emotions. Some stoics even take this mastery of emotions to the level where emotions don't even exist to them...Seneca said that The idea of "moderate emotions," is about as realistic as the idea of "moderate insanity" Emotions themselves are irrational...there's no use trying to moderate them...we should train our brain to think rationally. The important part is this: Don't let a single positive or negative emotion affect you too much...Don't let a single compliment go to your head and make you think you're the greatest ever...and don't let a single insult get you down and make you think you're a loser. Back to the sports analogy, don't let a single win let you think your team is destined to win the championship and don't let a single loss let you get down on future prospects. Being a slave, Epictetus had some good things to say on this topic too he said: Men are disturbed, not by things, but by the principles and notions which they form concerning things. he also said: If a person gave your body to any stranger he met on his way, you would certainly be angry. And do you feel no shame in handing over your own mind to be confused and mystified by anyone who happens to verbally attack you? "Our

thoughts create our negative emotions. The most common and arguably the most destructive of all these negative emotions is Anger. By far, the most popular work by Seneca, and my favorite to read is called "On Anger" It's an entire book dedicated to analyzing and dealing with...Anger. He famously said that "No plague has cost the human race more, than anger." According to Seneca there are four primary emotions...two emotions thinking about the present time and two thinking about the future. Pleasure...which thinks that something is good right now...Pain...which thinks that something is bad right now...Desire...which thinks that something will be good in the future...and fear which thinks that something will be bad in the future. Anger, to Seneca, is a type of desire. Because an angry person is always thinking about revenge in the future. He compares the irrationality of anger with proper rational thought here: "Anger is altogether inconsistent. Sometimes it goes further than it should, Sometimes it stops short. It indulges itself, judges capriciously, refuses to listen, leaves no room for defense, clings to what it has seized and will not have its judgment, even a wrong judgment, taken from it. Reason gives time to either side, and then demands a further adjournment to give itself room to tease out the truth: anger is in a hurry. Reason wishes to pass a fair judgment: anger wishes the judgment which it has already passed to seem fair. Reason considers nothing save the matter at issue; anger is roused by irrelevant trifles." He spends a good deal of time in "On Anger" addressing the common misconception that people have that anger is something that is entirely out of their control...as though it's involuntary...some sort of instinct that's programmed in us...he makes a case for how the two are not the same here: "take the way that we shiver when cold water is sprinkled on us, or recoil at the touch of some things take the way that bad news makes our hair stand on end and indecent language brings on a blush. None of these is in our power; no amount of reasoning can induce them not to happen. But anger IS put to flight by precept. For it IS a voluntary fault of the mind and not one of those which occur through some quirk of the human condition can therefore happen to the very wisest of men, even though they include that first mental jolt which affects us when we think ourselves wronged." He says that most people see the process of anger as

something bad happens to you...and then now I need to get back at that person. But Seneca says that it is much more complex than that...there are actually four stages to anger...realization, indignation, condemnation and retribution...he says it well here:"To receive an impression of wrong done to one, to lust for retribution, to put together the two propositions that the damage ought not to have been done and that punishment ought to be inflicted, is not the work of a mere involuntary impulse. That would be a simple process. What we have here is a complex with several constituents -- realization, indignation, condemnation, retribution. These cannot occur without assent by the mind to whatever has struck it."The first step is realization...this is the moment you realize that someone has done something bad to you...this is the moment you realize a referee just made a terrible call on the television against your team.The second step is indignation...that bad thing just happened to you, and now you have contempt for the person that wronged you...the referee just cost my team the game...i hate them now.The third step is condemnation...now that this person is contemptible, now you label them as a bad person that deserves punishment for how they've wronged you...this is you saying that the referee should lose his job...that he should keep his ref uniform and just go work at footlocker where he belongs...The fourth step is retribution...this is the childish idea of exacting revenge...you know I need to get BACK at them for what they've done to me...in the referee example there's all sorts of things you can do here, but I guess one of them would be you organizing a petition to send to the NFL to get the referee fired for his terrible mistake.So anger is actually a pretty lengthy process even though it happens so quickly in the moment. It certainly isn't the same as the involuntary shiver that happens when cold water is sprinkled on us like Seneca talks about. He gives several recommendations throughout the book, one of them is adjusting the way you look at the world to ensure that you have more realistic expectations of what is going to happen to you...adopting a more pessimistic view like we talked about before...and using mental gymnastics, like reading a mantra to yourself at the beginning of the day expecting bad things to happen...constantly referencing the principles of stoicism in your mind to form good habits of thought...things like that.So this idea of having realistic expectations is

definitely powerful, but I'd imagine some of you are saying something like...Well, I can change my world view and have realistic expectations...but what if even THOSE expectations get broken...then I should be really mad...and on that same note, what about someone who has unrealistic expectations, but they have the ability to accept the fact that expectations won't be met sometimes?"This point is the reason why I believe that happiness doesn't lie in low expectations like a lot of people say...it lies in acceptance. And this acceptance of everything that happens to you...the acceptance of your fate is a hallmark of stoicism.Determinism is a very broad concept in philosophy that says that when something happens...something is the case that makes it so that nothing else could have happened. There are TONS of different kinds of determinism, many of them differing in their idea of what that THING IS that makes it so that nothing else could have happened. Things are destined...Now, Some people might instantly think that this implies some kind of magical thinking, but not necessarily. Yes, it could be the providential plan of a God at work, but it could also be entirely non-magical..like the idea that the brain is a computer basically and based on the input you've received so far...there IS a reaction that will happen...you THINK you're making a conscious decision, but really it was the inevitable process of the brain you've been given combined with your experiences. This is a VERY broad topic with MANY different varieties...all of them have names...the relationship between free will and determinism is one of the most widely discussed topics in all of philosophy..and trust me, the works of the stoics are not our best option of content to reference when talking about it. There are much better options...not to mention...within stoicism it's one of the most controversial topics. The most important thing to take from their views on the matter is that they were compatibilists. They believed that the idea of determinism and the idea of free will are compatible with each other. They're not mutually exclusive as many people think.They believed in the idea of fate...but the important part is not the magical aspect to fate...the important part is the acceptance that you get from that mentality. Zeno and Chrysippus compared humans going throughout their life on planet earth to dogs that were tied to the back of a cart. Just imagine that visual...a big cart tied to the back of a horse is

moving along a path...and someone tied a dog to the back of it. The movement of the cart represents fate...god's plan...the reason that governs all things...and we, as humans are the dog. We're going where ever the carts going...there's no fighting it...the question is, how much are we going to whine and complain and struggle along the way. Think of yourself as a foot that is part of a human. What if you were a foot? You'd just be one small part of a giant body doing its purpose until you stop working one day. It would be ridiculous for you to say to the body..."No...I'm not speaking to you. I refuse to walk around anymore...I refuse to do my foot duties" No, that would be ridiculous right? Because the foot needs to realize that what is in the best interest of the body is in the best interest of the foot. It needs to fill its role and not complain. The stoics thought this is the way humans should look at themselves in relation to the world. One small part, doing its duty for the greater whole. Several years ago I got an English Bulldog...I named him Charlie...and he is adorable. That is his only good quality. If you've never had an English Bulldog, they are notoriously stubborn. They're very difficult to train...some people can do it...I've seen it before...I have massive respect for you if you can...but I sit there with a treat in my hand telling him to sit...and I just look into his blank eyes staring at the treat...and after four or five times of telling him to sit...I just give him the treat. Well one day I made a huge mistake, whenever we go anywhere I put him in the laundry room and a couple years ago he refused to go in. He just stared at me, so I got a treat, coaxed him into the laundry room, gave him the treat closed the door...Problem solved...Evolution everybody, it's wonderful. But it wasn't wonderful...NOW he doesn't come in unless if he gets the treat. I tell him..."Get in your room." and he looks at me...and doesn't move...he wants the treat...and hes not moving until he gets it...its like a reverse hunger strike...i say "get in your room" he starts going "hmmmmmm.....hmmmm" This next sentence is gonna make me sound crazy. If Charlie was a human...and the Stoics were around to see this behavior...they would give him a stern talking to. I mean I give him an ENDLESS WATERFALL of food and water...a couch to sleep on...and he has ONE JOB and that's to get into the laundry room when were leaving the house...and like the dog tied to the back of the cart...like humans tied to the inevitable process of fate...he whines and struggles,

but eventually he gets in the laundry room. He always does. Stoicism says we should have resigned acceptance and just cut out that whole process of whining and struggling...and just get in the laundry room. Epictetus says it well when he says: "don't demand that things happen as you wish, but wish that they happen as they do happen and you will go on well." Marcus Aurelius says: "the good man's only singularity lies in his approving welcome to every experience the looms of fate may weave for him" "Everything is right for me that is right for you, O Universe. Nothing for me is too early or too late that comes in due time for you. Everything is fruit to me that your seasons bring, O Nature. From you are all things, in you are all things, to you all things return." Seneca said: "Let Nature deal with matter, which is her own, as she pleases; let us be cheerful and brave in the face of everything, reflecting that it is nothing of our own that perishes." What Seneca is touching on here is the idea that accepting your place in Nature as a very small part of a massive fated process not only can bring you comfort in times of the political adversity of the Hellenistic Age, but it can also bring you comfort if something is taken away from you or if a loved one dies. This is an interesting alternative to the purpose that an afterlife serves. Someone loses a friend, or a child or a parent that is very close to them...and there's void left in their absence...it is a great consolation to tell that person that you will see that person soon and you guys will live forever together and it will be better because your dad messed up his ankle playing college football and that's not gonna mess with him anymore...that idea is comforting. The Stoics talked about thinking of everything from your most prized possessions, to your family members as really belonging to nature, just as you'd think your right foot belongs to you and not to its best friend...your left foot. Think of these people and things as being already gone in a sense. Then there won't be any unrealistic attachment to these things...the relations to Buddhism are obvious. Epictetus said: "Never say about anything, 'I have lost it,' but only 'I have given it back.' Is your child dead? It has been given back. Is your wife dead? She has been given back. 'I have had my farm taken away.' Very well, this too has been given back. 'Yet it was a rascal who took it away.' But what concern is it of yours by whose instrumentality the giver called for its return? So long as He give it to you, take care of it

as of a thing that is not your own, as travelers treat their inn." "Permit nothing to cleave to you that is not your own; nothing to grow to you that may give you agony when it is torn away." To the epicureans, pleasure was the most important thing to shoot for. To the Stoics, Virtue was the most important thing to shoot for. Pleasure, and various other things people think are the end goal, are seen as after thoughts in Stoicism. If you live virtuously, you will experience pleasure, but the real thing to focus on is virtue. In other words, humans are a little like my dog charlie not wanting to get into the laundry room. You shouldn't get into the laundry room just because you get a treat if you do it. You shouldn't do the right thing because it brings about happiness...although it probably will. You shouldn't do the right thing because it brings you pleasure, although it probably will. You do the right thing simply because it is the right thing. It is in harmony with the reason that governs all things. If the only things we have control over are our thoughts and actions, then the only thing we have control over is our mind or soul, whatever you want to call it. And if our mind is the only thing we control, we should try to do it as best as possible. Seneca: "The point is, not how long you live, but how nobly you live...virtue is nothing else than right reason." Epictetus: He who is free in the body, but bound in the soul is a slave; but on the contrary he who is bound in the body but free in the soul, is truly free. Marcus Aurelius gives interesting thoughts on the matter being the emperor of Rome... "Very little is needed to make a happy life; it is all within yourself in your way of thinking." Kinda ran out of time, but I want to end with one of my favorite parts of Stoicism...and it brings us back to the idea of our oikos that we said we'd return to at the beginning of the show. We'll talk in one of the next episodes on Stoic Natural Law, but one of the implications from this is the idea of having compassion for your fellow humans and fellow animals. Like we said at the beginning, the oikos of something like a skunk is very simple...eat sleep reproduce, self-preservation...and occasionally chasing around a cat with a white paint stripe on it and teaching kids about the consequences of sexual harassment. For humans, it is part of our oikos to not interfere with other creatures and their ability to carry out their oikos. It wouldn't make much sense for a foot to sabotage or inhibit the hands' ability to do their job. We should help other humans to

exercise their rationality. Treat other humans and animals with compassion. Marcus Aurelius: "Do not waste what remains of your life in speculating about your neighbours, unless with a view to some mutual benefit. To wonder what so-and-so is doing and why, or what he is saying, or thinking, or scheming—in a word, anything that distracts you from fidelity to the Ruler within you – means a loss of opportunity for some other task. See then that the flow of your thoughts is kept free from idle or random fancies, particularly those of an inquisitive or uncharitable nature. A man should habituate himself to such a way of thinking that if suddenly asked, 'What is in your mind at this minute?' he could respond frankly and without hesitation; thus proving that all his thoughts were simple and kindly, as becomes a social being with no taste for the pleasures of sensual imaginings, jealousies, envies, suspicions, or any other sentiments that he would blush to acknowledge in himself. Such a man, determined here and now to aspire to the heights, is indeed a priest and minister of the gods; for he is making full use of that indwelling power which can keep a man unsullied by pleasures, proof against pain, untouched by insult, and impervious to evil. He is a competitor in the greatest of all contests, the struggle against passion's mastery; he is imbued through and through with uprightness, welcoming whole-heartedly whatever falls to his lot and rarely asking himself what others may be saying or doing or thinking except when the public interest requires it. He confines his operations to his own concerns, having his attention fixed on his own particular thread of the universal web; seeing to it that his actions are honourable, and convinced that what befalls him must be for the best – for his own directing fate is itself under a higher direction. He does not forget the brotherhood of all rational beings, nor that a concern for every man is proper to humanity; and he knows that it is not the world's opinions he should follow, but only those of men whose lives confessedly accord with Nature. As for others whose lives are not so ordered, he reminds himself constantly of the characters they exhibit daily and nightly at home and abroad, and of the sort of society they frequent; and the approval of such men, who do not even stand well in their own eyes, has no value for him."

The Hellenistic Age Pt. 4 - Skepticism

Episode #013

This is a transcript of Episode 13 on Skepticism. So we've covered quite a bit of ground in the Hellenistic Age so far, and I want to tie it together a little bit. There were four main schools of philosophy in the Hellenistic Age the Epicureans, the Stoics, the skeptics and the cynics...all of these schools trying to cope with all the problems for the average citizen in the Hellenistic Age that were seemingly impossible to deal with. The goal of all of these schools was to achieve this "freedom from disturbance" sometimes described as ataraxia... sometimes described as a tranquil state of mind, but although the end goal of all of these schools was the same...if you looked at a member from each one of them on the streets, they would look COMPLETELY different from each other, because each of them had a very unique way of achieving it. If you lived back then, you would have several options...so which one best suits you? Your first option is to be an Epicurean. You wouldn't worry about the fact that your family just got sold into slavery, or your town just got burned to the ground...because all you really are anyway is a random collection of atoms. There is no god that you're beholden to, there is no afterlife to be scared of...so why worry? You should position yourself as best you can to do what you were put here to do...to experience the higher pleasures and achieve a complete freedom from disturbance. You'd dress modestly, you'd eat in good proportion, you wouldn't have a bunch of stuff or big dreams of being a figure in politics...you would resign from public life and live on a commune, away from the busy city... living a subsistent lifestyle with your friends. And your friends, were extremely important to you. They were your way of achieving this state of tranquility, the complete removal of pain. Your second option was to be a Cynic. For the sake of keeping it simple, think of the extreme version. Think of Diogenes. You wouldn't worry about losing your house or your job or your status among society in the Hellenistic Age, because who cares about all that stuff? They're all meaningless social conventions that have been imposed upon us...other people have

somehow convinced themselves that they're something to worry about...but not you. Through not caring about these things, you would achieve a state of flourishing and tranquility of mind. You would live in squalor, perhaps in a tub or in modern times, a cardboard box, but to you it wouldn't feel like squalor...it would feel natural. You'd do whatever you wanted to do...you'd go wherever you wanted to go...You'd wear whatever clothes you wanted to wear, if any at all. Your third option was to be a Stoic. You wouldn't worry about an evil dictator riding into town because no matter what happens, it was destined to happen. Everything that happens is part of the providential plan of God, the guiding hand of reason that is inside everything, and questioning it was as unwise as it was futile. You were tied to the inevitability of fate like a dog was tied to a moving cart being pulled by a horse. How much are you going to whine about where you are going whether you like it or not? Through this acceptance of fate and cultivation of realistic expectations of the world, you achieved a freedom from disturbance. Knowing the right way to act in every situation was using your ability to reason to live virtuously and in accordance with nature. You would perform a preemptive meditation to start the day...telling yourself that you WILL be met with morons and inconsiderate people...thus rendering you impervious from anger or dissatisfaction....throughout the day you would review and reference your stoic handbook...refreshing the content and keeping it at the top of your mind...you would be constantly working...being mindful of your thoughts ...brainwashing yourself into productive habits of thought...like modern cognitive behavior therapy. You'd be active in politics...or at least in the community...because it was your oikos to assist others in their quest to develop and use their ability to reason as best they can, and what better place to influence others than in the Senate of the most powerful civilization on the planet? Well, your last option would be to be a Skeptic. And of all the schools, this one was probably the one that when it comes down to achieving ataraxia by actually practicing all the ideas...it's gotta be the hardest. Almost impractical. But I don't think there's any other school in the Hellenistic Age that changed philosophy more. Just to get an idea of how this wave of skepticism rolled over the other schools of the Hellenistic age and to understand where skepticism found an obvious and convenient

foothold, I think it's illustrated best when talking about it in relation to Stoic Epistemology. These schools of the Hellenistic Age were in such heated competition with each other that it's easy to think of them as being on completely different ends of the spectrum from one another... This school and this school are NOTHING alike. But that's really not the case... they all influenced each other at one time and really were just talking about different answers to the same questions. Maybe a better way to think of them is... if YOU were a school in the Hellenistic Age... the other schools were like ambitious rival coworkers all shooting for the promotion that you want... they'd be showing up early to work like you... they'd be working hard like you. If you want that promotion that's coming up... and you don't want them to get it... you better keep working hard. Those people would keep you honest... and their competition would make you better in many ways. Well, When any one of these schools made a claim about something, the other schools found the flaws in it, jumped on them, argued about it, offered a counter-argument, etc. And one of the biggest claims around this time was in regards to the concept of epistemology. If you remember, the Epicureans were all about disproving any sort of supernatural explanation for anything happening, and in the process of this, sometimes they were guilty of prematurely accepting anything that seemed like a reasonable explanation simply for the sake of having SOME rational explanation. Well Zeno was no doubt responding to this line of reasoning in some way when he put together his multifaceted visual explanation for stoic epistemology that we talked about last time. And this is the most important part: The Epicureans thought we could attain true knowledge, but were a little too cavalier about it. The Stoics thought we could attain true knowledge, certainty IS possible... but they had a multi-part system of qualifications of what constitutes knowledge, and the skeptics thought having knowledge was impossible. Let's go back to Zeno and his example. Zeno would be giving a lecture in the painted stoa and he would hold his hand out... palm completely open and he would say "this is perception". Well he kind of says it right there, perception isn't knowledge. It's just the first step towards having knowledge. The stoics would eventually settle with calling what we receive during this perception phase as "impressions". Now, it's a little

complicated and we can't call them strictly empiricists, but we can rest assured knowing that the information received by the senses was incredibly important to them. These impressions our sense organs pick up are how we gather information from the physical world around us, and they're important because they're the first step towards arriving at knowledge. Zeno and Cleanthes compared these impressions to imprints made in wax. Let's do an example of an impression...lets say you're sleeping...you're having a pleasant dream...finally getting that 8 hours of sleep you've been wanting all week...and bam...a car alarm goes off in front of your house. and it keeps going and going and going...and you're just laying there with your red eyes...staring up at your popcorn ceiling saying "really?" just wondering if a car alarm has ever prevented a single car theft in the history of the world. Now, you can't see the car...you're lying in bed. You can't touch the car...all you can do is hear it. The alarm...the siren is giving your sense organs...in this case your ears...an impression that a car alarm is going off. Well how do you know that? You can't know for sure right? What if it's an air raid siren...what if an ambulance is just idling in your neighbors driveway with its siren on...filibustering your sleep schedule? Now, the Epicureans would say that the impression you received was true, but if it wasn't a car alarm, your mind wrongly assigned an interpretation to the impression. The stoics don't think this way..they think that some impressions are true, and some impressions are false. they would say, "yeah, it sure does SOUND like a car alarm is going off, but it's your decision to assent to that impression" you could easily look out the window and be shocked to see that overnight some strange people had set up a casino in your neighbors driveway, and that the siren that woke you up and wont stop is the sound of someone winning the jackpot on a slot machine. In THAT case, you wouldn't assent to idea that a car alarm woke you up. But on the other hand, you could go to your window...see the car's headlights flashing and the noise clearly coming from that direction in your neighbors driveway and be pretty sure that it was a car alarm that woke you up.This leads me to the second phase of Zeno's visual teaching example...the one where he takes his open palm extended in front of him and closes his fingers just a little bit...i said Zeno with arthritis last time...it looks like Zeno if he was pretending to be a cat...about to claw

someone...this phase is called assent. Assent is a belief in something. An agreement with something. You believe it was a car alarm that woke you up...it's not a mere impression...it's not just hearing what sounds like a car alarm and assuming it is one. You have processed the sound and the sight impressions through your ability to reason and arrived at a belief in something. you know, a cow has sense organs...he has impressions of the world...but humans can question those impressions...they can use reason to determine that things aren't what they seem. a stoic sage would suspend judgment on whether something was true or not until they were absolutely certain...until they had what they called, a cognitive impression. This is the third phase of Zeno's hand analogy...he would close his hand completely and make a fist and say "this is comprehension". Sometimes we have impressions that are really solid...impressions that are so clear it almost seems impossible for them to be wrong. Back to the car alarm example...Lets say you don't just go to the window and see the car alarm going off...lets say you go outside and really examine the car, find the exact part of the engine compartment the alarm is coming out of...touch the car..make sure it's not a hologram....you know stuff like that...you could leave that experience almost certain that it was a car alarm that woke you up. This is what the stoics would call a cognitive impression...an impression that is crystal clear and reinforced. But it's important to note that we STILL don't have knowledge as far as the stoics are concerned. These cognitive impressions were an essential element when arriving at knowledge, but knowledge really lies in understanding the relations between all of these cognitive impressions. There's a famous story about a stoic philosopher that was a follower of Zeno named Sphaerus where he's having a conversation with King Ptolemy and the king asks him "will a wise man ever allow himself to be guided by opinion alone?" and Sphaerus says No, but little did he know that the king KNEW he would say this and had someone manufacture some fake pomegranates made out of wax. They looked just like a real pomegranate, but were in reality...fake. And he served them to Sphaerus. And he bites into one of them...spits it out and is fooled....and the king goes "ha! what now? who's falsely assenting now son?" Well, Sphaerus said he didn't assent to the fact that they WERE pomegranates...only to

the idea that it was reasonable to assume that they were pomegranates. The wise man will always suspend judgment until he is absolutely certain. And it's this crossroads where the skeptics find a foothold in the Hellenistic Age. The stoics say you should suspend judgment until you're absolutely certain, and the skeptics say that you can NEVER be absolutely certain, as far as we can tell. See, a big part of knowledge for the stoics were these cognitive impressions, and what the skeptics said is that every cognitive impression, no matter how solid it may seem...will be indistinguishable from some other impression. Impossible to tell the difference between the two. For example, let's say you just paid for your groceries at the grocery store...you walk out of the grocery store and see your car. but is it really your car? everything seems the same...it's parked in the same spot you parked it in...it's the same color...it's got YOUR air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror...some wild and crazy 12 yr old kid wrote wash me on your dirty back window in the same spot...you're pretty certain this is your car...but the skeptics would say that even despite all this checking...you can't know that for sure. you could be on a Japanese hidden camera prank show right now...your friends could be in on it...someone could have orchestrated everything...they towed your car away...they got an IDENTICAL replica of your car, they parked it there, they made it dirty and wrote wash me into the back window in the exact same place...how do you know it's your car absolutely? can you? The skeptics would say no...this uncertainty, no matter how ridiculous it may seem in a practical sense... is impossible to escape...everything has this plague of doubt attached to it. and how can we honestly say we knew something for certain if this doubt exists? This is probably a good time to talk about the man who is widely considered the first skeptic in the history of the world, Pyrrho of Elis. I'm starting to notice a pattern here...if you're a figurehead for a particular movement...if you're one of the founding fathers of something and you lived during a time when historical details are scarce...you instantly inherit a sort of mystical, legendary status where stories are told about you exhibiting EXTREME behaviors in line with your movement. Pyrrho was really skeptical. He didn't believe anything. There are stories of him getting surgery in 300 BC and despite being completely awake...he was unaffected. He lied in silence without so much as a twitch of

his face as someone dug into his body...because he wasn't under the delusion like everyone else that pain was a bad thing necessarily. There's another story of his good friend falling into a hole and he's unable to get out...Pyrrho comes across him...sees him in the hole...and just leaves him there. And his friend wasn't even mad at him...he was just impressed...he deeply respected his ability to be so skeptical. There are stories of Pyrrho walking around with complete skepticism of everything around him...he was like an elderly woman...he would walk into people...in front of wagons...apparently his friends would have to save him from the brink of walking into his certain death all the time. And despite all these stories...he lived to the very old age of 90. Well these stories are obviously fiction, but they do illustrate an extreme version of Pyrrho's line of skeptical thinking. It probably isn't a shock that Pyrrho didn't believe in writing things down either...so one of his lead disciples Timon wrote about his beliefs and a later philosopher talks about them here:"According to Timon, Pyrrho declared that things are equally indifferent, unmeasurable and inarbitrable. For this reason neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. Therefore, for this reason we should not put our trust in them one bit, but we should be unopinionated, uncommitted and unwavering, saying concerning each individual thing that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not. The outcome for those who actually adopt this attitude, says Timon, will be first speechlessness, and then freedom from disturbance"Freedom from disturbance. That was the whole point. The skeptics were in heavy competition with other philosophical schools that claimed to bring you a state of tranquility...and their method of achieving it was through realizing that negative feelings come from negative judgments about things, but you don't know whether those things are actually bad...you can't prove that they are absolutely bad...so how can you arrogantly assume that you know? How do you know that pain is a BAD thing necessarily? How do you KNOW that losing your farm is a bad thing necessarily? Pyrrho said that we should suspend judgment on everything until we know for certain that it is the truth, which we never can.It was a new way of thinking and many historians think that when Pyrrho was a soldier in the army of Alexander the Great when he was

young...he traveled east and was either heavily inspired by or just stole the idea from what they called the "naked philosophers" of India. We talked on the Buddhism episode about this way of looking at the mind as being misleading and that by conceding to the impulses of the mind, often times it accomplishes the opposite of what you were intending. Couple this with a few strands of skepticism that can be found in earlier presocratic philosophers, and you get a pretty good idea where Pyrrho was coming from when he developed his version of skepticism. There are several examples...but just for example...remember Parmenides talking about how everyone THINKS the world is moving around them, but in reality NOTHING is moving? Not to mention one of my favorite quotes ever as said by Democritus...remember? By convention sweet, by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color: but in reality atoms and void. Skepticism had been around for a while, but not as an attitude that you apply to anything...not as a Hellenistic School designed to bring freedom from disturbance. And that's another thing...like the other schools that claimed to be heavily influenced by Socrates, the skeptics were too. Remember it was Socrates that said the only thing I know is that I know nothing. When Socrates says it that way...it's sort of clever and paradoxical, and he was making a deeper point really. But when Pyrrho says it...it starts to look like hypocrisy. Pyrrho thought that:"nothing is honourable or base, or just or unjust, and that likewise in all cases nothing exists in truth; and that convention and habit are the basis of everything that men do, for each thing is no more this than that"The problem is.. if you're supposed to suspend judgment on everything until you know what it is for certain...how can you claim to know it is impossible to be certain? you should suspend judgment on that too. How can you know that you know nothing, if you in fact know nothing? This extreme stance is really what separates Pyrrho from the rest of the other skeptics that came in the generations after him. To be fair, some people don't even think HE thought this way... but nonetheless, as we'll see later, it was the doctrine attached to the man. It was what he represented.You know, it's easy to get distracted by language... it's easy to spend your efforts trying to be critical of an argument written in 300 BC, but lets not forget that skepticism was a practical philosophy as well...you were

supposed to apply it to your life to achieve ataraxia. I think there's a lot of wisdom in skepticism...there are many ways to benefit from what they talk about that don't involve lying on the ground getting surgery and choosing to not believe in pain. I want to tell you guys about someone named Jack Whitaker. Jack was a small business owner from West Virginia who was pretty successful...he would walk around in a black cowboy hat...a nice dress shirt...a black suit coat...he probably had some kind of flashy bolo tie to go with the outfit...he seemed to have a loving family...friends...he employed people at his business...he donated to charity...he paid his taxes. He had a lot of good things going for him. Then, on December 25th, 2002...Christmas morning...he rechecks his lottery ticket from the night before and finds out that he just won the largest lottery jackpot in history at the time...319 million dollars. Now at first glance this may seem like a dream come true... I mean I think it's common for people to think that the greatest thing that can ever happen to you is to win the lottery, let alone the largest lottery prize in the history of the world. And like most things that appear to be good, at first things were. He hired back a bunch of people he had to lay off a couple months before...he gave a couple local pastors millions of dollars so they could build new churches...he cashed his novelty sized cardboard check and started giving it out to people that were in need. But part of winning the lottery is forfeiting a certain, temporary amount of privacy. It's actually in the lottery rules that if you win the jackpot, you need to do press for the lottery office... you need to stand there with the giant check on stage and answer questions for reporters...make yourself accessible to people. Well, Jack won the biggest lottery jackpot in history... and after being on TV and in the newspapers he started getting letters. A LOT of letters. It looked like that scene in Harry Potter with all the letters flying everywhere. He had so many letters from people asking him for stuff that he hired a full-time staff of people who just opened them all day long. The Article said, "There were so many letters that they wouldn't even deliver the mail. It was nothing for us to sit for 10 hours just opening envelopes," said Jill, who asked that her last name be kept private. Jill says the foundation received all kinds of requests, such as, "people wanting new carpet, people wanting entertainment systems, people wanting Hummers, people wanting houses --

just absolutely bizarre things."And he bought them stuff. He spent more than \$50 million buying people stuff. Once everyone saw that he was giving stuff out...he became like someone at the beach that gave a french fry to a seagull. People started swarming him. He said,"Any place that I would go they would come up," he said. "I mean, we went to a ballgame, a basketball game ... and we must have had 150 people come up to us ... and it would be going right back to asking for money."Things started going downhill fast. He was drugged and robbed while hanging out at a strip club, ironically probably giving money to the people who need help most. He was arrested for driving drunk into a concrete median a couple months later. He started getting into all kinds of trouble with the law, people filing lawsuits against him, his wife left him...his family grew distant from him, he gave his granddaughter burlap sacks full of money... she became addicted to Oxycontin and eventually overdosed and died tragically young.After it was all said and done, Jack said that he wished he had never won the lottery. He wishes he had just torn the ticket up and never gotten any of the money. He said that winning the lottery was the worst thing that ever happened to him.Just as philosophers make judgments about what the criteria of having true knowledge is, or about what the universe is made of...Just as someone in the Hellenistic Age might make judgments about whether losing their home was a bad thing or being sold into slavery... In modern times... WE make judgments about things in our everyday lives. I think you'd be hard pressed to find someone that thinks that winning the biggest lottery jackpot in the history of the world was a bad thing...but this story is not unique people. Most lottery winners say that a couple years after winning the lottery they are no more happy than they were before they won the money...and many of those people say they're less happy. Why?I once heard a very wise man say that if he could wish something upon his worst enemy it would be that he would be forced to get whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. That sounds crazy right? Well suspend judgment like Pyrrho for a second...if you had to make an argument on the other side of the spectrum...if you had to argue why that would be a terrible thing what would you say? Well this is another great example of something that seems like everyone's dream come true...and it IS in the short term, but think after a year or so... if it

was a curse that you couldn't lift, your life would become terrible. Think about it, so much of the satisfaction that you get out of life comes from the struggle. It comes from wanting something...really bad...but you can't have it. Maybe there's a car that you really want, but you can't afford it...so you work hard all summer and save up for that down payment and then when you get it...there's a tremendous sense of achievement and satisfaction that comes with it...maybe someone tells you you can't take them out on a date...and then you work hard, improve yourself and now they're interested...maybe there's a scarcity of something that you want...you know like a rare collectible...even something as simple as needing to go to the bathroom...and there are no bathrooms around...so when you finally go...it feels great. If every time you ever wanted something even for a split second it just appeared in front of you...think of all the great feelings you would miss out on. Things would lose their value...they'd lose their mystique. You'd never feel a sense of achievement ever again in your life. That sounds like a great thing to wish upon your worst enemy. Pyrrho would have been a big fan of the saying "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is". There are REAL overtones of skepticism in there. How can we know what is good in reality? How can we know we aren't just falsely attributing good to something that we think seems like it should be good? I mean you spend 8 hours a day working so you can get what you want...and you don't like working...so why wouldn't it be wonderful to just get what you want without work...it's all the good and none of the bad! Skepticism applied in this practical context is similar to skepticism applied to questions in metaphysics or epistemology...even the nature of things. The ground looks flat, so the earth must be flat. Take a few steps back, look at it in a more farsighted way and you see that's not the case. Pyrrho said: "things are never one way or another. impossible to measure or judge...our perceptions or beliefs render neither truth or falsehood, so we should remain without belief. inclining neither this way or that...so we avoid making any assertions and achieve ataraxia" I remember being 16 years old and looking for a job...any job. I remember I walked around for multiple hours a day for miles up and down this big long road where most of the stores were where I was living...and I must have filled out a hundred applications. I wanted a job so bad...I

wanted to buy clothes...I wanted to buy food and books...I was kind of desperate...and a grocery store called me in for an interview and I was really excited. I went in for the interview...and the lady doing the interview instantly loved me. I was making her laugh...I nailed every question...it was like a scene out of a movie...and at the end of the interview she looked down at the paper and said, wait a second...we already hired for this position. Oh that's too bad...but listen...if anyone quits...I'm keeping your application in my desk and we're going to hire you. I felt terrible. I thought the world was ending. I couldn't imagine a worse outcome and for a week and a half I remember feeling sad thinking that I'd never find a job and if I did it wouldn't be as good as that one...and then another grocery store called me...gave me a job...and it was bagging groceries at that store that I met my current wife. Funny thing is, I'm a perfect example of someone that needed to employ the ideas of skepticism. Accept your ignorance like Socrates. Admit that you know nothing. Things that seem bad are not always bad, and even if it is bad...adversity is what prepares you to navigate the future hurdles in your life. Your level of success is not determined by whether there are hurdles in your path, but by how well you can jump over them. If something bad happens to you...you approach it head on, deal with it, grow and become stronger and come out the other side a better person...was it still a bad thing that happened to you? Pyrrho said to Suspend all judgments. Because by suspending all of them you suspend the negative ones, and by suspending them you are impervious to them. Think of all the ways this applies to you! You got fired from your job? Seems bad, but in six months you might find a job that is twice as fulfilling as your last job. Your spouse leaves you? Seems bad, but you might meet the love of your life the next day. You contract some terrible illness? Seems bad, but what if it made you exercise and think positively and build your confidence in yourself and made you appreciate every second of life after you beat it? Many of the things that made skepticism so important to Hellenistic philosophy lied in the abolition of any potential monopoly that may have formed. Pyrrho died in 270 BC, but he passed the torch to future philosophers who carried on and improved skepticism. The word skepticism comes from the Greek word "skeptikos" which meant inquiring or searching. And skepticism became a critical

philosophy, one that was centered around looking at beliefs that other people hold and looking for weaknesses...inconsistencies. Are these beliefs the truth? Or is there room for doubt. If there was room for doubt, then it couldn't be true knowledge and now the people with faulty beliefs had to fix something. It's important to note that it wasn't just about tearing other people down...it was about finding the truth. Think of the four schools of the Hellenistic Age as companies that were competing for market share...all providing the same general service, but appealing to a different group of people according to their own individual way of doing business. Kinda like McDonalds and KFC....they both are companies that fill the need of busy Americans to have quick, convenient, good tasting food at an affordable price, while simultaneously subtracting decades from your life. But they do things differently from each other...if you're a guy that likes fried chicken more than you like hamburgers...you're probably going to go to KFC. This competition between companies keeps them constantly working to get better...and the worst thing that can possibly happen is a company gets a complete stranglehold of a particular market...because then they have a monopoly. They grow complacent...there's no incentive for them to improve themselves. Well the skeptics provided this constant competition in Hellenistic Philosophy...constantly nipping at the heels of the Stoics...questioning everything they said...keeping them honest. If the stoics said anything that wasn't entirely substantive or based on sound logic, they would call them on it...Just like if McDonalds started charging 10 bucks for a hamburger...all their customers would start going to burger king. A monopoly in the corporate world is bad...just imagine a monopoly of thought with no competing ideas. Keeping other schools honest really was the only role of skepticism...I mean if one of the central tenants of your philosophy is that it is probably impossible to ever attain certain knowledge...what are you gonna write down for other people to read? Are you going to write a treatise that is two sentences long? They didn't really have much to do creatively...so what they ended up doing is they spent all their time refuting what other people had to say, especially the stoics. It's interesting to think about whether stoicism would have been well developed enough to win the hearts and minds of Rome a couple centuries later if it weren't for

skepticism sharpening the initial teachings of Zeno down and making them stronger. And to continue the analogy...just like how companies have really smart people strategizing at the top...trying to find any way to cut costs or expand or make their product or service better, all the competing schools of the Hellenistic Age ALSO had brilliant people at the top trying to improve their product. So Pyrrho died, and he didn't write anything down...let alone set up a philosophical school...but his ideas lived on. Plato set up his academy...and after he died in 347 BC...someone else took over the academy...and for 75 years they just continued talking about Plato and what he had to say. Just think about that...from the time of the end of the second world war to today...the people teaching and studying at the academy expanded upon and argued what Plato taught...and then everything changed. The academy chose a guy named Arcesilaus as the new headmaster of the Academy...and being a philosopher living during the Hellenistic Age, he looked at philosophy with a more Socratic approach. He was a skeptic...even willing to question and refute the teachings of the founder of the school himself...Plato. This change of power into the hands of the skeptics marks a period of the Academy that historians call, "the skeptical academy". Arcesilaus spent most of his life and time as headmaster of the Academy refuting Stoic epistemology. And he attacked it right at its roots...remember, the stoics said that certain knowledge was possible and it heavily relied on what they called cognitive impressions...impressions that were so crystal clear that they were self-evident. Well Arcesilaus attacked the idea of the possibility of things being self-evident. He said "no impression arising from something true is such that an impression arising from something false could not also be just like it" and what he was touching on is the idea illustrated in the pomegranates story... there isn't anything you can perceive that can't be hallucinated or have a fake replica made...or something that would make you think the impression was self-evident. Arcesilaus argued... how could you ever be sure enough to deem something self-evident? When you constantly attack the views of others, you should expect to get your fair share of attacks back at what you think. One attack that Arcesilaus had to deal with in his time as the head of the Academy was the obvious inconsistency in Pyrrho's skepticism that we talked

about earlier, "how can you know for certain that nothing is knowable for certain." It's a contradictory statement. And more than that, if you were going to apply skepticism in a practical way...in everyday life...how do you do that while having the super extreme view that you should suspend judgment on everything? I mean it seems like that wouldn't bring freedom from disturbance...you'd just be really confused all the time, not sure about what to do. Well Arcesilaus said that an ideal skeptic would suspend judgment on knowing anything for certain, but realize that there are things that definitely SEEM to be the case and live in accordance with them. A common example of this thinking in philosophy books is let's say you're out on a walk in the woods and out of the corner of your eye you see a tiger leap towards you...obviously going to attack. You're not gonna sit there and check to see if the tiger is real or a hallucination...you're not going to take samples of the fur on the tiger and analyze the lighting conditions to see if your eyes are deceiving you...you're just going to run and try to climb a tree. This doesn't mean that you are CERTAIN there is a tiger there...you are just acting in accordance with the way things seem. Now we could talk more about Arcesilaus, but the most important thing to take from him if you're looking at Hellenistic skepticism as a whole was this concession that he made. It was a concession that would later divide the skeptics...It created a spectrum of ... just how skeptical are you? Do you believe knowledge isn't possible at all and you should reject everything like Pyrrho, or should you suspend judgment on knowing things for certain and live in accordance with the way things seem? The next big headmaster of the academy was Carneades...you might recognize his name from the story I told at the beginning of one of the stoic episodes about philosophy coming to Rome. He was the guy that impressed the Romans with his argument for the merits of justice and then the next day, equally well against the merits of justice. This kind of behavior was what being a skeptic was all about...you believed that truth didn't lie on one side or another...as far as you knew, truth was impossible to attain...and if someone argues one side of an argument well...it's possible to argue the other side equally well. And if your job is just to refute what other people argue and shine light upon their weaknesses...then YOU WOULD need to know both sides of an argument extremely well. One of Carneades'

students wrote about him saying that he was "impossible to understand"...but he wasn't insulting him...for the skeptics that was actually seen as a compliment. It's some bizarre alternate world where the merit of someone's intellect lies in just how skeptical they were. Hes the most skeptical guy I've ever seen...I mean, he doesn't believe anything. You gotta respect that. The first time I read that I started laughing...i mean from an outsiders perspective it seems pretty arbitrary. Ever since then I've always remembered all the skeptics in relation to the smurfs. You know, the smurfs ALSO have a strange criteria of what gets you respect in smurfland...they say "hes the smurfiest smurf in the smurfin world... things like that." They get respect for being "smurfy" Carneades gets respect for being skeptical. And the characters of the smurfs are comparable to the characters in Hellenistic skepticism. I think of Carneades as Papa Smurf... the smurfiest guy around. I think of Pyrrho and his really extreme viewpoint of rejecting everything ... sitting on one end of the spectrum of skepticism... I think of him as that weird balding guy that wears a robe that has an evil cat...and for some reason he has a problem with a bunch of little blue people. I don't know his name, but hes the antagonist of the show. Because once the skeptics started making these concessions about acting in accordance with the way things seem, there was a die hard group of skeptics that didn't agree. They thought you SHOULD reject everything...and when they were looking for a philosopher to model themselves after, they went with Pyrrho, who had long been dead, but his views were the closest to encapsulating theirs. This group of people became known as one type of skepticism known as Pyrronism. Well, if Pyrrho was the balding guy with the evil cat that hates the smurfs, then the opposite of him has to be the rational smurf...the one that always wants everyone to get along and loves everyone. That would be Smurfette... and the skeptic philosopher that represents the opposite end of the spectrum and thus represents Smurfette would be a guy named Philo. Almost everyone doesn't really like what Philo had to say because they saw him as being too soft...too committed to trying to bridge the gap between stoicism and skepticism...a gap that had been present for generations. Philo moved to Rome later in life...and his theory makes it clear that he doesn't agree with the definition of Stoic epistemology that former heads of the academy

had argued against and taken to be the way the stoics thought. Instead, he said that the Stoics had a different view of what constitutes knowledge...a flimsy definition that made decades of argument completely worthless and made some people wonder...if you believe what Philo believes... what is the difference between Stoicism and this abomination that skepticism has become. Carneades was Papa smurf, the smurfiest guy around. Pyrrho was the crazy guy with the evil cat, because of his mean-spirited rejection of everything. And Philo was Smurfette... the peacemaker.

The Hellenistic Age Pt. 5 - A Race to the Dark Ages

Episode #014

This is a transcript of Episode 14 on A Race To The Dark Ages. For the last several episodes we've been talking about the Hellenistic Age. As you know by now, this was a period of uncertainty and many times chaos for the average citizen living in the Mediterranean Sea region, but the Hellenistic Age is just one segment of time that's part of a much larger whole that's known as Classical Antiquity. Classical Antiquity refers to the events in the Mediterranean Sea region... Greece, Italy, north Africa etc.. during the entire span of time from around 800 BC when the first Greek epic poems start being written to about the first few centuries AD...the end is really marked by the ascendancy of Christianity and the Fall of the Roman Empire, which obviously didn't really happen in tandem or on a specific date. Now, If you've listened to the podcast from the beginning, we've almost covered this entire time period...we started with the pre-socratics...some of the earliest of them like Thales and Pythagoras living in what historians would call "Early Antiquity" and we've made it all the way to the end of the Hellenistic age...a time that's sometimes called the post-hellenistic age when referring to philosophy, but historically speaking... we're moving into Late Antiquity. The events that are about to unfold...right here at the end of the Hellenistic Age, both politically and philosophically, they are the reason why before you even clicked on this podcast you had heard of the names Plato and Aristotle and didn't know people like Zeno of Citium or Arcesilaus. They are the reason why people wrongly think of Epicurus as a man who was 600 lbs and had 100 girlfriends. Think of this time period....the period of time from the end of the Hellenistic age to the end of antiquity...as a Race to the Dark Ages. We've heard a lot about four schools that gained popularity during the Hellenistic age...but where are the followers of Plato and Aristotle during all of this if their founders are such big names? If this time period is a race to the dark ages, then you're about to find out how Plato and Aristotle are Sea biscuit. They started out slow, but they break late. On that last straightaway...some 80 lb

man wearing the helmet of an English bobby is driving them to the triple crown. Quite a lot has changed in the political landscape from early antiquity to where we are now...Athens used to be the cultural center of the world... or at least without question the center of the world when it comes to philosophy. You know...Being a Greek city-state under the protection of the powerful Athenian Navy for a while and Alexander the Great and the most powerful army in the world for a while...It allowed the philosophers living in Athens enough stability to make Athens the center of philosophy. Then, Alexander the Great died, everything descended into chaos... and all of a sudden it was a fight for control over the region. And Athens began to fall from grace when it comes to their prevalence as the sole center of the philosophical world. There's something called a Pyrrhic victory...I'm pretty sure it's used as a colloquialism in the United States, but to be honest, I've only heard it used a couple times. People will use it when referring to a situation where technically they won...technically there was a victory here...but it came at a severe cost...and that severe cost makes the situation like it wasn't even a victory at all. People will use it...when they're navigating the Costco parking lot... they'll be driving... dodging the people walking at a glacial pace across the street...avoiding one accident after another... screaming at people... angry... narrowly avoiding the giant wheel of cheese that someone is trying to tie to the roof of their minivan.. .you're driving around for 20 minutes just looking for a spot...you finally find one that's not even in the same zip code as the Costco anymore...and you feel like it's a Pyrrhic victory. Because, yeah you found a spot... but at what cost? you just subtracted 2 weeks from the end of your life just navigating the parking lot...you still have to walk 12 miles to the door and now you can save 30 cents on that 55 gallon drum of almonds you were going there to get. Well Athens losing their position as the sole kings of philosophy...the situation they and other Greek city states went through during the Hellenistic Age...is the ORIGIN of the phrase Pyrrhic victory. Part of Greece aligned themselves with a guy named Pyrrhus of Epirus...a general they asked to lead an army against the Romans who were taking control of everything. Well, to Pyrrhus's credit, he won several big battles...he had close to 15,000 soldiers...he even borrowed some War Elephants from Ptolemy the 2nd...but even

despite losing, the Romans were so powerful and able to reinforce so much more quickly, that these victories ended up costing Pyrrhus the war. Plutarch gives a really great description of the quandary Pyrrhus found himself in..."The armies separated; and, it is said, Pyrrhus replied to one that gave him joy of his victory that one more such victory would utterly undo him. For he had lost a great part of the forces he brought with him, and almost all his particular friends and principal commanders; there were no others there to make recruits, and he found the confederates in Italy backward. On the other hand, as from a fountain continually flowing out of the city, the Roman camp was quickly and plentifully filled up with fresh men, not at all abating in courage for the loss they sustained, but even from their very anger gaining new force and resolution to go on with the war" This is a perfect microcosm of the Hellenistic Age as a macro. Rome made some brilliant decisions and became an unstoppable tsunami. A hundred years after Pyrrhus lost Magna Grecia...Athens would be under full Roman Control. And now, instead of Athens being this Philosophical Oasis, now there were other places that were cultural hubs...we start seeing notable philosophers appear in Alexandria and Rome. After all, if philosophy at least in some capacity reacts to the political events of the day, and a certain amount of stability is needed for people to spend their entire lives studying philosophy, then why live in Rochester, New York, why not live in New York City... Why live in western China.. .why not live in Beijing or Hong Kong? Yes, the four schools we've already talked about continued to argue against each other after the Hellenistic Age. Yes, In Rome stoicism took hold and became the dominant philosophy, we've already talked about that. But under the surface a storm was brewing. A storm that people didn't realize the significance of until it came to a climax in 300AD, right at the end of late antiquity with a guy named Plotinus and the founding of Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonism changes everything. Now you may be saying... Neo-Platonism? Doesn't that mean new platonism? What happened to non-neo-platonism? Well, we've already talked about Plato right? We've already talked about the period of 75 years after Plato's death and the people that had control of the Academy expanding upon and defending positions that Plato held. Well, those people would be some of the non-neo Platonists...they're known as dogmatic

Platonists. Dogmatic being a word that means you lay down things to be absolutely true, in this case, the doctrines of Plato. Well, we know what comes after those guys right? The skeptical Academy. The opposite of those people...these are people that questioned everything...how can you know ANYTHING for certain? Well people got tired of the skeptics after a while. Philosophy as a whole started heading in a more dogmatic direction...and that was most evidently seen in the return to more dogmatic Platonism. Nobody really knows for certain why philosophy started heading in this direction...but it doesn't really matter...and it's not like people are staring at each other clueless as to how it EVER could have happened. There are many theories...and because WHY it exactly happened isn't that important...I'm not gonna bore you with all of them here...but my personal favorite...and probably the most popular of the theories is that...like the rest of the culture and thought in the Hellenistic Age, people eventually started becoming disappointed with the chaotic time period they were living in and looking to the past for things from when times were better...and philosophy was no exception. In this way, the Hellenistic Age served the same purpose that the Warring states period served in Eastern Philosophy when people like Confucius and Laozi looked to the past for systems of thought present when things were better. And that's exactly what these Platonists were looking for. A complete system. And they recognized that Plato had a huge body of work that was compatible with these new monotheistic religions that were cropping up. There were the original Platonists...the dogmatic Platonists...who lived near the time of Plato.. the Neo-Platonists from 300AD onward... so these Platonists that lived after the decline of the skeptical academy...and paved the way for Plotinus and the Neo-Platonists...these people are known as the Middle Platonists. This is the final chapter of the Hellenistic Age even though most of it happened after the Hellenistic Age. The four schools, the cynics, the stoics, the skeptics and the epicureans are all around...but this is about the rise of the last two schools...making 6 in total... Neo-Platonism and Aristoteleanism. Let's start with the Middle Platonists. The middle Platonists can kind of be seen as mad scientists...taking the best parts from these creatures and fusing them with the best parts from this creature and making a Frankenstein monster of all the best stuff. Well that's

what a lot of these Middle Platonists were doing. You start to see them become mad scientists in a way...they'd take THIS great idea from this philosophy and combine it with This great idea from this philosophy...usually small things, because ALL of it had to be compatible with Plato. For example, From an ethical standpoint, Stoicism and Platonism actually have a lot of similarities. They actually agree on the most fundamental of ethical points back then...both believe that the key to living a happy life is living a virtuous life. But they had disagreements...and much like a Red Sox Fan and a Yankees fan watching sports together on Sunday...they could have been friends...but unfortunately they disagreed on an issue that was much more important to them: How the universe was created to begin with. See, the Stoics knew that the universe was God and that everything was formed by this conflagration of fire and air called pneuma. But a pantheistic outlook wasn't compatible with the three religious groups of the time: Paganism, Judaism and Christianity. Plato's outlook was for the most part. To explain why, I think it's best to discuss it in relation to one of the most noteworthy and brilliant of the Middle Platonists: Philo of Alexandria. First and foremost: Philo of Alexandria lived in Alexandria. The city of Alexandria was named after Alexander the Great...who founded it on the north coast of Africa in 331 BC and created an entirely new...extraordinary kind of city. There was an island called Pharos that was about a mile offshore of Alexandria...and because the Egyptian coast was too jagged for boats to be able to land consistently in the past...Alexander built a giant causeway from the shore of Egypt all the way to this island which created a MASSIVE artificial harbor that connected directly to the Nile, and on this Island of Pharos, so that every ship passing in the night would know exactly where his city was... he built one of the seven wonders of the Ancient World...the lighthouse of Alexandria. The city itself...was magnificent...Alexander embraced a lot of Egyptian culture...so instead of Razing the city to the ground and building a more Greek city...the people of Egypt embraced him and built these HUGE beautiful temples and monuments that are a really interesting fusion of Greek and Egyptian Architecture...not only that, but they had one of the biggest and most influential libraries in all of the ancient world...by the time Philo was living in Alexandria...it was a busy, prosperous nexus of cultures. If

there were three main religious groups at the time, we're gonna talk about one philosopher that heavily influenced each one of them. For Judaism...it was Philo of Alexandria. This isn't the same Philo that we talked about in the last episode about skepticism...Philo was Jewish, but he was also a Platonist. and he spent his life trying to reconcile the two. But he didn't think there was very much to reconcile...because his favorite philosopher...even over Plato...and in his eyes, not only the GODFATHER of all philosophy, but the greatest philosopher who ever lived, was Moses. John Myles Dillon was a philosopher from the 1930s and he talks about how Philo thought of Moses here, "His guiding principle was that Moses was a great philosopher (in fact, it turns out in practice, a great Middle Platonist) that all parts of his work are replete with philosophic content and are coherent and consistent with each other....How, one may ask, does Moses come to be, not just a Greek philosopher, but a full-fledged Middle Platonist? One half of this answer lies in Philo's view of the history of philosophy, which I have alluded to earlier. According to this view, Plato was a follower of Pythagoras and Pythagoras was a follower of Moses....he goes on...for Philo, Moses was not only a philosopher, but the very father of philosophy, from whom all Greek thinkers take their best ideas." Think back to our Plato episode...Plato was heavily influenced by Pythagoras. Philo knew this...and based on evidence that later became heavily disputed, Philo ALSO thought that Pythagoras was taught and heavily influenced by the followers of Moses. Philo recognized Plato's brilliance, but really he just saw Pythagoras as an extension of Moses and Plato as an extension of Pythagoras....Plato's value was that he was a relatively modern guy that encapsulated all of this ancient wisdom incredibly well, but more importantly, he gave people new philosophical works to study...i mean without Plato...what would the Middle Platonists read? And other western thinkers like Aristotle and the Stoics...they were just restating what Plato had already said. These are some wild accusations... where is he coming from with all this? Well he got it from reading the philosophical works of Moses. Or at least he saw it that way. The first five books of the old testament are known as "The Torah". They are not only incredibly important to Judaism as a whole, but they are also supposed to be the writing of Moses himself...you

know...the VERY IMPORTANT groundwork, the foundation on which your eternal fate rests... that God told Moses to....pass along to the rest of us. Well for Philo this was double awesome...this was like Elvis and Justin Bieber doing a concert together...he was Jewish, and he loved Moses. So he spent his life trying to interpret the torah not just as a divine proclamation on behalf of God, but as a philosophical text from the philosopher Moses. As far as Philo saw it, there was MORE to the first five books of the Bible than meets the eye. He went through it line by line writing commentary, not just interpreting what the average reader might INITIALLY think it meant, but giving an account of what he thought were OBVIOUS allegories underneath the surface purposely written by Moses. To a modern person, it may seem obvious that you can read the bible...or some other religious text...and think...these stories and this explanation for how it happened isn't actually how it happened...but these numbers and characters symbolize other things...much deeper things. Well, for people of Philo's time it wasn't obvious. In fact Philo was kind of a genius. He may be one of the reasons it's obvious to me and you. If you look at Philo through the scope of philosophy as a whole, this is the most important thing he brings to the table. The idea that you can look at the bible...you can look at these things that just seem like stories on the surface...but underneath the surface there are broader philosophical overtones at work here...that's huge. Philo was a pioneer in this field. Some people even think that he may be the sole reason that once Christianity became dominant in the western world, that philosophy could even exist alongside of it in even a small capacity. Here's an example of his work... we've all heard about the story from the bible of how the earth was created in seven days...now at first glance this seems like a fairy tale...like...how can God have a day if he's not orbiting around a sun...it seems like a nice story created by ancient humans to explain things to ancient humans before they realized the implications of what day and night actually are....but if you look at this account like Philo did...he said that it wasn't that it happened in 7 days...that obviously doesn't make any sense....he said why would an all powerful god take 7 days to do anything...he did it instantly.....but Philo said...the real significance... was that Moses was kind of speaking in code here. you know...The creation story of the Bible goes on the

first day god created light...on the second day he separated the waters...etc...But Philo thought that the thing Moses said was created on each day corresponded with something else, mostly... the properties that each number inherently holds. Properties that we would later see Pythagoras talking about. Remember, the Pythagoreans thought that the number 6 was a perfect number because it was equal to the sum of all the numbers that can divide into it besides itself...in this case 1, 2 and 3...well Philo interpreted that the physical world was created on day 6...and that perfection is why. He had one for each number...he thought animals were created on day 5 because they have 5 senses...He went through the entire Torah like this...verse by verse...giving the interpretation that most people would have...the one that is only on the surface...and then the true philosophical meaning underneath the text. How the universe was created was the most important part to him... he had to find a way to reconcile his interpretation of the Bible with Plato and his story about how the universe was created...he laid out his story in his famous work called the Timaeus. It wasn't as bad as it could have been. I mean there were definitely similarities...on one hand you have the book of Genesis talking about one Supreme God that has unquestionable dominion over everything and on the other hand, you have Plato...who believes that the universe was created by a master craftsman... who looks to the world of forms ...as a pre-existing blueprint for how to make each individual thing. The best way to understand how Plato thinks the universe was made is to think of yourself as a master craftsman. Now, I don't know about you guys, but I'm not even a mediocre craftsman, let alone a master. In fact, the only time I FEEL like a master craftsman...and come to think of it...the only time I ever build something from a plan...is when I get something from Ikea. So bear with me here, Ikea... is the world of forms. Imagine yourself as a master craftsman God...walking through the aisles of Ikea...and you come across some bookshelf called...organblaggen or something...and you buy it. Now imagine if when you're looking at that organblaggen bookshelf on the sales floor of Ikea... imagine if that was the only blueprint you had to put it together when you got home. Imagine if you had to look at the bookshelf and go home and try to make it exactly like that one. Well you probably wouldn't do it absolutely perfectly...you'd

probably end up with half a bag full of screws...you'd probably end up with...an inferior copy of that bookshelf. Your bookshelf is never gonna be as perfect as the one at Ikea... but it's still a bookshelf. Well in that case...Ikea is the world of forms...the Ikea store up in the sky with the perfect version of the end table...the perfect version of the bookshelf...think of the bookshelf you put together as the inferior copy of that bookshelf... or the physical world as created by the master craftsman of Plato's Timaeus. Plato thought that the world of forms exists separate from the master craftsman... and that the master craftsman creates the world using these forms as a blueprint. Philo said that the creation story in genesis wasn't talking about the creation of the earth...but that Moses was laying out an explanation for the creation of the world of forms. Then he points to specific passages later on in genesis to make a case for THAT being the ACTUAL time that the physical world was created. The importance of this is that it allows the fundamental ideas of Plato, like his world of forms and creation story, slightly tweaked...to be compatible with Judaism. See Plato thought this master craftsman of his... was only that...a craftsman...he had these perfect forms he was seeing at Ikea...the world to him was like one of those sample living rooms that they have at Ikea so you can see how things would look in the context of an entire room. He was looking at the organblaggen bookshelf...next to the stuklobben nightstand...next to the entertainment system...and he was recreating it. But there was still some tweaking to do. Plato's account isn't very friendly with the Monotheistic outlook that God is an all-powerful supreme being that has dominion over everything...his almost puts God and this world of forms on the same level. So with a very slight adjustment...Philo says that God IS in fact a Supreme Being and that the forms really only exist in his mind. God can still look at these forms as a plan...he just doesn't have to drive all the way down to Ikea to see the world of forms. Basically, God has a photographic memory in our Ikea example. Like what he has to say or not, I think Philo is a genius. He also manages to take the ethics laid out in the Torah and reconciles them with Plato's ethics. The idea that happiness lies not in bodily pleasures or external goods but in living virtuously is something that is touched on in not only Plato's ethics...but Aristotle's ethics and Stoic

ethics as well. Philo thought that all of these ethical positions are derived from the same guy...Moses. Philo said that the Torah strongly reinforces the idea of turning away from bodily pleasures of the body towards virtue...he didn't think man actually began his existence...one man..one woman in some paradise garden somewhere...thought that the Garden of Eden symbolized virtue and that Adam and Eve's submission to that persuasive talking snake and the subsequent eating of the fruit...ACTUALLY represents a submission to bodily pleasures and a departure from virtue.plus, as we've seen before, the definition of what virtue is varies from philosopher to philosopher. For Philo, virtue means adherence to God.Now, if Philo of Alexandria was the Middle Platonist representing Judaism...then the Middle Platonist representing Paganism was a guy named Plutarch. For anyone not familiar, to say that something is Pagan is actually a pretty vague term...In modern times Paganism refers to any religion that isn't Christianity, Judaism or Islam. So back in Plutarch's time it meant a religion that wasn't Christianity or Judaism. Plutarch was born into a privileged life... his family was wealthy and successful. Plutarch...didn't waste his gift. He became a priest at the local temple for the Greek god Apollo at Delphi...but on top of that he became a magistrate in his home town of Chaeronea... he'd travel around and represent his home at the various places where they needed a representative of his town. Despite his obvious differences from Philo of Alexandria...he still dedicated the time he spent as a middle Platonist to reconciling the teachings of Plato with something perfectly compatible with modern religious beliefs.The most notable philosophical work of his life was a clarification of Plato's creation story that allowed it to be completely in harmony with his ethics.Plutarch noticed that there were a couple lines in two completely different treatises by Plato that seem to say the opposite thing from each other. In the Timaeus...Plato says that the universe was created by a master craftsman...but in the Phaedrus he says that because the human soul moves around all by itself...you know when you die it flies around and goes where ever it goes...based on that...the soul is eternal and wasn't created by anything.Plutarch clears this up by saying that Plato is talking about two completely different souls...one irrational eternal soul that isn't created by anything...that's in each

one of us...not created by the master craftsman...god did create the world, but he didn't create the stuff that he makes the world out of.... and because this irrational soul is part of that stuff...because it isn't made by a perfect creator, its irrational...however...the master craftsman does make a rational soul for the entire universe...and that's what he was talking about in the Timaeus... this is a view that is unique to Plutarch and its obvious that its one of those combinations of elements from multiple philosophies that we talked about earlier...you know, both Plato and Aristotle and the idea of the soul having a rational and irrational part dueling against each other...the stoics and the spark of the divine reason that governs all things being inherent in every one of us...and obviously Plato and his Timaeus. This irrational part of the soul is something that Plutarch refers to all the time in his philosophy. Even ethics. Things that are not virtuous appeal to the irrational part of our soul. People who are destructive or fake appeal to the irrational part of our soul. Plutarch actually had a lot to say about friendship, how to treat your friends and what makes a good friendship...he actually wrote an entire book called "How to tell a Flatterer from a Friend". and it's exactly what you'd expect...he lays out a comprehensive argument for what a flatterer is...how to identify a flatterer vs a friend...how to treat flatterers and not sacrifice your own virtue...he even spends the last 12 chapters of the book talking about the proper way to talk to your friends honestly. This topic was obviously very important to him, and it makes sense. Plutarch was born into a rich family and had a prominent standing in local politics...if you were someone looking to flatter someone to get some sort of selfish gain...Plutarch is the exact type of person you would target. There's no doubt he dealt with tons of these people...but the most interesting part is how much of it directly applies to relationships today. So... what is the difference between a flatterer and a friend? Well to Plutarch, friends are incredibly important to our individual happiness and well being, for various reasons. For one, they bring us companionship. You know... it's good to know no matter what happens someone is always gonna be there for you. But, the most important thing...the biggest value that friends have to us as far as Plutarch sees it is that they can be honest with us. I mean, think about it...who else can we actually rely on to be that voice of reason for us? Who

can we actually rely on to call us out when we're lying to ourselves or we're being an idiot? Strangers? They might do it sometimes... but we can't rely on them for it...most of them just mind their own business. Can we rely on our enemies? Of course not. Too much is at stake. We need friends. Sometimes, we need a different set of eyes other than our own to look at us...no you're not going out in public in that fanny pack...even if you ARE trying to be ironic. If the only things we were ever able to improve on were things that YOU were perceptive enough and honest enough to notice in yourself...think of how slowly you'd improve...think of how little you'd ever notice was wrong. Plutarch says that this is because we delude ourselves. It's even easy to flatter yourself. He said, "We must eradicate self-love and conceit, because by flattering us beforehand they render us less resistant to flatterers." You know when you go into someone's house and it smells like old food or dead animals or something? It's not like these people spray dog feces scented Febreze or something...they can't smell what you smell because they are immersed in it. A fox can't smell his own hole...To them, their house just smells like air, but an objective outsider like you knows better. Just how this person isn't able to tell that something is wrong despite being around it all day long, the same thing applies to the way they behave or the way they look or the way they think. Friends offer an objective honest perspective that we can rely on, and the value of that is priceless. Now, only by understanding how important friends are can we truly understand how dangerous flatterers are to Plutarch. If the value of friends lies in their honesty and the various ways that honesty enriches our lives, then the danger of flatterers lies in their dishonesty and the various ways that dishonesty destroys our lives. But what exactly is a flatterer? Plutarch isn't scared to answer, "That last one is referring back to what we talked about before...the irrational part of the soul vs the rational part of the soul. The flatterer appeals to the irrational part of the soul. Plutarch says, "The flatterer is always covertly on the watch for some emotion to pamper. Are you angry? Punish them. Do you crave anything? Buy it. Are you afraid? Flee. Are you suspicious? Give it credence." Plutarch goes on...paragraph after paragraph...giving an extremely detailed account of not only the common mannerisms of these flatterers...but the common tactics they use to try to get what they want. He paints

a picture of these people being methodical in how they find their victims...they find someone that has something they want...something they can give them. Keep in mind this doesn't need to be money or stuff...this could be anything...this could be a womanizer...this could be someone that just wants a ride down to the convenience store...and once these people find the person that has something they want...they pretend to agree with you, as if they have similar interests and ways of thinking like your friends would. Plutarch says, "Why should the parasite insinuate himself under that disguise? And yet he, as counterfeit gold imitates the brightness and lustre of the true, always puts on the easiness and freedom of a friend, is always pleasant and obliging, and ready to comply with the humor of his company. "Did you catch that? He actually refers to these people as parasites. These people weren't just an inconvenience to Plutarch, they were toxic. A parasite by definition is an organism that lives by consuming nutrients at the expense of its host. And this really is the difference between a friend and a flatterer for Plutarch...it was a question of motives. A true friend always acts in your own best interest, no matter the immediate cost to you or them. A flatterer just always tries to please you, because they want something from you. BIG difference. The other day I was reading about Hitler and the closing months of WW2... and the book I was reading was talking about how whenever one of Hitler's top generals would come to him with information or results that were bad, that bad things would happen to that person that gave him the bad news. They'd get fired...they'd get shot...something. Well, problems didn't just stop happening...people just stopped telling him about them. So eventually, Hitler didn't even have the ability to fix anything, because he didn't have anyone that was willing to tell him the truth for fear of what might happen to them. Hitler, in the closing days of WW2, basically surrounded himself with flatterers, and I don't think I need to tell you guys how that worked out for him. Plutarch said "The flatterer thinks he ought to do anything to be agreeable, while the friend by always doing what he ought to do is oftentimes agreeable and sometimes disagreeable not from any desire to be disagreeable. He is like the physician who administers an unpleasant remedy." So what should we do about these people that selfishly damage us for their own personal gain...pretending to be our friends

so they can get what they want, and how do we know someone is a flatterer for certain? Well Plutarch suggests a couple different courses of action, but one of the best ways to know for certain if you're dealing with a flatterer is to feign ignorance about something. Plutarch says to give him terrible advice. Advice that is supposed to be ridiculous. Pretend you are stupid. But you gotta do it with a perfectly straight face and you gotta sell it...because if he thinks you are serious, then he's going to agree with you about anything. and if he agrees with you about your terrible advice...well then he's definitely a flatterer. Plutarch says, "Now to discover the cheat which these insinuations of our own worth might put upon us (a thing that requires no ordinary circumspection), the best way will be to give him a very absurd advice, and to animadvert as impertinently as may be upon his works when he submits them to your censure. For if he makes no reply, but grants and approves of all you assert, and applauds every period with the eulogy of Very right! Incomparably well! — then you have trepanned him, and it is plain that, though He counsel asked, he played another game, To swell you with the opinion of a name." In modern times, we think of friends slightly differently in particular circumstances...The main thing I get from How to tell a flatterer from a friend is that if Plutarch lived today...he would've hated Facebook. I mean, if a flatterer is someone who falsely represents themselves for personal gain...then everyone's Facebook friend list is full of flatterers. I once knew this guy who was completely miserable. I mean...he was always angry about something...he was constantly talking about how much he hated his wife and kids...attacking people...saying that vacation is worse than working and working makes him want to kill himself...the guy was 28 years old with crows feet around his eyes...but it wasn't because he grew up somewhere sunny and he couldn't afford sunglasses...it was because he was always glaring about how mad he was about something. I worked in close proximity to this guy for a good year...and I can honestly say that I never heard him say a single thing that wasn't disingenuous conversation or a complaint. One day, randomly he was taking a picture with someone, and instantly his expression changed...he was smiling for the camera. And it was weird...I had never even seen him smile before, at work, outside of work, with his family...never. 500 years from now...when someone looks at

that guy's Facebook page...when they look at his time line of pictures...they're gonna say here's a guy who is obviously a happy guy that worked hard, loved his family and enjoyed life. I mean look at him...he's smiling in all his pictures...here's a list of all these things he's passionate about...he must have really enriched the lives of others. Is a Facebook profile a true representation of a person? Or is it just who that person wants you to think they are? To me, the things that make people unique and interesting are their flaws...the things they wouldn't initially be inclined to tell you about...the things that they wouldn't dream of including on a Facebook page. A Person becomes the curator of their own museum...their false identity interacting with the false identities of others...but it's unavoidable, social media profiles will never be truly accurate for the same reason that reality TV will never be reality once the cameras are turned on. Plutarch would have pointed out, yeah this person has 900 friends on Facebook, but how many of those people are being totally honest with them. How many of those people can they truly say are always working in their best interests, and how many of them are parasites that occasionally please them? So Philo and Plutarch were middle Platonists, followers of Plato who moved away from the skeptical academy and towards a more dogmatic reading of Plato...borrowing the best things from a few other philosophers to eventually make a sort of Frankenstein philosophy that would dominate late antiquity called Neo-Platonism. The resurgence of Aristoteleanism during this time is a little less straight forward...and not entirely relevant. There was certainly more going on for Aristotle during the Post-Hellenistic Age than in the Actual Hellenistic Age, but all of it is insignificant compared to the dominance he gains later. Many of you listening to this may already know that the Dark Ages was, well, among many other things, a time in the West when philosophy didn't have much going on. And as we'll talk about then, most people think it can be entirely attributed to the dominance of Christianity at the time, but that's not entirely true. Many people say that Aristotle, at least indirectly played just as big of a role in the stagnation of the Dark Ages as Christianity...maybe even more! The "rise" of Aristoteleanism during the time period leading up to Neo-Platonism mostly was the terrific commentaries that sort of "microwaved last night's leftover Aristotle" so that

the Middle Platonists could take it, pick out the best parts of it, and apply it to their system.

A Period of Transition - Plotinus

Episode #015

This is a transcript of podcast Episode 15 on the philosophy of Plotinus. To me, remembering the important elements of Plotinus's philosophy and Neo-Platonism as a whole is easy to remember when thinking about it and remembering it in relation to one common question about God. It's a question that people understandably ask whenever there's any sort of major tragedy in the news or around the world, and really...of all the arguments people make against the existence of a God, it's one of the most common and I think one of the weakest arguments around. How can an all powerful, loving God exist and still allow evil to exist? Or...with a less narrow conception of what God is you could ask...how can evil or bad things arise from a force that's entirely good...one that possesses no evil to begin with? You know...if we live in an ordered and harmonious Cosmos as the Greeks mostly thought...and Goodness is something that seems consistent and important to whatever maintains this order and harmony...then why does evil exist at all? Plotinus had a really good answer to this. Unfortunately, just explaining how Plotinus would have responded to the question when it was asked to him... isn't enough....and it's not like his entire philosophy centers around this question anyway. But what I'm getting at here...is if you could remember Plotinus's response to this question...and why he thought it was the truth, then by remembering one question... you could use it to remember the most important contributions Plotinus and the beginning of Neo-Platonism made to philosophy as a whole. Think of ALL of Plotinus's philosophy as your entire wardrobe. This question is kind of like a walk-in closet...Instead of having all your clothes in a giant pile on the floor...wrinkled.. getting a shirt or a pair of pants whenever you need them...you can have them neat and orderly in a walk in closet...you can have your Summer beachwear over here...your winter wear way over there...and your old prom dresses hidden deep behind everything else...you know where it is and it makes sense in relation to everything else. This question is a walk-in closet that keeps Plotinus's

philosophy organized...and we're going to keep referencing it throughout the episode. First, let's set the stage a little bit...I wanna take you guys back to what it was like to live during Plotinus's time period, because by understanding that, you can understand where Plotinus is coming from. You'd find yourself in the year 250 AD. Late Antiquity...Right during a period of the Roman Empire with more disaster and chaos that was out of the average citizen's control than almost any other time in the History of Rome. This time period is commonly known as the "crisis of the third century"...so just the name kind of gives you an idea of what is going on...This is a couple hundred years AFTER the Hellenistic Age...Again, another example of philosophy making huge strides during times of political and cultural unrest. Life was terrifying and difficult during this time...Constant war and disease was killing the population...and when it was all said and done, historians think the population was reduced by as much as 33%. and that's not all...the population that survived, even in areas where no war was going on...these people still had to PAY for the constant war. Taxes soared and a lot of people were forced to move somewhere else because they couldn't afford to be a citizen of Rome anymore. Imagine your modern day government demanding money from you and being forced to walk for a month in one direction to get to a place you could actually afford to live. In fact, forget that example, just imagine yourself as someone living in Rome around the year 250 AD, during all these problems going on...and you have a bone to pick with Plotinus. You just had an epiphany! You're thinking to yourself...how can an all powerful God exist when there is so much evil in the world? You think it's an amazing point, and you're gonna take it to Plotinus...the wisest, most highly respected philosopher sage around and say "let's see what he has to say about this question..." Well forget what Plotinus was like for a second... let's talk about you. Not only was there all this stuff going on at a political level.. but you would've found yourself living in a world not long after a massive shift was occurring in how the average person viewed themselves as a being in this world. Or more specifically, what does it mean to be a human being...what are you exactly? Think about it for a second, when you think of your "self", what are you? Would you say that your body is part of who you are? Are you only a BODY? made up of only atoms in a universe

that's also is made up of only atoms? Maybe you think this body of yours is just where you currently reside...in this physical existence. So what are you? Are you a mind that has the ability to reason that is controlling this body? Are you like the power rangers controlling the megazord...something made of physical stuff controlling something else made of physical stuff? It's not a simple question. Remember in, I believe, episode two of the podcast when I did a terrible impression of a pretentious English man asking what is philosophy...and then I believe I did a terrible impression of professor Snape just to flesh things out so that there was a good balance of bad spread around...probably my least favorite moment in the history of the show, but I think I've gotten a lot better since then...well I'd like to re-address that question for a minute because I think it's relevant and can add something here. People use the word philosophy in an incredibly loose fashion. It can mean...tons of stuff. Because everyone's definition of it is different, when different people tune in to a philosophy show like this one, people have different expectations of what the content is gonna be. Look, really...it's no one's fault. People see the word philosophy overused all around them...like, Howard Schultz writes on the back of a Starbucks cup, "My philosophy is that everyone deserves a hot, delicious...perfectly brewed cup of coffee" but obviously that isn't what we're talking about here. We're moving into a place in the history of philosophy where it starts moving in tandem with the story of religion, most notably in the west with the monotheistic religion of Christianity. So if we're trying to figure out what philosophy is exactly, then it might be a good idea to start with what experts say it is...and if you're getting a degree in philosophy from a university...or you're reading an overview of philosophy...Not all university curriculums cover Christianity...not all book overviews see Christianity as a notable part of philosophy. Personally, I don't agree with that, I think it made several very notable ethical contributions, but I don't entirely disagree with sentiment that they aren't the same thing. I mean, why would we have two names for them if they were the exact same thing? There's a book called A Brief History of Thought by a guy named Luc Ferry...it's one of those VERY GENERAL, BROAD STROKES introductions to some of the core concepts in philosophy. It's not comprehensive, its target audience are people that have

little or no experience in philosophy and it's just trying to peak your interest or give you a skeleton to work with when you're moving forward in your education. People ask me for further reading all the time over email, well here's one. I'm pretty sure it's on Audible...why wouldn't it be. It's a best seller. But I'd definitely recommend it, but throughout the entire book he makes the case that philosophy and religion are two very different things that try to address the same issue. He says that we are humans. Unlike any other animal in the animal kingdom, we have the unique ability to use the pre-frontal cortex of our brain and look ahead of us and worry about what terrible things might happen to us in the future. We have the ability to look to the past and regret things that we did or may have not done. This unique ability of humans presents a very unique problem for us...it causes anxiety. It causes fear. Luc Ferry makes the case that what we fear is death...but his definition of death isn't a narrow definition where he's only talking about the end of our bodily existence...he thinks that death is better described with the term of Irreversibility. Being humans, we worry about anything bad that might happen to us where existence won't be the same anymore. you worry about your arm getting ripped off by a passing train or bus...you might worry about your girlfriend leaving you...and then you're just gonna be looking back on "the one that got away" for the rest of your life...we fear irreversibility. Well, both religion and philosophy give us relief from this fear. Religion makes the claim that death is an illusion...and there's all different ways the various religions put this, but most of them say that death is just the end of this obstacle course that we're in and then TRUE existence begins or re-begins...in some higher realm. When seemingly bad things happen, Christianity would say that it's all part of the providential plan of God, so you shouldn't worry about it, God is sending you a message through this experience. Luc Ferry says that philosophy, on the other hand, is "salvation without religion". He thinks that philosophy is a way to look at yourself objectively and overcome this fear of death and irreversibility using only the mechanisms given to you as a homo sapien living on planet earth. You don't need a supernatural God that tells you that death is actually something really great to overcome it, you can come to peace with death ALL on your own. So far, we've seen a lot of examples of this...we have the

epicureans saying that there's no reason to fear death because all you are is a collection of atoms that will simply cease to exist...we have the stoics and the Buddhists saying very similar things about the fact that if you were to be killed or bad things were to happen, they are external to you and completely out of your control so there is no reason to worry about it. Real quick, you may wonder why things like physics and metaphysics are important in philosophy if you think this way...well, to know the best or wisest way to act in any one situation, one very important piece of information you need is to know where you are. I mean, the proper way to act in the library is completely different than the proper way to act in a night club...or a bowling alley. Luc Ferry says that we can think of physics and metaphysics as just a way of understanding exactly where we are, so that we can make further inferences. Now if you think about it this way, then philosophy and religion are obviously VERY different from each other. There are exceptions to this RULE that he's laid out...but by and large it is a really good way to categorize information in philosophy. This is the idea behind why many university curriculums and books don't consider Christianity or other religions as philosophy. And really, can I just say that as a nice man that wants nothing but to entertain and empower people with my voice, the idea of doing an episode solely on Christianity is a recurring nightmare that I wake up to. Christianity back in the times of Jesus and then the Roman Empire was MUCH different than Christianity is today. Plus, because it effects SO MANY people still, there are ALL KINDS of different interpretations of what happened, how it happened, how Christianity made its ascendancy and its relation with government. It's an absolute nightmare...its just ASKING for people to be offended...or for people to defensively offer up another interpretation. The religion itself is a pretty big part of philosophy over the years, and we WILL have episodes on philosophers, who were christian, that looked at the tenets of Christianity through the lens of philosophy. But to do an episode on the FOUNDING of the religion, not really relevant and not really a good idea. Just think about any other story we have during this time period or before. I mean just to give an example...we talked about Seneca in our episode on stoic ethics. He lived a generation AFTER when Jesus would have walked the earth...he was supposedly an important public

official...adviser to the Emperor Nero...and we don't even know for sure that he existed. The signs point to yes, but there is uncertainty...Many people think that his writings may be two or three different people just attributed to one guy they call Seneca. Just think about the magical and crazy stories we've heard about people like Pyrrho...or Pythagoras....i mean, today we're going to talk about Plotinus who lived in TWO HUNDRED AD...and there are all kinds of stories of him summoning spirits and countering a magicians spells...we're supposed to immediately discount these stories as though they're completely untrue and accept the miracles that Jesus performed as fulfillment of prophecy. The point i'm trying to make is that ALL the sourcing from this time period is shaky and up for dispute, and as a podcast host I don't think it would be fair to do a show on the founding of Christianity anyway. One thing you cannot dispute is the HUGE surge in the popularity of Christianity, and really it was in line with that SHIFTING of how the average person of the time viewed themselves. Remember, what am I exactly? There were tons of answers to this question that came before this time period of 250 AD....I mean, pretty much every Greek Philosopher before had something to say on the matter....and really...they all had the same amount of real evidence to make these claims about what we were...they had nothing. Well now, there was a NEW thought pattern growing in popularity. People decided that they weren't a body or a mind...they thought they were just a consciousness that controls a body in this physical world. Humans decided what they truly were was something that closely resembled a spiritual being...not just a spiritual being...but an imprisoned spiritual being... confined, chained to bodies in this physical realm. Your body belongs to you, but it isn't you. Kind of like your smart phone...it belongs to you...it is instrumental in how you go about your everyday existence...but your smart phone isn't YOU. Your true self is just a consciousness that controls this body. It's important to note that when all these other Greek Philosophers were talking about souls... there were no implications necessarily of this soul traveling to some spirit world after you were dead... there very sporadic instances where they mentioned an afterlife of some sort... but for the vast majority of them, the soul was completely compatible with the physical world, many times as much a

part of your body as your hands or feet were. If your hands were the part of your body that held things... or touched things... then the soul was just the part of your body that...reasoned...or felt emotions... or a number of different other things depending on which philosopher was speaking at the time. Just imagine for a second if you felt that way. The people back then, more and more, began to see themselves as a consciousness... trapped in a flawed physical body... existing in this flawed physical realm that brings you suffering... just dying to return to REAL existence in this higher realm that has nothing to do with the physical world. Just imagine feeling that way. You're basically the main character in the movie planet of the apes...you crash land on an alien planet...actually...spoiler alert...you crash land on what you THINK is an alien planet...your ship is destroyed...you need to replace some parts or find a new ship so you can get off the planet and return to your true existence...but in the meantime...you're trapped on this hostile alien world...just trying to make the best of it. That would've been your reality. That would've been Plotinus's reality. So what started to happen is people started looking for a way to get some relief from this "reality" as they saw it, and not to mention the anxiety of death and all the other problems that face you as a human in this world...and there were several narratives that gained popularity during the time to try to achieve that sense of relief. You saw Eastern philosophy start to gain in popularity in the West a bit during this time...There were several pagan approaches...but none of these caught much steam because they didn't immediately improve the lives of the people following them like Christianity did. Plus, Christianity offered a personalized salvation, it was very appealing to people worried about their own mortality. The most important thing we should understand RIGHT NOW... is that during this time that Plotinus lived there were various attempts at creating a system that would help people cope with this new idea of what exactly being a human is. Most commonly, this was done by creating a distinction between existence in this physical world...and what they called TRUE existence... you know... turning away from our bodily existence...and towards a higher realm of existence. Neo-Platonism was one of them. But let's go back to our example. You're living during this time, you see yourself as this consciousness that's trapped in

this inferior physical realm....you have this great idea pointing out how God can't exist because there is evil in the world and you want to talk to Plotinus. Well based on the stories that we have about him...it's pretty clear that Plotinus was a pretty interesting guy...he's alive a little too late to have super extreme stories about him where he's practically a god himself...he has kind of a lessened version of the treatment people like Pythagoras got...it's not as extreme...he ends up sounding a little less like Pythagoras and a little more like the ruler of North Korea...you know he gets stories like "he invented the game of basketball and scored 500 points in his first game playing" There's a story of Plotinus when he's fairly young and one of his fellow classmates got really jealous of him and cast a spell on him...he was like an evil magician...and Plotinus gets hit with the spell and his body gets all stiff, but because Plotinus had such a powerful spirit protecting him...the spell bounced off of him and was reflected back onto the person that cast it. Basically, replace the entire opening sequence of the Harry Potter books or movies with this section of Plotinus's life...I mean come on...his mom's love protected him...Voldemort's spell was reflected and then he had to get geriatric care for the next 15 years...I'm just saying lets not COMPLETELY rule out that JK Rowling stole this story from Plotinus.What I'm saying is...we have a very limited number of stories about Plotinus to work with...and these kinds of stories recur over and over again. He was seen as a sage in his time...he didn't eat very much...he didn't sleep very much...he was breastfed until the age of 8...and it's clear that there was at least some sort of reason to believe that he had these sage like qualities and powers because he had a level of transcendent knowledge. He had encountered something intellectually that made him...different from everyone else. He had achieved that sense of relief that everyone was looking for. And it's not like he just didn't experience the feeling of being trapped on an alien planet like everyone else...he felt that too...there's a story of someone wanting to make some kind of likeness for him to be remembered by. You know they wanted to make a painting of him...and he turns to the guy and says:"Is it not enough to have to carry around this image? Must I transmit the image of this image as worthy of attention?"What he meant here is that this body that he inhabits in this physical

world...this isn't the highest form of existence...this body that he's in is already just an inferior copy...it's just an image. Why should he have a picture painted of this false image...it's just an inferior copy of an inferior copy. It's like taking a Polaroid picture of a Polaroid picture. Whats the point? Plotinus was highly respected. And if you asked him...How can a God exist who is good and powerful and still allow evil to exist in the world? How can that possibly be the case? He would say that it's because EVIL does not exist. At least in the way YOU think about it, it doesn't. See, Plotinus would have heard your question and said: "how does evil exist in the world? that's easy...i'll do you one better...how does ANYTHING bad exist in the world at all?" Not just...why does God allow serial killers to exist...but also, why are people born with birth defects? why do people get cancer? Things like that. Really, Plotinus doesn't HAVE to challenge you here, but the word he used for evil in greek is better translated in modern times to anything "bad"...so just go with it. He would say that the reason why you're so confused about evil existing is because you're looking at it the wrong way. When bad things exist in the world...when evil things happen...that isn't a presence of evil or badness...that is an ABSENCE of goodness. Because no matter what it is...if something commits an evil act or has qualities that are bad...those qualities or acts can only exist IN RELATION to something good. We used a Harry Potter example earlier...well Lord Voldemort...we've all seen the depiction of him in the movies...he certainly commits his fair share of evil acts...but he wouldn't be able to commit any of them if he didn't have a certain level of...virility. He has a GOOD body...not a good body like an Abercrombie and Fitch model...his body...is good. He has good enough health and mobility to chase Harry Potter around and try to do evil stuff. You can't be an evil dictator on the level of a Lord Voldemort on a hover-round. alright? And there are other examples on Lord Voldemort...he doesn't really have a nose. Well, at least not like a normal person. It looks like he lost it in a construction accident...but the couple slits that he does have...if we call that his NOSE then it still allows him to breathe. If a good nose is one that performs the functions of a nose well, then there is at least SOME good present in relation to his BAD nose. If there wasn't, then the nose wouldn't exist, and he would be dead. Everything evil

or bad really should be thought of as goodness not being as good as it has the potential to be. Because if something was COMPLETELY devoid of ANY good qualities...it would not and COULD NOT exist. The physical matter things are made of also plays a big role and a little later, we'll talk about how matter works into all this. The genius of this lies in saying the same thing in a different way. If you took away the good of something...then the bad is always taken away with it. So bad only exists in relation to good, and is therefore just an absence of good. And this begs the question of why there should even be an absence in the first place. Well this is the crossroads that can be explained by the rest of Plotinus's philosophy. This is a convenient pivot point...because by explaining that absence of good, we thereby explain his largest contribution to philosophy and the philosophical system that allowed him to get relief from being trapped on an alien planet. See, this alien planet is the physical world. And Plotinus's philosophy begins with asking what seems like kind of a weird question...How do we tell when something is something...What is a quality that everything that is something has? Well to answer this question, Plotinus looks at a lot of different individual things...He says: "It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings. This is equally true of things whose existence is primal and of all that are in any degree to be numbered among beings. What could exist at all except as one thing? Deprived of unity, a thing ceases to be what it is called: no army unless as a unity: a chorus, a flock, must be one thing. Even house and ship demand unity, one house, one ship; unity gone, neither remains... thus even continuous magnitudes could not exist without an inherent unity; break them apart and their very being is altered in the measure of the breach of unity." So in case you didn't catch it, Plotinus says that every thing has a certain amount of unity. In order to be considered a being...you need to possess a certain amount of unity. I mean, what makes a marching band ONE marching band? Why isn't it just a bunch of individual people in really weird costumes that specialize in playing various different instruments? There is a quality of UNITY that makes them ONE marching band. If you remember our last episode, when we compared the world of forms to IKEA, what makes the bookshelf a bookshelf as opposed to all the different parts that you get when you open the box when you get home? On that same note, what makes a clock a

clock, instead of just being a bunch of different individual cogs and levers? Plotinus says what all these things have in common is that they possess unity, but they all don't have the same amount of unity. The level of unity something has comes down to the idea that Aristotle lays out in his four causes...and if you remember, one of those four causes is the efficient cause, which the vast majority of the time is just the cause of the thing's existence. What brought this thing into being? Well, the efficient cause of a clock is much different than the efficient cause of a dog. I mean, humans artificially created that clock's unity...living things like dogs have a unity that is inherent...they were born with it. Plotinus says that something like a dog has a greater amount of unity than something like a clock. And marching bands...they have less unity than either of these things...for obvious reasons. Following this line of reasoning, Plotinus says that the more unity something has...the more real it is. Well, we've already talked about this concept of reality not existing in this physical world...this bodily existence...and that our true existence lies in a higher realm that we're hoping to return to one day...and for the record, this is compatible with huge concepts that Plato talked about...remember his allegory of the cave that reality as we see it can be thought of as just shadows on a cave wall. Well those shadows on the cave wall that we see in our bodily existence...the inferior copies of the true forms of everything...this alien planet was what almost every single piece of Greek Philosophy before Plotinus tried to make us feel better about. We can look at the philosophy of this time period as just a means to an end of relieving the suffering of the physical world WITHIN the physical world...Greek philosophy that came before focused on achieving happiness in this physical world...but Plotinus tells us to turn away from our bodily existence and towards a higher realm where our true reality is...and this idea of unity is extremely important. This is the part we NEED to remember for future Catholic philosophy. THE MOST important part of Plotinus's philosophy is called his "chain of being" sometimes referred to as his "hierarchy of being". It's kind of how it sounds...it's a hierarchical system...The most common visual people use to describe the way Plotinus looked at existence, and one that I think is really good, is by thinking of it as a multi-tiered fountain. You've seen one before where the water spouts out of the top tier

and it overflows into the next tier until it overflows into the third tier and so on and so forth...Well, think of Plotinus's philosophy as a three tiered fountain. At the very top...the TOP TIER OF THIS FOUNTAIN...is Unity. Plotinus sometimes calls it, "The One" he sometimes calls it "the good" as a harkening back to Plato..many people call it "God"...but I cant call it anything. Nobody should really call it anything. You know how the first rule of fight club is that you cant talk about fight club? Well, the first rule of "the one" is that you cant talk about the one. It is beyond description. The second you try to categorize it with words and call it something, you're already wrong. In fact, if it wasn't such a huge part of his philosophy, I wouldn't have even brought it up. See, my only skill is to categorize things and make them relatable...but Plotinus has found my kryptonite. In fact, the best way for me to even convey what it is in an inaccurate way is to compare it to the second and third tiers of the fountain, so let me just tell you what all three tiers are and then ill explain how they relate to each other. The top tier is "the one", the second tier is "the intellect", and the bottom tier is the soul which creates the physical world that we live in. So, things exist in this physical world. Right? They all possess different amounts of unity. And much like Plato talked about in his allegory of the cave and his world of forms...we can study things like...TREES in this physical world. We can see a million trees and write down all the characteristics about them, but we will never find the PERFECT form of a tree...and part of the reason for that is...what is tree-e-ness? it isn't roundness...or if it's a pine tree...it isn't the ESSENCE of being "Green"...It's JUST TREE-E-NESS. But we can never find that here in the physical world. No matter how hard you look, it will always have other forms in relation to it...green-ness and roundness for example. But the perfect form of tree-e-ness MUST exist somewhere...even if it's only in thought. As we all know by now, this PLACE where these things exist is called the world of forms. Well that perfect form of tree-e-ness in the world of forms is the most unified, perfect version of a tree...and if the more unified something is the more real it is, as Plotinus thought, then that tree, even if it only exists through intellectual thought...is more real than any of these flawed shadows on the cave wall of the physical world. This is why the second tier of the fountain is called the intellect. This is the world of forms. This

is where true existence lies. We are souls that inhabit a physical body. Sure, it may seem like we exist in the sense-able world...you know the world that we can sense with our sense organs, but TRUE existence is in the intellect. Just because trees in the physical world LOOK like trees, doesn't mean they ARE trees. Plotinus thought of things in the physical world as more of NON-being than Being...because true being...the unified, pure forms of everything existed in tier 2...the intellect. These physical non-beings were shadows on the cave wall, or as Plotinus saw it, reflections of the forms from tier 2...cast by the soul...into FLAWED, terrible matter that distorts and dilutes everything...and that's the world we live in. The soul is tier three. That is the function of the soul to Plotinus, to create and organize the physical world by being a catalyst between the world of forms and this crude physical matter that ruins everything. To Plotinus there was a rational soul given to humans that was a little different... and a world soul that did it for... everything else. To Plotinus, humans were really just pure intellects with an individual soul. He thought the purpose of an intellect...was to think...and try to gain understanding about the world of forms. Yeah we have all these emotions and ambitions and desires but really, those don't make up what it means to be "me" ... those are just as much a part of us as our physical bodies are. OUR true existence, and the true existence of most things for that matter lied in tier two...the intellect. So because of all that, Plotinus concludes that the goal of philosophy, and really what we should all be doing, given that we are an intellect, we should turn away from this bodily existence and towards reality by contemplating and trying to understand the forms and then eventually we will find out how fake the physical world is and that actually always connected to true existence, or tier 2. But in this tier 2, in the world of forms, there exists a perfect form of everything. Again, if we think about it as IKEA, there is a perfect form of a bookshelf, the perfect form of the end table...the perfect form of the night stand...but even all of these things have one thing in common. they are all a single unified being, in themselves. that's the unity that we talked about...and because of this Plotinus thinks they must all rely on something even greater than them...something whose entire being is that unity...that oneness....something that gives rise to everything. That is the first tier. The One...The

Good...God...whatever you want to call it. Through lots of imagery and storytelling Plotinus says that the One overflows and gives rise to The intellect and that the intellect overflows and gives rise to the soul which then shines reflections of these perfect forms into the terrible physical matter that makes up the sense-able world. Hence the example of the fountain. Now, it's not the story of HOW all of this stuff happens that's important here, though he does go into a lot of detail. It's not the nuts and bolts of the method in which the one somehow overflows into the intellect and so on and so forth. The IMPORTANT part is what this system means to us as beings living in the physical world. By understanding how far removed we are from "the one"...by understanding how diluted and imperfect the physical world is due to the fact that it is created by flawed matter and is the third tier of the fountain, which for all intents and purposes is a SUPER watered-down version of the first tier of the fountain. by understanding all that, we can understand why evil and bad things can exist...why there can be an absence of good. because the world we live in is a Polaroid picture of a Polaroid picture of a Polaroid picture. So real quick, this is the closet that organizes Plotinus's contributions. how can bad or evil exist in a world with an all powerful god? the answer is: it doesn't. Only absences of good do. good things not being as PURELY good as they could be. And this can be explained because we exist in the physical world, the bottom rung on Plotinus's hierarchy of being.

Saint Augustine

Episode #016

This is a transcript of podcast Episode 16 on the philosophy of Saint Augustine. One of my favorite things to ask people and, to me, one of the most fascinating things to hear people talk about is the moment they knew they had found the infallible truth about life and the infinitely enormous universe that we live in. There is usually a moment in their life...it's a little like the JFK assassination...or 9/11...everybody knows where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news...well I think being one of the lucky few that has the nature of existence revealed to them has to rank AT LEAST as high as those events. I mean, it's pretty huge! People have ALL different ways that this happens to them. For whatever reason, they're chosen out of the 7 billion people and growing on this planet for God to breach the strict protocol of never revealing himself so that he can have some kind of direct correspondence with them. You know, he'll directly speak with them sometimes, people talk about having conversations with god...maybe sometimes hes not really in a talking mood so he does something like...move the drapes and then the person infers that God moved the drapes, so that means I have to go outside...but not physically outside...he means outside this BOX I'm living in...this box of sin and deceit. A couple Mormons that came to my door one time said that the moment THEY knew WAS direct communication, but it was more in the form of God giving them certain feeling states when they think about big decisions in their life...or by giving them goosebumps...the all powerful creator of the universe was communicating with them by making their hair stand up on end. Another one of these interesting examples... One of my many step grandmothers over the years once told me a story...apparently one day her cat, who was SEVERELY overweight somehow got the...you know those ventilation grates in the floor that you can have in a two story house? well apparently she forgot to put it back covering the hole in the ground one time and her morbidly obese cat went down inside of the ventilation shaft and got stuck...like he got wedged in there...it was

like some parody of mission impossible 7... Tom Cruise gains 50 pounds and has one last go at trying to save the world but its not working out for him too well. Anyway so my step grandma hears the cat meowing and she goes to the kitchen where she keeps her bible, because who doesn't like to cook and study the word simultaneously... and she begins praying... and all of a sudden and when she tells this story she is incredibly emotional, so she obviously believes that it happened... or it DID happen... GOLDEN TUBES OF LIGHT RAIN DOWN FROM THE SKY... there was a chorus of angels...she told me she actually saw heaven and Jesus descended from the ceiling right through the ventilation shaft and he said "USE THE STEPLADDER" granted when she tells the story he doesn't say it like he's a genie... he says it in a comforting voice...then he disappears and she goes and gets her mom, because she was young at the time... and they use the step ladder to reach up into the ventilation system from downstairs and they manage to get the cat out. and how lovely is that you guys? Jesus HAS to be busy... there's a lot of tragedy in the world...i read once that something like 100 people die EVERY SECOND... many of which from preventable diseases or violent acts...i mean i cant fathom how special it must feel to be the cat he saved instead of dealing with the rest of the 7 billion pieces in the chess game he is playing all over the world. To my ex-step grandmother it was a miracle, and she said from that moment on there has never been any doubt, she and god have conversations all the time and she knows that if anything bad ever happens to her, God is going to get her out of it. Well I love hearing these stories... and the guy were gonna talk about today has a really great one, albeit not as sensational as my ex-step grandmas... and its a great story... because he spent SO MUCH of his life as a skeptic of Christianity and then he has this experience and he is INSTANTLY certain of everything...he INSTANTLY knows the infallible truth. Can you guys REALLY blame me for being so interested in these stories? I mean if you start with the knowledge we are born with...its pretty incredible that ONE experience not only tells you that a supernatural God exists... but that THAT god is a single god...that is interested in human affairs and offers people personal salvation if they follow his set of rules... but not only that...ALSO that this supernatural god manifested himself on planet earth and sacrificed himself, to himself to

save us from himself or however the popular saying goes if we were talking about Christianity. I mean these things are not just a given when you're born into this world, and I find it endlessly fascinating to hear when others are given experiences like this. Now, Saint Augustine was one of these lucky few... and if you're looking at figures in the history of philosophy... he kind of gets a bad rap... he's sometimes portrayed as the "mommas boy" of philosophy... but I think that's kind of inaccurate and really it's just trying to point out that his mom was a semi famous figure herself. You guys would know her better as Saint Monica..the town of Santa Monica in Southern California is named after her...it's easy to imagine being a child and feeling an enormous amount of pressure to conform to the same religious beliefs as your parents and fearing that if you don't you won't be accepted by them...plus if it's a RULE in their house that you're GOING to go to church every Sunday if you're living under my roof...your choice as a child becomes either to believe and to become a Christian... or to be COMPLETELY antisocial and against all these people at all the various church functions... people who are usually INCREDIBLY nice and worthy of respect. My point is...this is a modern example of how someone might feel pressure from their parents and family to believe in something and it might lead them to accept the first thing that is presented to them and work out all the details later simply by virtue of this peer pressure. Well one AMAZING thing about Saint Augustine is that he DIDNT do that, he remained unsure for many of his formative years... and he did it in the face of Saint Monica. Much of the reason this woman is heralded by the Roman Catholic Church is because of how persistent and effective she was at leading her son to Christianity. For her son to remain skeptical for as long as he did tells us a great deal about Saint Augustine and it makes the story he tells of the moment when he converted especially interesting. But first let me tell you a little bit about his early life because it ends up shaping his philosophy for years to come. Saint Augustine was born in a town called Thagaste... it's on the coast of North Africa and instantly he found himself in an environment of religious differences and conflict. But I'm not talking about the world and society he was born into which without a doubt WAS full of differences and conflicts...I'm talking about his home life. His father was a pagan...his

mother was a devout Christian. Their two backgrounds made for two very different ideas of what the best path was for young Augustine. When you read Saint Augustine's principal work called ... "confessions" ... ALL throughout the dozens of books and volumes a recurring theme is him lambasting himself for all the TERRIBLE sins he committed as a youth. The funny part is... it's not like he was some sick...sadistic kid...you know it wasn't like he was that kid that lived next door in Toy Story. He seems pretty normal. But this guilt consumes him...and it would consume you too if you believed like he did that you are held accountable for every sin you commit from the moment you are born... even ones you commit when you are just an infant... he says this in the confessions:"Who can recall to me the sins I committed as a baby? For in your sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth."Right here, you can see the disconnect from how we in modern times typically think about the actions of babies and things we do in early childhood. Generally speaking... as a society... the earlier in life you do something the less accountable you are for your actions...or at least the more we expect you to make mistakes so therefore the punishments are less... I mean this is why if an 8 year old kills someone they get 2 years in Juvi and if a 28 year old kills someone its 25 to life. But for Saint Augustine, from the time we set foot on terra firma for the first time were getting tried as adults. and he's not just vilifying everyone else for the sins they committed as children and babies... like I said before... he spends huge chunks of entire books reading HIMSELF the riot act about all the bad things he used to do...he talks about his unquenchable desire for his mother's milk as though he's committing the sin of gluttony... he talks about all the needless and ungrateful COMPLAINING he did all the time just crying whenever he needed something. The deeper implication here, one that even adults can take something from... is that if we do something wrong and we didn't know that it was wrong...that doesn't SAVE us from God's wrath. Plus, this sets a very useful precedent that regardless of how seemingly perfect your life has been from the moment when you were able to be mindful of your actions...you are still a sinner that needs God to save you from the lake of fire.In other words, no matter who you are or what age you are, you are flawed and in need of God's

grace to save you from your inevitable fate in Hell. This is what his mother Monica was telling him all throughout his childhood. And yet, he STILL remained skeptical. Luckily for him, his father saved up enough money to get him out of the house and be educated. But he was still a young man...a young man setting sail...making the philosophy scene...you know...hes a blank slate out there experiencing the world. Years later in his Confessions he would write about one of these places he went in his early life:"I went to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust. Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart, so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust."He goes on later:"This was the age at which the frenzy gripped me and I surrendered myself entirely to lust, which your law forbids but human hearts are not ashamed to sanction."So, we can see several things here that are quintessential qualities of Saint Augustine. Most notably in my opinion is that its a not-so-distant relative of the idea that Plato, Plotinus and other philosophers laid out that there is a clear distinction between existence in the sense-able world and existence in a higher, more real world. It's drawing a distinct line in the sand between pleasures within our bodily existence and what he sees as the truth, our soul's eternal fate. His example is the difference between "the clear light of true love from the murk of lust" It seems clear that he made some mistakes during his younger years when it came to lust. He sure talks about it enough...honestly he attacks himself so relentlessly and with such severity that the deeper philosophical implications under what hes saying can kind of get lost underneath the paragraph after paragraph of him telling himself he didn't follow the Christian rulebook well enough. But earlier on in the confessions he makes a point that illustrate what I think he was trying to get at in the next several chapters, he said:"But my sin was this, that I looked for pleasure, beauty, and truth not in him but in myself and his other creatures, and the search led me instead to pain, confusion, and error." So while he is out, getting educated, seeing the world, he finds what HE thinks is the truth. He became a believer in Manichaeism. Manichaeism was a Gnostic religion that was a pretty serious rival to Christianity during the times of Saint Augustine: basically the idea behind it was

that God wasn't all powerful, and that in actuality everything is controlled by a dualistic cosmos. In the case of Manichaeism there were two forces, Good and Evil constantly battling against each other and it should be known that these two forces in themselves are extremely complex and represent things... many times the Good representing the spiritual or higher existence and the Evil representing the material flawed lower existence. The important part is this, Saint Augustine became a follower of Manichaeism. Sometimes I like to think about how things would have played out if little sputnik moments throughout history ending up happening differently. Just imagine if instead of Christianity becoming the dominant religion of the west if Manichaeism tipped the scales in their favor. How would the world be different today? It's interesting to think about people walking around believing that there is a powerful cosmic force of Good perpetually battling with a powerful cosmic force of evil and we, as humans, are co-existing with this battle. It's interesting to think about. But really, the great thing about Christianity is that it kind of has everything. There are Christians today who believe in something very similar...they believe that the devil exists and has the power to intervene and try to influence humans into doing his bidding...you know the devil tries to get us to do bad stuff and God tries to give us strength so that we won't succumb to his temptations. The similarities to Manichaeism are obvious. But anyway, after a while of following Manichaeism he grew kind of suspicious. He started having questions that people couldn't answer... and ultimately he just wasn't satisfied. He started talking to Archbishop Ambrose and he started leaning more in the direction of Christianity. But he wasn't sold yet. He wanted to be...but I imagine he would've felt a little silly just hopping from one religion which he says is the absolute truth directly to another one...he needed some sort of experience to make him sure. So the story goes that Saint Augustine was having a conversation with someone and gets incredibly frustrated with himself... so like someone who has attended therapy in his life...he removes himself from the discussion and goes out to his garden to cool down and get some fresh air. But he doesn't cool down. In fact, he starts hitting himself... he starts pulling his own hair out... he starts crying. Now as he's sitting there crying on a bench, he hears a child say from a nearby

house the words "pick up and read, pick up and read". At first he thinks it is just the kids playing a game... but then he realizes it was a divine intervention. God had taken control of that child's brain...or at least orchestrated events in that child's life so that he KNEW she would yell those words at that time and that they would echo across the garden and Augustine would be there crying and HE would take those words and interpret them as a message from god to read his Bible. God is smart, you guys. He was ten steps ahead of them... as feeble humans they got played by God. It almost calls into question our ability to exercise free will if our actions are so predictable or God has the ability to seize control over your actions. So Augustine gets the message from God and decides that what he should "pick up and read" is the Bible...so he get's his Bible, opens it up and the first line that he reads is Romans 13 verse 13 and 14: "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. 14 Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh." Well to someone whose mom had told him all throughout his childhood how flawed he was and how wrong all of these earthly desires were... the kind of upbringing that would lead Saint Augustine to think so terribly of his time in Carthage as a young man... the type of upbringing that would cause him to ruthlessly lambaste himself for all of his sins.... this was the best passage you could've read. This was God speaking to him. Now he knew the truth, and Christianity became the last religion he converted to. Saint Augustine would spend the rest of his life making a case for Christianity against it's many competitors and critics during his day. In the process he would write by far the most brilliant philosophical works of his time period and would foreshadow to concepts that changed the world over 1000 years later. He may be one of the main reasons why Christianity prevailed over all of it's competitors. One key idea that was a central theme of last episode with Plotinus is the apparent dichotomy between evil in the physical world and the existence of a benevolent God. If you remember, Plotinus made the case that evil is better described as just an absence of good, and really to be fair to middle Platonists... and actually Plato himself says in his work "Gorgias" that evil only is manifested by an absence of something...the

point I'm making is that it wasn't an idea unique to Plotinus to say that evil is only an absence of good. Plotinus just organized everything and popularized this three tiered fountain approach which explained how the physical world is so far removed from the source of good.. "the one" that it stands to reason that that absence of good can be there. Well there are obviously differences between Saint Augustine's world view and the world view of Plotinus and his hierarchy of being...but it's important to point out that the relationship between these two men is BY FAR the biggest contribution that Saint Augustine made to philosophy. Make no mistake...Saint Augustine made huge strides when it came to Christian thought...he defended orthodox thinking like nobody else...but philosophy owes him a massive debt of gratitude because of the fact that he managed to fuse together the philosophy of Plotinus with Christianity. Saint Augustine is commonly referred to as a Christian Platonist. There's no telling what would've happened to Platonism or ALL of earlier philosophy if it weren't for this merger that he pulled off...but if the fate of Plato's thought was anything like all the other philosophy of the ancient Greek world and the Hellenistic age, then I think if it weren't for Saint Augustine we might only know Plato through a few obscure fragments that managed to survive. This is why Saint Augustine is a hero to philosophy...he kept it going during a time when it had no business... going. That said, he was an INCREDIBLY brilliant man who made completely unique philosophical works as well as adaptations of older works. But back to what I was talking about before...the question from last episode. How can evil exist in a world created and maintained by a benevolent god? Well Plotinus attributed it to the distance between this lower matter and the transcendent "one" or "good". Saint Augustine didn't think the same way...so he had to find a way to answer this question. His answer was the most comprehensive approach to date of a concept that still rocks philosophers to this day. Evil exists because humans have free will. The idea was simple... humans are rational creatures... that seems to be a given. But the only way humans can TRULY be rational creatures is if they have the ability to make choices. Most importantly, to make choices between murdering that guy or NOT murdering that guy...stealing your neighbors bar B cue or NOT stealing your neighbors bar b cue. He

calls this ability to choose between good courses of action or bad courses of action... Free will. Saint Augustine points out that in the book of Genesis when Adam and Eve were in the Garden of Eden, he left the choice of whether to listen to the talking snake and take the fruit up to them... this is an early glimpse at the relationship between God and all other humans. We have the ability to make choices either to our benefit or detriment. It naturally follows that these choices can be to the benefit or detriment of others...when they're to the detriment of others we might call them "evil". This is how evil can exist in a world with a benevolent God as it's creator and overseer. The concept of evil actually has nothing to do with God, it has to do with human action. These detrimental actions are just a necessary expense of having a bodily existence with the right to choose. The important part here is that Saint Augustine was heavily influenced by Plotinus and this wasn't the only issue where he was influenced. it turns out...Plotinus and his hierarchy of being...the Three tiered fountain that all of creation stems from makes a pretty good companion philosophical doctrine to Christianity and their idea of the trinity. Saint Augustine was able to merge the two. But one interesting part of his quest to merge Neo-Platonism with Christianity is a problem that he ran into when thinking about Plotinus' concept of "the one". Saint Augustine would have been thinking about "the one" as God. For Plotinus, "the one" was independent of EVERYTHING else. There was absolutely no way to describe it...so it goes without saying that it has existed forever, eternally...because if it existed in relation to time...it wouldn't be a singularity...it wouldn't be "the one" anymore...it would be..."the two". But this didn't merge well with the Christian idea that God created the heavens and earth, because when something has a Creation...people can always ask...well what came before that? Saint Augustine reconciled the problem by creating a conception of time that was so ahead of its time and different from everything else that had come before it... it's almost like he heard a kid chanting it next door to him. We can think of Saint Augustine's theory of time as being broken down into two parts. What is time in reality? and how is it measured? Well he takes a page out of Aristotle's book when trying to classify what time is exactly and he looks to the efficient cause of time as a starting point and it also clears up the questions

everyone has about how what the relationship is between the Christian god and time... he talks about it here in his Confessions when he is talking to god about the questions these naive people have: "How could these countless ages have elapsed when you, the Creator, in whom all ages have their origin, had not yet created them? What time could there have been that was not created by you? How could time elapse if it never was? Furthermore, although you are before time, it is not in time that you precede it. If this were so, you would not be before all time." What he's saying here is that God created time. Because he created time, he couldn't have existed "within the fabric of time" so therefore, he exists external to it and isn't affected by it. This may seem a little disappointing to some people, but it gets better because he's nowhere near done. Once he established that God gets all the credit for time... then he started to wonder what it is exactly... and how do you measure it? He sets the stage for a while in his Confessions and he really gets this state of confusion that he's in across: "My soul speaks with truth when it confesses to you that I do measure time. Is it the case then Lord, my god that I perform the act of measuring but do not know what I am measuring? I measure the motion of a body in time. Is it the case that I do not measure time itself?" Most of us measure time in terms of past, present and future. But Augustine makes the case that the way we think of the concepts of past, present and future are wrong... in fact nothing exists in REALITY except for the present. The past has already happened and doesn't exist anymore... and the future hasn't happened yet, so can it really be said to exist? He thought the concepts of past and future are really just human constructs to make sense of the world around us... he said: "It is inaccurate to say, 'there are three tenses of time: past, present and future,' though it might properly be said, 'there are three tenses of times: the present of past things, the present of present things, the present of future things.'" These are three realities in the mind, but nowhere else as far as I can see, for the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is ex[expectation. If we are allowed to put it that way, I do see three tenses or times, and admit that they are three." He goes on and describes the way that the human brain measures time: "It is in you, my mind that I measure time. Do not interrupt me, or rather do not allow yourself

to be interrupted by the thronging of your impressions. It is in you, I say that I measure time. As things pass by they leave an impression in you. This impression remains after the things have gone into the past, and it is this impression which I measure in the present, not the things which in their passage caused the impression. It is this impression which I measure when I measure time. Therefore, either this itself is time, or else I do not measure time at all."What he's saying is... Time is nothing in reality. It only exists in relation to the human brain's way that it perceives reality. Time is an illusion created by our minds to make sense of the world around us. This was incredibly ahead of it's time...and he sums it up with a great quote here:"What is true of the poem as a whole is true equally of its individual stanzas and syllables. The same is true of the whole long performance, in which this poem may be a single item. The same thing happens in the entirety of a person's life, of which all his actions are parts; and the same in the entire sweep of human history, the parts of which are individual human lives."

Boethius

Episode #017

This is a transcript of Episode 17 on Philosophy of Boethius. Try to imagine yourself trapped in a prison cell...convicted to death...NO CHANCE of an appeal...you KNOW you're going to die soon in a horrific, painful way for something you didn't do. How would you spend your time? This isn't just me being dramatic...REALLY try to put yourself in that situation and ask yourself...what would be important to you in that moment? Boethius was a medieval neo-platonist philosopher who found himself in that moment. He actually had a pretty good standing in the world...considering he was living in a society that was growing increasingly corrupt and intolerant...the Roman Empire was crumbling heading towards where in modern times we have the luxury of knowing where it eventually would go but the people of the time didn't know. And the entire peninsula of Italy was controlled by a group of wonderful gentlemen known as the Ostrogoths. Let me tell you about who Boethius was working for. The Ostrogoths were led by a guy named Theodoric the Great. Just to get an idea of the types of moves this guy would pull in the interest of gaining and sustaining power let me tell you about how he took control of Italy in the first place. He was fighting an army led by a guy named Odoacer. Theodoric wins a couple battles...JUST SO THAT ODOACER gets on his back foot a little bit...and right when he's in this place of vulnerability...a bishop acts as a mediator between the two leaders and arranges a negotiation for a peace treaty. Theodoric agrees to a treaty where BOTH of them would occupy the area together and BOTH make decisions...kind of combine their forces and have a period of peace. So Theodoric calls a celebratory banquet...were gonna sit down...have a feast and revel in this new arrangement we've come to...well at the banquet Theodoric stands up...makes a toast...does the little clinky thing on his glass...and then stabs Odoacer in the neck. It says in a text called the Anonymous Valesianus...that right after Theodoric kills him: "That same day, all of Odoacer's army who could be found anywhere were killed by order of

Theoderic, as well as all of his family." [44] Odoacer's wife Sunigilda was stoned to death, and his brother Onoulphus was killed by archers while seeking refuge in a church. Theoderic exiled Odoacer's son Thela to Gaul, but when he attempted to return to Italy Theoderic had him killed. "This guy is the RULER of everything. But more importantly, he's Boethius's boss! This is the guy he's an adviser to. Boethius's life resembles a common theme in Hollywood and pop culture. The example that comes to mind is the Prince of Egypt...highly underrated Dreamworks movie...EVEN MORE UNDERRATED soundtrack. But I think the reference is a little too obscure...and it really doesn't matter. We've all heard the story of Boethius told in some capacity. He was orphaned at a very young age and was adopted by a rich, aristocratic family. This privileged upbringing yielded a top-level education for his extremely above-average brain...and this warranted him eventually being given a job as chief adviser to Theoderic the great. Now the reason why his upbringing is significant is because he led a privileged life. And one typical hallmark of a person who was spoiled rotten throughout their childhood is that they don't appreciate anything. and I'm not saying Boethius was by ANY means the extreme version of this, he didn't belong on my super sweet 16...but it's not crazy to think there were remnants of it. Let me tell you about how Boethius ended up in prison. There was a meeting of the Royal Council in Verona where a guy named Cyprianus accused a guy named Albinus of treason, but neither of these guys are really important...the important part is what Boethius did. He was a loyal guy. He came to Albinus's defense and tried to show everyone there how flawed their way of thinking was...he said: "The charge of Cyprianus is false, but if Albinus did that, so also have I and the whole senate with one accord done it; it is false, my Lord King." Now this is the part in the movie where everyone is supposed to look at each other and be like "oh yeah he's right...look at what we've come to, thank you Boethius" one person starts clapping really slow. Instead they just said..."alright then you can be guilty of treason too!" Didn't work out that well. So all of a sudden...Boethius finds himself stripped of EVERYTHING. Stripped of his home...his family...his work...even his FREEDOM. His existence consisted of sitting in this dark cell...wrongly accused of treason...waiting to be put to death. And this is why I

asked that question at the top of the show...If for some reason i was wrongly convicted of death...id be a lot of things..id be angry...id be weeping...id be like those prisoners in pirates of the Caribbean with the bone trying to coax the dog over with the keys in his mouth...One things for certain, I wouldn't be writing a philosophical text that solves one of the oldest problems in philosophy and paves the way for ALL subsequent medieval philosophy. Why did he do it? Most of the writing from him before hes commentating on Aristotle or other Greek philosophy. Why did he choose to start now? Well I think that unjustly having EVERYTHING taken away from him...including his life was SO TRAUMATIC...that it was only after he was removed from his largely privileged life up until that point that he understood the complete value of philosophy. His book was called "The consolation of Philosophy" because Philosophy, CONSOLES us within the adversity that the world inevitably throws our way. The book starts out REALLY dark. Boethius is ready to die...hes sad, angry...all the things you'd expect from someone that is going to be wrongly put to death...but remember this is just a character in a book. the REAL Boethius is writing the book. hes in a COMPLETELY different mental state. Now as he is complaining about his unfortunate situation...he looks up and realizes that there is a woman TOWERING over him. But not just a woman...a really STRANGE woman...she has all these weird characteristics...her height keeps fluctuating...she has a glow about her...but more importantly Boethius notices that she has Greek letters sewn into her dress. At the top she has the letter "Theta" ...At the bottom she has the letter "Pi"...shes carrying a stack of books in one hand and a scepter in the other...i always think of the statue of liberty. Well, this strange woman is known as lady philosophy. The letter "Theta" sewn into the top of her dress symbolizes the metaphysics branch of philosophy and the letter "Pi" at the bottom of the dress symbolizes the branch of ethics. Shes supposed to be a physical embodiment of philosophy. She's also supposed to be a physical embodiment of wisdom...remember Boethius was a neo-platonist...this LADY PHILOSOPHY serves the same purpose to Boethius as Socrates served to Plato in his dialogues...the quintessentially wise person...and the true philosophy of the author. Boethius stays humble...when you watch QVC or any of those home shopping

channels...its always two people that are entirely dissimilar...one guy, for some reason knows EVERYTHING about this rice cooker hes selling and the other guy for some reason has managed to navigate the world and tie their shoes every morning, yet has NEVER EVEN HEARD OF RICE. let alone tried to cook it. Well in the consolation of philosophy, Boethius is the Quintessential Naive person and lady philosophy is the quintessential wise person who is educating him on his wrong thinking. The irony is that both of them are Boethius. Throughout the book he lays out a lot of great stuff...not all of it new, revolutionary stuff, but all of it written in a satisfying way. The stuff that was revolutionary is enough to make him the most influential philosopher of the time period. But before we hear the infinite wisdom of Lady Philosophy we need to talk about Aristotle. One of the most famous works by Aristotle and one that has been talked about a lot in recent years is his work called "On Interpretation" Boethius and many later philosophers respond to this work directly and now seems like the best time to talk about it. I mean, if I talked about it back when we did the episode on Aristotle it would just be a vague memory at this point and his argument is actually very important. Its sometimes known as Aristotle's Sea Battle Analogy. The big question that Aristotle addresses in this part of "On Interpretation" is the question of: Are things predestined and out of our control or do we, as humans, get to choose what we do? What Aristotle says is that nobody would disagree that there are statements that can be directly contradictory to each other. Two people holding opposite viewpoints where one of them HAS to be true. You can think of a million different examples of this...but the one that Aristotle uses is that one person says "there will be a sea battle tomorrow" and the other person says "there WONT be a sea battle tomorrow". Now, ONE of these has to be true. There either WILL be a sea battle tomorrow or there wont be. And because its the type of contradiction where ONE guy has to be right and the other guy has to be wrong...the statement is JUST as true now as it will be tomorrow when it actually happens or doesn't happen. You could say there NEEDS to be a sea battle tomorrow...you could say there is no situation possible where there CANT be a sea battle tomorrow because that statement is true right now. The implications of this is that nothing at all is possible except for what

actually happens. This is an ancient Greek, very Aristotelian way of looking at something else that is a lot more familiar to us in modern times. In the times of Boethius, The popular belief was the God knows what will happen tomorrow. He knows everything. He KNOWS whether the sea battle will or will not take place. But if that is true...how much control do we really have over our actions? Last episode we talked about Saint Augustine and his explanation for how its possible that a supernatural god can exist and still allow evil to happen in the world. His answer, if you remember, has to do with free will. God wanted and created a world where humans possess free will. Saint Augustine said that if that is the case, then evil is something we need to be willing to accept as a possibility. Its not that God WANTS evil to happen. Its not that he COULDNT stop things from taking place...its just that if he did...it would blow the whole system. Then people don't have free will anymore, and how can you eternally judge someone based on something other than immoral actions taken based on their own volition. Now Boethius had ALL of this information. Boethius answers the question of...how can we be said to have free will if god already knows what were going to do in the future by making a distinction between divine foreknowledge and predestination. When I first read Boethius, this changed the way I looked at things...what Boethius says is that there is a HUGE difference between God KNOWING something will happen and God Pre-slating out everything that WILL happen and we have no control over it. But that's just part of what Boethius says...we need to be clear on this though. God's KNOWLEDGE of things that have happened, are happening or will happen is a DIFFERENT THING than God forging a destiny for everyone ahead of time that they cant deviate from. KNOWING something will happen doesn't predestine it to happen. Now if you're a really smart person and you're quick at thinking you might say that...Once we've made that distinction, Why are we even here? Lets say God only KNOWS what you're going to do before you do it...why not just have judgment day on the first day of existence? He already knows whether you're going to follow the rules well enough to be admitted into the country club! Doesn't that just make our free will a bunch of smoke and mirrors that really aren't necessary? Well Boethius would argue that: "Everything is known, not according to itself, but according to the

capacity of the knower."The way we can apply this brilliant concept to what were talking about with free will is by understanding that we percieve everything in the world through the lens of being a human being. That Human interpretation of things may be useful to us in a lot of ways...but it would be naive to think its the COMPLETE picture of anything. Just how a Goldfish might look out of its fishbowl and think your living room is the rest of the ocean...humans might look at something and misperceive it too.What Boethius says we are MOST guilty of misperceiving is the nature of TIME. Remember, Saint Augustine said that time doesn't really exist...its a human construct that we use to categorize information about the world around us. Well Boethius agreed...but he said thatbecause as humans we live in a constant flux of past present and future...we think about it in a narrow way. We think about it in terms of things that have happened..things that are happening now...and things that are going to happen. God, on the other hand, as Saint Augustine said as well, exists OUTSIDE of time...he lives inside of an eternal present...Maybe a better way to think of it is to Think of how you interact with other things that are existing in the present with you. If you and your friend decide you are gonna get in shape and you're gonna go on a jog together and you're running along with your friend and you start to get tired...and lightheaded and hot pockets are spinning around your head...your friends knowledge that you are jogging right now in this moment...doesn't change your ability to stop running and throw up all over the ground...just like that's the interaction in THIS present moment, gods knowledge of your future doesn't stop you from changing it. He lives in an eternal present.Now if you still disagree, don't worry. The centuries will go by and you'll feel more and more at home, but try to appreciate the brilliance here. Boethius was wrongly convicted to death rotting in a cell writing about these imaginary conversations he was having with this "lady philosophy". In fact, right now is a good time to talk about how Boethius says philosophy serves to console us in times of hardship.So as I said before the book starts out with Boethius really depressed and sad...a little bit like Eeyore...and then lady philosophy, the wise owl swoops in and corrects his faulty ways of thinking that are leading to this place of suffering. She asks him whats wrong...and he tells her about the meeting...and the

wrongful conviction and the unjust tyrants that took away EVERYTHING from him...his wealth, his home, his career, and ultimately his life...and lady philosophy...in her own way...just kind of scoffs. She didn't see any reason to be acting like EEEYORE...she says to Boethius: "If I have fully diagnosed the cause and nature of your condition, you are wasting away in pining and longing for your former good fortune. It is the loss of this which, as your imagination works upon you, has so corrupted your mind. I know the many disguises of that monster, Fortune, and the extent to which she seduces with friendship the very people she is striving to cheat, until she overwhelms them with unbearable grief at the suddenness of her desertion" To Boethius, when bad things happen and we allow them to affect us...we are wallowing in our bad fortune. Our Mis-fortunes. When I think of fortune I think of Las Vegas, Nevada. Beautiful city...a place I wish I could go again and I'm not really all that into prostitution or mainlining drugs. But I still have a great time...and if you've ever been there for a few days you might have had a similar experience. I walked into the various casinos on the first day and I see all the people playing the slot machines and I think...wow this is awesome...all these people have hope...maybe it'll be me that hits the big jackpot...yeah the casino strictly regulates the payout and yes I know the odds are heavily against me...but maybe I'll be the lucky one. But with each day that passes the slot machines are full of people...you see some with a look of desperation in their eyes...you see people doing all sorts of superstitious things attributing winning and losing to things other than chance...you know...I didn't have my lucky rabbits foot on the OUTSIDE of my clothes so THATS why i didn't win...you see the casino handing out free drinks to the people gambling...maybe you see the same person from yesterday...and it looks like they've been there EVERY day for the past decade. I stopped feeling excited for this collective sense of hope and started feeling sorry for some of these people. All the casinos post signs that give out the number to the problem gambling hotline. Well Boethius would say that we ALL need to call the problem gambling hotline. But not because were playing kitty cat slot machine too much...its because we share the same delusional expectation of nothing but good fortune in our everyday lives. When Boethius is sulking in his cell and complaining about his loss

of good fortune...lady philosophy tells him that fortune is like a wheel. A wheel of fortune. The things that he had that he considered good fortune weren't actually things that he HAD at all. His health, his freedom, his house, his clothes...these things don't actually belong to him...so how can they be taken away from him? And besides...his situation is far from the worst thing that's ever happened to anyone...EVEN AS HE WAITS IN HIS CELL...waiting for his unjust death sentence, he STILL has tons of fortune...she points out his ability to reason and write his ideas down. In fact, when you add everything up honestly, even if you're sentenced to death, how can you say that you aren't on the net positive side of fortune. Boethius says: "Balance out the good things and the bad that have happened in your life and you will have to acknowledge that you are still way ahead. You are unhappy because you have lost those things in which you took pleasure? But you can also take comfort in the likelihood that what is now making you miserable will also pass away." Some people might see this as a warming over of Buddhism or Stoicism...and there are a lot of similarities. But to put it in terms of a Wheel of fortune that is constantly giving and taking away the earthly things we see as good really makes me think of myself as no different than the people playing the slots in Las Vegas. Except while they're using disposable vacation income, I'm wagering my own happiness. The bottom line was this: If you follow philosophy to a T...you are impervious to all these misfortunes in the world. The real thing you should focus on is virtue. Virtues are the tools you use to achieve happiness. Boethius said: "One's virtue is all that one truly has, because it is not imperiled by the vicissitudes of fortune." In fact, it's the types of things that humans would typically see as bad fortune that is actually the GREATEST fortune...because it's THAT fortune that does the most good in the long run for the person receiving it. The things we see as GOOD fortune are actually pretty deceptive...they allow us to delude ourselves into thinking that we are TRULY happy, when in actuality these conditions are extremely fragile. At least MISfortunes show us how bad things could be and therefore, how good we have it currently. He says: "All fortune is good fortune; for it either rewards, disciplines, amends, or punishes, and so is either useful or just."

Avicenna

Episode #018

This is a transcript of Episode 18 on Avicenna. I've sat up the last few nights thinking about the best way to describe where we are, in the history of philosophy. Where we've come from. We've covered a lot. I found myself trying to think of the best metaphor I could use to tie it all together and give a little bit of context to this period of time we're moving into, because I know where this is all heading. I think many of us know where this is all heading. Things are about to get really awesome, and I had all these examples and metaphors I was throwing around in my head and none of them really captured what I was going for and then it hit me. Philosophy, in so many ways, is like the process of starting a maintaining a fire. Fire doesn't just start out of nowhere; It takes a spark. And that spark doesn't just instantly erupt into roaring flames, unless you're throwing a cigarette out the window in southern California. Barring that one exception, that spark takes work. You got to put it inside of the handful of tree shavings and leaves, you got to blow on it, you have to nurture it. We talked for a long time on this show about the Presocratics. Now, none of these guys had ideas that held up to scrutiny for very long, I mean sure we still talk about people like Heraclitus and Parmenides but their ideas were more landmarks of thought than philosophical endgames. But these Presocratics were incredibly important nonetheless, if for no other reason than they began the discourse that was necessary. They are the sparks that started the fire. Yeah, one spark may pop up and just instantly fade away, not starting the big fire, but we needed people like Thales to exist. We needed someone to look around them and say, "I think everything is made of water." so that then someone else could say, "What are you, stupid? You think air is made of water?" so that Thales could then say, "Okay, prove me wrong." They started that discourse and that discourse was the spark that eventually turned into the roaring white hot flames of Athens during antiquity. During the Hellenistic Age. But then with the political troubles, the looking back to years past when things were better, the radical

shift in the average person's philosophy of self, the popularity of skepticism; all these things led to philosophy slowing down, things headed in a more dogmatic direction. We ran out of fuel, we ran out of logs to keep the fire of philosophy going and it started to get smaller and less hot. Then with the rise of these new monotheistic religions that didn't see much value in looking for truth outside of what they saw as the truth, I mean why would you really, it was like dumping a bucket of water on the fire. And here we are in this smoldering phase. People that have taken any sort of forest or camping safety course know that a fire can go on for a long time after it's seemingly put out. It may not look hot, but that heat is still trapped inside of those embers and you got to really make sure you stamp it out or there's a possibility it could find a twig or a leaf and start back up again. This period of time we're heading into is really like this smoldering phase where once every couple hundred years, some polymath genius comes along and stirs up the embers, and you can see the red and orange you can feel the heat of the fire of philosophy again, if only for a moment. Avicenna was one of these people that stirred up the fire. He kept the fire going long enough to get to the moment in history that all of this is leading up to when someone comes along and dumps a bucket of gasoline on that fire. But today's episode is about one of the most brilliant men who has ever lived: Avicenna. Now, personally I have a deep respect for Avicenna just because of the circumstances he was born into. We're talking 950 AD. There's an Islamic saying that goes, "the ink of a scholar is more holy than the blood of a martyr." This was the thinking in Baghdad during the centuries leading up to Avicenna. It was truly an incredible time in history. You had a culture of people where one of their top priorities was collecting the world's knowledge. They wanted all of the world's wisdom translated into Arabic. Turns out it was a good move for them, they experienced what is known as the Islamic Golden Age. While the west is going through their Dark Ages, the Arabic speaking world is having monumental leaps forward in almost every, single category. Mathematics, Medicine, Architecture, Science and most importantly for us, Philosophy. If it weren't for 8th, 9th, 10th century Baghdad, we might not know who Plato and Aristotle were really. They were the guys that translated it and kept writing commentaries on it. Now the head and shoulders

above, fan favorite was Aristotle. He was the gold standard if you were living as a philosopher in this region. And just to illustrate how much Avicenna stirred up the fire of philosophy, people think of this region's philosophy as all of the philosophy before Avicenna where they made commentaries on Aristotle, and all of the philosophy after Avicenna where they made commentaries on Avicenna. That's how much he changed things. But Avicenna didn't live in Baghdad. He was born in a small town that we'd know as modern day Uzbekistan, so how did he benefit from all this? It kind of reminds me of listening to Adam Carolla in recent years. "Don't you just hate it when you're so talented, successful and rich that your personal maid hides your remote control from you and you can't find it for twelve seconds? What a terrible inconvenience." Well, that's kind of how the Caliphate was feeling in 9th century Baghdad. They were having problems dealing with the quandaries that come with having a sprawling empire that was almost as big as Rome at its height. They changed the capital city around, there was some in-fighting concerning the direction all this was going in, but the important part is that this cultural center of Baghdad, this mylar balloon filled to the brim, just stretching and bursting at the seams ready to explode, the centralized control over it dwindled a bit. And what happened was some of these outlying towns near Baghdad starting getting more access to this Hellenic Philosophy translated into Arabic. There still was no Academy or Lyceum that taught a structured curriculum of philosophy for Avicenna to attend, but at least he had access to the information. Avicenna was a mostly self-educated guy. Not to belittle how brilliant he was, but that self-education probably contributed to him having such a unique perspective on Aristotle. The loosening of the grip on Baghdad, the heightened access to knowledge and education, the ambition and brilliance of someone like Avicenna, all of these things remind me of modern times. When have we ever had as much access to educating ourselves for free as we do today? You see when you have a very special person like Avicenna what even a little bit of education can do, what happens when Avicenna has the entire internet? What happens when Avicenna has podcasts to listen to? We live in amazing times for realizing human potential. Bryan Cranston himself couldn't make meth strong enough to give to the printing press to make it as

influential as the internet will be. Google is the modern day 9th century Baghdad, and I wonder how many Avicennas have been flipping burgers or digging ditches over the last thousand years. So like all the other philosophers in his region, Avicenna was influenced most heavily by Aristotle. But he wasn't just going to roll over and accept everything Aristotle had to say as the gospel truth. In fact, he already had a gospel truth, Islam. He reads Aristotle, finds the parts he doesn't agree with and dismantles it with his own brilliance. But Avicenna wouldn't see it as dismantling. He saw it as healing. His most famous work actually directly translates to "the healing". He heals Aristotle to be compatible with Islam. And this is one of those hallmarks of medieval philosophy that is the reason most universities skip huge chunks of this period, is philosophy becomes not the search for truth, but the quest to validate what you already believe as the truth. By far the thing he is most known for is his "Flying Man" thought experiment. But before we can talk about that, we have to understand a big area of disagreement among philosophers, an area where Avicenna heavily disagreed with Aristotle: the relationship between Mind and Body. You can think of Aristotle's thoughts on the relationship between mind and body by thinking of an iPhone. Or any cellphone or electronic device for that matter, but using the term "mind" might be a little misleading if we think about it in modern terms. The definitions of words get a little hazy back then, Aristotle uses the word soul to describe this a lot, but what he is referring to is the "rational soul". Our ability to reason, whatever existence is present in our minds. Now what he says, is that mind and body are one. Indivisible. Inseparable. This is the opposite of Plato who would say that the soul and body are separate, with the soul being chained to the body, shackled within the body waiting to be released. But for Aristotle they were one and it's not that he has some deep argument proving this is the case, he just kind of points out how silly it would be to focus on that question, because we don't do it in any other area of existence. We don't do it with other things. He says: "It is not necessary to ask whether soul and body are one, just as it is not necessary to ask whether the wax and its shape are one, nor generally whether the matter of each thing and that of which it is the matter are one. For even if one and being are spoken of in several ways, what is properly so spoken of is the

actuality."What he's saying here is that if you took an iPhone, that iPhone has a certain contoured shape and form. When we think about things, the shape of the iPhone is one thing, the materials it's made out of is another thing, but do we think about them as two separate things? If you answered yes, Aristotle would argue that you could say that that shape or form is what makes it an iPhone because if you melted it down into just a hunk of burnt electronics, it wouldn't be an iPhone anymore. And when you do that, does the shape of the iPhone remain there in some mysterious way? Of course not. Well based on this Aristotle says: "It is not unclear that the soul – or certain parts of it, if it naturally has parts – is not separable from the body" Now you're probably going, "Wait a second, how did we get there? Weren't we talking about the shape or form of something in relation to the materials it's made out of? How does that make the rational part of the soul inseparable from the body?" Well to Aristotle, the rational part of the soul is the form of a human being. Think about it, there are many things that could have the shape of a human being. I can think of all kinds of humanoid robots, other monkey like creatures, things that may have the shape of a human, but aren't human. What shapes a human, to Aristotle is our ability to reason and the other functions of the rational soul. So maybe the better example to explain how Aristotle thinks of the relationship between mind and body for humans is that if you had an iPhone, if you took the IOS software off of that iPhone, you wouldn't have an iPhone anymore. You'd have a really shiny brick to ward of common street criminals with, but not an iPhone. The relationship between mind and body to Aristotle is similar to the relationship between an iPhone and its software. What the word iPhone symbolizes to us cannot exist without that software. It wouldn't be the complete definition of iPhone. Aristotle talked a lot about this. If you put an iPhone in a blender and turned it into powder, Is that still an iPhone? No. In fact I think that's how they make most weight loss shakes so at that point it might change forms into a weight loss shake but the point is what if you took all the electronics out of the middle is that an iPhone? Well, at some point it needs to become an iPhone. When is that point? Aristotle would say that the blended powder of the iPhone, is only potentially an iPhone. Only when it is assembled does it become an iPhone. Well Avicenna didn't agree with Aristotle

that the body and mind are one. This was a huge rift between the two of them. The reason why is because think of what Aristotle is saying by saying that the soul and body are inseparable. Just like there is no reason to believe that the shape of the iPhone sticks around after you've melted the materials down, there is no reason to believe that the soul continues to exist after the body ceases to exist. This obviously wasn't compatible with the idea that you are a spiritual being that can look forward to eternal life in paradise. So what Avicenna had to do is somehow prove that the mind and body ARE separate entities from one another. What he creates is genius and it's known now as the Flying Man Thought experiment. Be ready to hear a lot more thought experiments in the future. Thought experiments to philosophers are like a hammer is to Jesus. You know, carpenters. The idea behind using thought experiments is that we exist in a very limited framework, and because of that framework, our thought is limited. Thought experiments change something about that framework. They pose some hypothetical situation and then ask, "what if"? And that "what if" usually makes us look at our current existence a little more openmindedly. Every sci-fi movie ever made is a thought experiment. Well Avicenna gives us one of the best ever: "One of us has to consider that one has been just created in a stroke, and that one has been thus created fully developed and perfectly complete, yet [created] with one's vision shrouded from watching external entities created falling in the air on in empty space in a fall not buffeted by any felt air that buffets it; its limbs separated and not in contact nor touching on another. Then let it contemplate whether it would affirm the existence of its own self. It would not then doubt the affirmation that its self is existent, yet not affirming the existence of any other limbs nor inner bowels, nor heart, nor brain, nor anything of the external things. Rather it was affirming the existence of its-self without affirming that it had length, breadth, or depth. And if it were possible for it, in such a state, to imagine a hand or any other limb, it would not then imagine it to be part of its-self nor to be condition of it." What he's saying is: Imagine yourself being reborn with all of your memories wiped...floating through space but there are no stars. Only complete blackness, no sound no smells. Nothing to sense at all. Arms and legs separated, you're just floating through space. Now,

if this existence was possible to be BORN into...you certainly exist...right? Maybe a different way of thinking of it is...if you were wiped of your memories and put there now...would you cease to exist simply because your body cant SENSE anything? It seems reasonable that you would have some sense of awareness you just wouldn't have any idea that you have a body. You wouldn't know to expect to have a body. So, What is this self that exists? its certainly not your body parts...because in this analogy you wouldn't even know that you have them. you don't KNOW that you have a body...you don't know how big you are...you could be an elephant for all your know...what you DO know...is that you exist. What this proves to Avicenna, is that the human body and the mind are separate from each other...the flying man proves it. Now, if you've taken the time to ask yourself "How do I know that I exist?" You're probably a little weird. Don't worry man I'm with you. Lady Gaga writes songs about people like us. Embrace it. And look, to be fair, there are just way too many good AMC shows and video games to watch nowadays to think about things like that. If Avicenna had grand theft auto five, I'd be talking to you guys about the historical progression of different flavors of Doritos. None of this stuff would have gotten done. But one interesting thing to think about is that we actually address this question more often than we realize. Whenever we think about quality of existence, we think about the nature of existence. Despite the fact that it may seem unimportant we think about it a lot. For example, there's a character in Breaking Bad, I think it's Tuco's dad...hes the really old, wheelchair bound guy with the little bell that he rings with his weird finger. Well, he has an existence where his body doesn't work, except for his finger, but his mind works. As humans, we still see him as existing, albeit in a lesser sense. He's a good way to remember Avicenna's Flying Man Thought experiment. But flip that around. What happens when someone is completely brain dead, but their body is still functioning. Their heart is still pumping their nervous system is still working, what is that person's existence like? The fact is, if someone we know was in a terrible accident most people would be far more likely to end life-support on the person who is brain dead than the person whose body is next to useless, but their brain is still functioning. By making a judgment on the quality of existence, we're asking at some level what is it to

exist at all? It's important to note that Avicenna wasn't trying to prove that he knows we exist simply because he is able to be self-aware. This is one of the rare occasions where I'm going to jump ahead a little bit, just real quick. The Flying Man Theory has a lot of similarities to one of the biggest moments in the history of philosophy a few hundred years from now when a guy named Rene Descartes wrote: I think therefore I am. Now for the record, this is another reason why philosophy seems boring to some people because if you're an outsider talking to someone about philosophy and you go, oh, what's one of the big, awesome moments in the history of philosophy... what's a moment that I should be impressed by. And the person says back to them, "Rene Descartes said: I think therefore, I am". And the outsider is like, "Really? Well that's underwhelming. That's the sum total of thousands of years of human thought? That's one of the most obvious statements I've ever heard." What that outsider doesn't realize is the history that we talked about at the beginning of the show. The Presocratics, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the rise of skepticism. The co-existence of skepticism with all the schools of the Hellenistic Age. The Pyrrhonists. Generation after generation of philosophers asking how can you know ANYTHING for certain? Can you? It was all but accepted that humans could NEVER arrive at truth about anything because you can always say, well how do you know that? Then the rise of monotheism and for a thousand years humans claimed to have arrived at the truth, and then BAM! Copernicus, Francis Bacon, Galileo All of a sudden, we don't exist within an ordered cosmos as the Greeks saw it, we live in the middle of chaos. And what's worse, we don't seem that important in this chaos. It is impossible to know ANYTHING for certain. And along comes Rene Descartes. You know, Avicenna's Flying Man is NOT the same as Descartes. Avicenna's would be I think therefore I'm not only my body... or I think therefore my body is separate from my rational soul. But I think it is just as brilliant as Descartes. If you want someone to be Descartes before Descartes, I think you'd be better off looking to Saint Augustine who makes an extremely similar claim hidden in some obscure chapter of NOT his most famous work: "By not positively affirming that they are alive, the skeptics ward off the appearance of error in themselves, yet they do make errors simply by showing themselves alive; one cannot err who is not

alive. That we live is therefore not only true, but it is altogether certain as well"he also says: "who would doubt that he lives, remembers, understands, wills, thinks, knows, and judges? For even if he doubts, he lives; if he doubts, he remembers why he doubts; if he doubts, he understands that he doubts; if he doubts, he wishes to be certain; if he doubts, he thinks; if he doubts, he knows that he does not know; if he doubts, he judges that he ought not to consent rashly. Whoever then doubts about anything else ought never to doubt about all of these."Well, above all else, and this is something were going to talk about more in future episodes, although in many ways Avicenna's healing of Aristotle helped to make it compatible with Muslim teachings, the flying man thought experiment really was the complete opposite....it flew in the face of Islam. By saying that the soul is immortal and therefore doesn't need the body to live on in the afterlife, he was going against the orthodox Muslims of his time period who believed that both body AND mind are resurrected into the afterlife. The downside was that he was ruthlessly attacked for this, the upside is that he found favor with many later Christian thinkers. This brings me to the question of the week: Philosophize This! Is what Avicenna said true? Does his Flying Man thought experiment really make it impossible for the body and mind to be inseparable? I wonder if there is a way to link the feelings in the body with the thoughts that the rational soul has. Thank you for listening. Talk to you soon.

Three Islamic Truths

Episode #019

This is a transcript of Episode 19 on Three Islamic Truths. The theme of today's episode is truth. When you think of truth, as it's own entity, there's not really that much controversy. I don't think most people disagree that it seems likely that there is an absolute truth about each individual facet of everything that exists. Some blanket single code about everything that is, the truth. That concept is pretty straightforward in itself. It's when humans start talking about truth that things get crazy. It's what that truth is, and what makes it true when viewing it through the lens of a human that is the tough question. And it's because we're all viewing the same exact scene, unfolding out in front of us, but we're all viewing it through a different filter and from a different vantage point. Now because of that, and this is something that is a big issue in philosophy, we might have to be willing to accept as humans that we... can't arrive at truth. We might have to accept that as beings living on this planet, whatever you think we are, that discovering the absolute truth about everything or anything isn't a function of our existence. We might not have the equipment to find the truth. I guess it kind of depends on what you believe in, if you think we evolved from monkeys, you might not think our brains are designed to necessarily understand the fabric of space and time...you might think our brains are designed to socialize, pick bananas and reproduce. On the other hand, if you think we are spiritual beings, programmed into this body by God or some creator, maybe you think god didn't put us here to understand how he did everything, he put us here to follow a certain set of behavioral restrictions and to be judged. I mean, whatever you think, the key thing to note is that it's never been obvious to us what the truth was. And because of that ambiguity, truth has always been a subjective term. People arrive at their own truth about things. You hear it all the time, this is "my truth". Another question to ask is if you arrived at the truth, would you even know it? How could you know that THAT truth isn't just another step on your journey towards arriving at the

truth? The subject is actually one of the biggest in philosophy and it's ten times more complicated than this, and it's focused on so much for good reason. Just think of what is at stake when we think about the truth. This is going to be a shocker to everybody listening. Throughout history, people haven't always agreed on what the truth is. You see the same story repeat itself all throughout human history. Some guy arrives at what he sees as the absolute truth, and then uses that truth as the basis for subjugating entire groups of people, for committing mass genocide, for trying to take over the world. What's even scarier about that is that most of these truths, at least at the time they were arrived at, seem to be based on sound logic. And what do you do when two really smart people arrive at what they call truth, and they're diametric opposites of each other? One of them has to be wrong and it has to be a problem with the method they used to arrive at the truth. So philosophers from the beginning have focused on that question, what is truth and what is the proper method to arrive at the truth? They realized that their answers to these questions, not only had their lives in the balance, but the future of all of humanity. They were thinking of us. And make no mistake, if they didn't do this, the world would be a very different place today. That is what today's episode is: three genius thinkers from the Islamic world and their three completely different approaches to the best way to arrive at truth. They came to very different conclusions, but all three approaches are based on sound logic, they had to be. In fact, the entire middle-ages, at least when it comes to philosophy is distinguished by a heightened focus on logic. What's even more cool about their different approaches is that all three of them relate to us in modern times in some unique way. By the end of the show we'll not only see how thought progressed in the Islamic world throughout the centuries but we'll understand more about the two time periods on either side of Avicenna. Remember the period is typically broken down into two parts, before Avicenna and after Avicenna. So, I guess the best way to start is to talk about that "before Avicenna" part. It began in the seventh century. There was a violent clashing of two different cultures coming together. But it's funny, if you were looking at it, it wouldn't really appear to be a violent clashing. You think of a violent clashing and you think of fireworks, explosions...a Jason Statham movie. but it

didn't happen in an instant. Sometimes when two cultures violently clash, its more like the violent clash that happens when two tectonic plates slam together and make a mountain. It's still a violent clashing it just takes place over a long period of time. The two tectonic plates that are colliding in our example today are this newly created Muslim empire in the seventh century and this large region of Iran, Iraq and Syria. The intellectual history of the region would eventually become embodied in the city of Baghdad, which would eventually become the capital city of this newly founded Muslim empire. See, the truth for Baghdad was legitimized the region's rich history of science and philosophy for hundreds of years. Truth for the Muslim empire was legitimized by the sword. They conquered the entire region, it was under control of the Persian Empire at the time, and if you were living during that time you had two choices if they conquered you. Convert to Islam or pay an extremely high tax that most people couldn't afford. It certainly wasn't paradise for anyone living as a non-Muslim during this time period and region. The two cultures slammed together and there was a great deal of tension. It was kind of a weird place to be in if you're the Muslim empire. Nobody is going to beat you in a direct military engagement, the question just becomes how do you command the front lines of this culture war that is going on? Could the thought of the area, thought based around truth being arrived at through reason, with Hellenic Philosophy deeply entrenched in the culture; could that be reconciled with truth based on fulfillment of prophecy? Truth given to us by God and recorded in a book? Is it even possible to reconcile the two? The better question for the powerful Muslim empire was, What is the best way to deal with this problem? Should they forcefully take over cultural control of the entire area or should they try to find some sort of common ground between the two? Find some way they can coexist. Well, luckily for us they decided to try to coexist. And this attempt of philosophers to try to reconcile these two very different ways of looking at the truth is what defines this "before Avicenna" stage where they mostly translated work by Greek philosophers into Arabic. But as we touched on a little bit last time, it wasn't just translating. They also wrote commentaries on the earlier philosophers to try to explain to people of their time what they were saying. This is where Al Farabi comes into

the picture. There would not be a revolutionary thinker like Avicenna if there was no Al Farabi. There's a story Avicenna tells in one of his books where he tries to read Aristotle's Metaphysics and he just doesn't understand it. So he reads it again, and doesn't understand it. He says he read Aristotle's Metaphysics 40 times and still didn't understand what he was saying. And the even more impressive thing is that 40 is just the number they used back then for "I can't even count how many times, let's just call it 40". It's like saying "a million kagillion". By the way, when you're turning 40 years old, you got to already feel a little insecure about getting older. It must be terrible when you think that your age is the hyperbole that people used to use as a number so high, the actual number doesn't even matter anymore. It really is cruel. But anyway, Avicenna didn't understand Aristotle's metaphysics until he read the commentary that Al Farabi wrote on it, and then instantly he understood. Even someone as brilliant as Avicenna couldn't get it because there was a giant cultural divide. Al Farabi describes it here: "Aristotle expressed the canons of logic by means of words customary among the people of his language And used examples that were familiar to and current among the people of his day. but since the explanations of the people of the Arabic language are not customary to the people of Greece and the examples of the people of this time are different from the examples familiar to the Greeks, the points that Aristotle intended to clarify by means of these examples have become unclear to and not understood by the people of our time." So what he's obviously alluding to there is that he is just like me! Al Farabi was doing his own version of Philosophize This! way back in the day. He realized something. When Aristotle was writing all of this stuff down, he was communicating it through the limited language that he had in his day, to the culture of his day, using examples that people of his day could understand. Al Farabi thought that maybe some of the blame for the current time not relating to and understanding what Aristotle had to say lied in the way it was explained. He updated the examples. He explained it in a way people actually cared about. He was a peacemaker between the two cultures and this really is what defines the philosophy of the time period. I mean, if you think Al Farabi is a peacemaker, you have to hear about Al Kindi. Al Kindi just wanted everyone to get along already. He spent a lot of

his time trying to create a full philosophical system that fused together the best parts of the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, who as we know are typically seen as too different to ever be fused together. But the most important peacemaking venture he embarked on was making a case for the fact that using philosophy to search for the truth and arriving at the truth through fulfillment of prophecy, are not mutually exclusive things. They both can exist alongside each other. Really, I think it comes down to the slightly different way Al Kindi defines philosophy that allows for the two to coexist. He says: "indeed the human art which is highest in degree and most noble in rank is the art of philosophy. the definition of which is the true knowledge of things insofar as is possible for man." In so far as is possible for man! See, what Al Kindi believed is that we can't reasonably expect to be able to arrive at ALL truth through our ability to reason. I mean, just think of how HUGE that encyclopedia would be if we found the truth about every single thing. He thought we can certainly figure out a lot of things though. So we should use reason to know as much as we possibly can and then add on the divine knowledge given to us through prophets to fill in the gaps. Whatever we do though, the truth is the most important thing, not our feelings about the truth or what it says about who we are. He said: "We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. for the seeker of truth, nothing takes precedence over the truth. the status of no one is diminished by the truth, rather does the truth ennoble all." This is a beautiful sentiment from Al Kindi. The truth is the most important thing. Not how the truth makes you feel, not how different the person looks who is bringing you the truth, not how stupid you will feel for having not known the truth for so long. The truth ennobles all. The type of people Al Kindi is lecturing here, we still deal with these people all the time. One search for truth that almost everybody goes through in modern times at some level, is trying to find where you fit in the spectrum of modern politics. These people obviously disagree on a lot of things, both sides cite their own statistics proving their side to be correct, but they can't both be correct, so what do I think the truth is? And I think the reason so many people grow ambivalent about American politics is because these commentators on TV

don't think about the truth like Al Kindi did, how can they possibly know what the truth is? I guess that's what both sides are banking on to a certain degree, but the average person has a full time job, a family, hobbies, a home to maintain, personal goals; when they start looking for what the truth is and they turn on MSNBC and hear how George Bush and his evil syndicate of minions are destroying the world and then they flip over to Fox News and hear how all of what they just heard is completely false and that it's really Obama that's the bad guy. If any of these people ever heard that science discovered that the other side was absolutely correct the whole time, they would NEVER acknowledge it. They'd find some way to spin it so that they never need to make a concession and they'd keep going on with what they do best. They aren't interested in the truth, or the real "news", they're not interested in ennobling all as Al Kindi would say. And given how much the media effects the decisions making of the average person, just imagine if they DID take a page out of Al Kindi's book. So, it was the translations and commentaries by people like Al Kindi and Al Farabi that led to a great thinker like Avicenna. Then shortly after, people started commentating on what Avicenna had to say. And one of his most famous detractors, and a man that more than almost anyone else looked into what it meant to arrive at truth, was Al Ghazali. Now it's spelled Ghazali. But its pronounced Ghazali. I'm not going to butcher your beautiful language, I'm just going to call him Ghazali from now on and you'll know what I mean. Al Ghazali's search for what truth is began at a very early age. He said: "consequently as i drew near the age of adolescence, the bonds of mere authority ceased to hold me and inherited beliefs lost their grip upon me, for i saw that christian youths always grew up to be christian, Jewish youths to be Jews and Muslim youths to be Muslims. my inmost being was moved to discover what this original nature really was and what the beliefs derived from the authority of parents and teachers really were. and also to make distinctions among the authority based opinions and in distinguishing between the true and false in them. therefore i said within myself, to begin with, what i am looking for is knowledge of what things really are so i must undoubtedly try to find what knowledge really is." He looked around him and saw that most people just kind of believe whatever the authority figures tell them to believe.

He noticed that children that grow up in various religious settings always end up being the same religion as their parents, he noticed that teachers told students the way things were, but no one ever questioned it. He called those in the quote "authority based opinions". Al Ghazali saw that the authority figures usually were right, but not always, and they certainly weren't right simply because they were authority figures. So this led him to start questioning, everything around him. He asked himself, what should truth be based on? What can I know for certain? And the conclusion he came to is that the only things we can know for certain are things that are so true that it's impossible for anyone to even cause a doubt in your mind. Things that are so true they are practically self-evident. Now, as people who study philosophy we already know the dark, depressing road this is going to take him down. I mean we've heard the stories of Carneades in Rome arguing for Justice one day and winning the crowd of Romans over and then arguing the complete opposite viewpoint, against justice and winning them over again. How is Al Ghazali going to arrive at a place where anything is self-evident? Well what he decides after thinking about it for a long time is that there are only two things he thinks we can be certain about sense perception and necessary truths. By sense perceptions hes talking about: unless if you're dreaming or hallucinating...when we see something in front of us...we can be sure it's there. by necessary truths, hes talking about things that are the case because their essence makes it so. things like a square has four sides. If a square didn't have four sides, it wouldn't be a square anymore. it is necessary that a square has four sides. But he goes even further. He pulls a Socrates on himself. He asked, how can I be sure that I am not dreaming? How can I ever be sure that I won't exist in a realm where necessary truths no longer apply? He said: "Is my reliance on sense perception and my trust on the soundness of necessary truths of the same kind as my previous trust in the beliefs i had merely taken over from others? and as the trust most men have in the results of thinking? or is it a justified trust that is in no danger of being betrayed or destroyed." Well you never pull a Socrates on yourself. He messed himself up. Apparently for 10 years he had this terrible disease of skepticism about everything. He was so distraught that it affected his physical health, he felt sick, no doctor knew what to do, he

had to quit teaching and he decided to go on a spiritual journey that eventually cured him of his skepticism. He found out the flaw in his way of thinking that cursed him for so many years and here it was: "Faith in prophecy is to acknowledge the existence of a sphere beyond reason; into this sphere an eye penetrates whereby man apprehends special objects of apprehension. From these, reason is excluded in the same way as the hearing is excluded from apprehending colours and sight from apprehending sounds and all the senses from apprehending the objects of reason." Basically what he's saying is look, reason is cool and all. We are human. We have limitations. How can we think that we can know EVERYTHING through reason? Some things we just can't through reason alone, and it is a narrow minded way of thinking to restrict yourself to only reason when arriving at conclusions. And when it comes to those things, all the rest of the truth we can't arrive at through reason, we need prophets to tell us the truth. He recognized that philosophy had some value, but we needed to keep it in its proper place. Philosophy needs to speak when spoken to, and never more. After all, at best philosophy was using reason to arrive at conclusions, you're never experiencing the truth first hand. He said "What a difference between knowing the definition of health together with its causes, and being healthy." Ghazali becomes a bit like Robin Williams in Good Will Hunting. Remember when he says to Matt Damon's character that I could ask you about art and you'd probably quote every art book ever written, but I bet you don't know what it feels like to look up at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. He makes a distinction between knowing a ton about something, and actually experiencing it. The key for Al Ghazali was to understand that you can never think your way to arriving at the conclusions that the prophets laid out...it is futile to even try. Instead, what you should do is accept on faith that the things the prophets said are true, and once you do, it will become clear to you that it is the truth because this first hand experience is much more powerful. Al Ghazali saw these philosophers claim to be free from the shackles of authority based opinions, but really in his eyes they had just imprisoned themselves in a new cell block. The confines of only using reason to arrive at truth. Al Ghazali brings up a good point that we touched on briefly at the start of the show in that maybe human reason in itself is

incapable of grasping certain elements of the truth. Maybe the only way to know them is to accept them as the truth first, and then look around you and see the effects. I think that's a dangerous recipe. If there's one thing human beings are good at it's mistaking correlation with causality. You don't have to look very far in any direction in modern times to see people or things that are confident one thing is causing something, and then it turns out it just appeared like there was a correlation between the two things, it was actually something else. The example that comes to mind is the indigenous tribe throwing people into a volcano because that's how you appease the volcano gods and make them not shoot lava at your town. If you accept something on faith first, you're relying on your own judgment to make accurate correlations and I think that's something we've proven we're not very good at. He thought they were downright incoherent. Which explains the title of his most famous work "The incoherence of the philosophers." Well the last guy we're going to talk about didn't agree with Al Ghazali on most things. Which explains the title of his most famous work "The incoherence of the incoherence." His name was Averroes. Averroes was living during a time long after Al Farabi and Al Kindi; long after the time when the relationship between religion and philosophy in the east could be symbolized by one of those coexist bumper stickers. Things were heating up. It was way beyond finding some alternative way of looking at older philosophy and finding a way it is compatible with Islam. Now Islam had it's own philosophy. They had centuries to study what everyone else had to say and by this time they pretty much knew who they agreed with and who they didn't agree with. That's where Averroes comes in. He was a little bit of a Renaissance man. He would've fit in a lot more during the time before Avicenna when people were writing commentaries on Aristotle, because that is almost all he did. But what he's most famous for is his response to Al Ghazali and his theory of the best way to arrive at truth. Averroes didn't think either religion or philosophy was a useless way to arrive at truth, he just thought they specialized in different areas. Some things philosophy is better at, some things religion is better at. He thought there should be something like a business arrangement between the two. After all they both benefit each other when they both do what they are best at. He says philosophy should

appreciate religion because there is no way people could dedicate their lives to thinking about stuff if it wasn't for the civil order that religion provides. Not everybody is intellectually capable of understanding philosophy, or of grasping certain concepts...so what religion does is provide an easily digestible version of the truth, which they should accept on faith, because they are never going to arrive at those truths through reason. He said:"the religions are, according to the philosophers, obligatory, since they lead towards wisdom in a way universal to all human beings, philosophy only leads a certain number of people to the knowledge of intellectual happiness, and they therefore have to learn wisdom, whereas religions seek the instruction of the masses generally, he goes on, since the existence of the learned class is only perfected and its full happiness attained by participation with the class of the masses, the general doctrine is also obligatory for the existence and life of this special class"Because of this, philosophers shouldn't stir up trouble. They shouldn't worry about shouting out to the masses about all the problems with religion, because that's the best the "masses" are ever going to do. What possible benefit can you get from that? In fact, if philosophers DO make people question their faith in religion, it's downright irresponsible. Averroes thinks people capable of understanding philosophy should carefully pick the best religion of their time period and endorse it wholeheartedly. But the catch is, they should leave themselves open to a new religion coming along that does a better job at conveying the truth to the masses. He said:"Further, he is under obligation to choose the best religion of his period, even when they are all equally true for him, and he must believe that the best will be abrogated by the introduction of a still better."I don't agree with Averroes that most people are incapable of understanding philosophy. But then again it's easy for me to disagree living in modern times, knowing how much more we know about human psychology and genetics. I like to think that if Averroes was privy to modern science and saw the world we live in today, he wouldn't say most people are incapable of understanding philosophy, he would say that most people are unwilling.And that doesn't make them bad people! Humans typically take the path of least resistance. From a survival oriented perspective, it makes sense. If you need water and you have two choices: the stream directly in front

of you or the stream on the other side of that dangerous chasm over there, which one is more reasonable? Knowing that, if people are born into a world where they have a choice, the ethical doctrine that is right in front of them, or the ethical doctrine arrived at through hundreds of hours of contemplation weighing the pros and cons of each individual virtue, which path can we expect most people to take? I mean, you can be told by a parent or a pastor that lying is wrong, only bad people lie and if you do it, bad things will happen to you. And accept that. Or, you can think about the benefits of being an honest person vs a dishonest person. For example, when you're honest, you have more meaningful relationships with people, which positively affects you emotionally. People trust you more, so naturally more opportunities are going to be thrown. Etc. Both examples are reaping the same benefits of being a virtuous person. Both people are acting as if they are wise people. If the only difference between them is that one person attributes all the good in their life to a supernatural god reaching his hand down and blessing them for doing things right, and the other person attributes all the good to being a natural byproduct of living virtuously, I wonder, and Averroes would wonder too, why there is a significant group of people that think religion as an institution should be abolished. Now it's time for the question of the week. I want you to think about the second example of truth in our episode today, Al Ghazali. He said that to arrive at truth you need to accept things based on faith first and then through experiencing the world around you arrive at truths that are much stronger than truths based merely in reason alone. Well think about that for a second. Philosophize This! Are there things we cannot prove with reason alone, that aren't in the slightest bit magical, that every day whether we realize it or not, we accept them on faith? Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you soon.

Two Medieval Approaches To God

Episode #020

This is the full transcript of Podcast Episode 20, Two Medieval Approaches to God. One of the hallmarks of philosophy is looking at one question from multiple different angles. It's not enough to think about stuff for a while and come to what seems like a reasonable conclusion, and then call it a life. You can't do that. Our thoughts about any subject should be an evolution. The subject today is a topic we've danced around quite a bit; we've covered little pieces of it, but today we're going to talk about it more. That's right, by the end of the show today you're going to know the answer to the question: Does God exist? Just Kidding, obviously. But I would like to talk about some common ways that people think about this question and address them. For about a year of my life, most of my free time was spent reading proofs of God's existence or non-existence. Not just philosophical proofs, although I read a lot of those, I read forums, I read articles, I read hateful YouTube comments, I read books. I called it my spiritual quest, you know, there are many philosophers we've talked about that come to question what they think about the nature of existence and the world they live in, and they go on some sort of spiritual journey where they find themselves, I believe I compared it to John Travolta's mid life crisis in the movie Wild Hogs. Well this year that I spent, was my Wild Hogs when it came to the question of: does God exist? And what I saw was, like most things, the vast majority of the people are emphatically on one side or the other. And one of the main lines of thinking I saw from the Atheist side of things, not from the philosophers, but from the average person walking around on the street, was they were "proving" God didn't exist or making fun of the idea of a God existing based on a very limited view of what God is. These people are born into a world where monotheism rules the day when it comes to religion, people are given a code of ethics to follow and if they do a good job they're given VIP treatment in the afterlife. That's the world they're born into. That's what "God" is to them, because that's the only concept they've ever been introduced to

because they've never studied it, and they call it a life. Pathetic fairy tale, meant to keep humans in line, God doesn't exist. Well it isn't that simple. Just like when philosophers use words like virtue and good and truth, and when they say those words they mean something very different based on who is saying them, because the individual definitions of them change, the word "God" is describing a concept that changes based on who is saying it. How ridiculous would it be to think that when Plato talked about God he had the same concept in his mind as a modern day Christian or Jew, he lived hundreds of years before Jesus supposedly walked the earth. Some of these people get so caught up in thinking "I'm so smart. I realize that snakes can't actually talk and that a guy didn't build a giant ship and corral two of every species on the ship while God killed everyone else on the planet, I know that's just a story." They get so caught up in that phase that they quit, they don't look at it any deeper; they don't think about the underlying concepts and whether they have merit. They don't think about the fact that maybe they just disagree with the medium its being communicated through. Just think about something for a second. Just on the concept of God, just on this show we've already talked about several definitions of the concept. We've talked about God being the thing, whatever it is, that brought this cosmos, into existence. Nothing more. Not interested in whether you said a bad word yesterday, not interested in whether you cheated on your test, to put a modern spin on it, the thing that caused the big bang. Later philosophers would say stuff like, the totality of all existence. Think of EVERYTHING that exists as a single unit, a unit that we and everything else in the universe are just aspects of. Couldn't that be considered God? If you don't think the big bang needed a cause, you certainly cant think it's pointless to entertain the possibility that it had one. We've talked about the Stoics and their pantheistic view of God where god is the universe. You know, this thing, God, pervades all things. That thing which is difficult to describe with words, but it animates all things that possess life. We've talked about Plotinus and his transcendent "one". And guess what guys, we've barely even gotten started with the concept of God. In fact, there are people, for each and every one of these philosophers that dedicate their lives to understanding what they meant by their concept of God. How they used reason to

determine that something transcendent like that must exist if you logically keep going, well what comes after that? Now here's the point of all this. That's just "what God is". That's just one very small part of what is laid out in these monotheistic religious texts. Just imagine being five years old and your parents take you to church for the first time, and you're really excited and instead of hearing the story about the man who built a giant ship and with God's wind at his back managed to conquer this unconquerable task, imagine if you started diving into Plato's Timaeus and started talking about the concept of a transcendent Good that can serve as a wind at your back. How many Sundays would you last before you started convulsing on the ground every Sunday morning like you're in Paranormal Activity, just so you can get out of going to church. I mean, the philosophical concept of each virtue goes equally as deep as the concept of God. People go to school for years to understand these things with any sort of depth, and like Averroes pointed out in the last episode, can we really expect the average person to go through that kind of schooling and understand the underlying concepts of religion in depth? How many Sundays would pass before the pews start looking like a Pittsburgh Pirates game? Make no mistake. When philosophers talk about the concept of a God, they're thinking about it in a philosophical way. Today, we're going to be talking about probably the most famous proof of God's existence in the history of the world and it was put forward in the Middle Ages where we're studying philosophy now. As we've talked about before, monotheistic religions were powerful and in charge during the Middle Ages. As a result, most of the great thinkers were members of these monotheistic religions, and most of them used all their excess brainpower to make adjustments to Plato or Aristotle compatible with this monotheism. We've seen Plotinus and his neo-platonism and Saint Augustine who was heavily influenced by him. We've seen people like Philo of Alexandria trying to make Plato compatible with the Torah. Plato's philosophy really lent itself to being compatible with these new religions on the scene because of several things. He believed in a creator, he believed in the mind and body being separate from each other which then allows for the possibility of an immortal soul, many things were good about it. But Aristotle was a tougher sell to the church. We've seen how the Islamic world and beyond worked to

reconcile Aristotle's philosophy with Islamic theology. But what was going on in the West during that time? Have you ever heard the phrase Greek East Latin West? Well it refers to this period of time that we're in right now. When the Roman Empire fell it broke into two parts, the very Greek Byzantine empire of the east and the Latin speaking west. Philosophy continued in both areas, but the more historically significant thing to talk about is what was happening ALL throughout Europe at the same time; it's what's known as Scholasticism. People use Scholasticism as a way to categorize philosophy of the time, you have a list of names known as Scholastic Philosophy. But really Scholasticism is just a method acquiring knowledge and learning that focuses heavily on dialectical reasoning. Dialectic is, if you remember, what Socrates used all the time. It's a style of doing philosophy that is conversational. Some people have opposing viewpoints and argue against each other being sure to use their tools of logic and reason as best they can, and hopefully at the end of the conversation they are a little closer to the truth. Well, one of the guys we were talking about today is known as the father of Scholasticism. St. Anselm of Canterbury. And it's his argument for the existence of God which would later become known as the "Ontological Argument" is the most famous proof of God's existence in history. But I want to give it to you guys in true dialectical fashion. I want you guys to have a conversation with St. Anselm and let him convince you that God exists. But first, I want to talk about the way Saint Anselm would have been thinking about things that exist. Simply put, he would've broken things down into two types. Things that exist in our HUMAN understanding alone and things that exist in reality. So let's think about some examples of these. What are some things that exist only in our human understanding? Well that would be anything that exists in our imagination that does not exist in reality. You can take your pick of the countless options. My little pony, Harry Potter, if you have an idea for an invention and it exists only in your mind because you haven't actually created it yet, these are all things that can be thought of as only having existence in relation to a human understanding them. Now if you had that invention manufactured; if you finally put pen to paper and got off of your parents futon and made that invention exist in reality, then it would not only exist in reality, it would still exist in

your imagination too right? Well, at that point, your new invention falls into the category of most everything we see around us. A lawnmower, a vacuum cleaner, a Honda Civic with the muffler taken off of it, all of these things exist both in our imaginations and in reality. They also all make recording this podcast nearly impossible. But there is another class of things. Things that exist ONLY in reality and not in human understanding. For example, you see every once in a while some backpackers go deep into the Amazon rain forest and come across some new species of bird or insect. A species that was buried so deep in the Amazon jungle, no human knew that it existed, no human had understanding of it, no human had it in their imagination, but it still existed in reality despite the fact that a human didn't know about it. And there are all kind of examples of this. There may be galaxies and other bubbles of the multiverse that we have no idea exist yet, but they still exist in reality. Really, there could be things flying all around us all the time, beings existing in this same space whose existence really doesn't affect us at all, we can't see them, but they still exist. Well when we look at St. Anselm's famous proof of God's existence, we have to not let our individual biases of what the word God means get in the way. Anselm is proving the existence of the concept of God. He says himself: "I began to ask myself whether there might be found a single argument which would require no other for its proof than itself alone; and alone would suffice to demonstrate that God truly exists, and that there is a supreme good requiring nothing else, which all other things require for their existence and well-being; and whatever we believe regarding the divine Being." Now focus on what he said there. All he's looking to do is prove that there is a supreme good that requires nothing else for its existence, which all other things require for their existence and well being. He could be equally proving the existence of Plotinus's transcendent "one" or "good", which didn't have any human characteristics. What's important to point out, is that whenever you're proving that God exists or proving that anything exists for that matter, the most important thing you have to do is define terms, understand exactly what concept you have in your head that you're trying to describe with words and then prove. You need to provide a definition. And this is where St Anselm's Ontological argument begins and ends: Within his definition of what God is.

He's setting up the idea here: "Therefore, Lord, you who give knowledge of the faith, give me as much knowledge as you know to be fitting for me, because you are as we believe and that which we believe. And indeed we believe you are something greater than which cannot be thought. Or is there no such kind of thing, for "the fool said in his heart, 'there is no God'" But certainly that same fool, having heard what I just said, "something greater than which cannot be thought," understands what he heard, and what he understands is in his thought, even if he does not think it exists. For it is one thing for something to exist in a person's thought and quite another for the person to think that thing exists." So if you were having a conversation with St. Anselm, and you were one of these people who "know" for a fact that God doesn't exist. He would start by setting a trap. He would say, Ok, I hear what you're saying. God doesn't exist. But let's just talk about what we religious people think of as God, would you agree that if, and only if, we're talking in theory here, if God existed, he would be the greatest thing you could ever imagine? If this thing existed, you as a mere human could never imagine something greater than him? Now, this seems perfectly reasonable. I think 99.9% of people would answer yes here. He's not saying that that thing exists yet, he's just defining what it is we're trying to prove the existence of. And he does so by describing it as "That than which nothing greater can be thought." If you're a Gnostic Atheist that claims to KNOW that God doesn't exist, you are quick to agree to this, because you see it as him just shining a light on this delusional concept he believes in. But it's a trap! He quickly makes that person feel a little stupid: "Thus even the fool is compelled to grant that something greater than which cannot be thought exists in thought, because he understands what he hears, and whatever is understood exists in thought. And certainly that greater than which cannot be understood cannot exist only in thought, for if it exists only in thought it could also be thought of as existing in reality as well, which is greater. If, therefore, that than which greater cannot be thought exists in thought alone, then that than which greater cannot be thought turns out to be that than which something greater actually can be thought, but that is obviously impossible. Therefore something than which greater cannot be thought undoubtedly exists both in thought and in reality." That's something

he does a lot in his writing, he writes in tongue twisters. It's like something Ron Burgandy would read before he goes on air. Good thing you got me to turn it into English. What he's saying is: By acknowledging that God is "the greatest thing you could ever imagine", you are acknowledging that God exists in your imagination, right? Again, most Atheists wouldn't have a problem with that. They would say he ONLY exists in my imagination. Remember as we talked about before, there is a difference to St. Anselm between things that exist only in human understanding and things that exist in reality. Then Anselm would say, well certainly it's wonderful to be able to imagine things, you know, you can imagine that new invention of yours being made and on store shelves, but it's much greater when that invention exists in reality right? Most people would say yes here. Things that exist in reality are a little bit better than that same thing only existing in a day dream of ours. Then he goes in for the kill. He says, "Well you agreed that God is 'the greatest thing you could ever imagine', and you say this "God" that only exists in your imagination is the greatest thing you can ever imagine, but you can also imagine that that concept of God ALSO exists in reality, and wouldn't that be greater than ONLY existing in your imagination? What he's saying is: if we define god as the greatest thing you can ever imagine, then you CAN imagine that God exists, so therefore according to the definition you agreed to, he DOES exist. Something funny that I've noticed as I've been re-reading all of this Medieval Philosophy is that whenever one of these guys asserts something to be absolutely true, like they preface what they're saying with obviously or certainly, most of the time that's the portion of the argument that I take issue with. It's a weird psychological thing there, it's like they're trying to convince themselves of it. When most people hear this argument for the first time, if they're not invested in the outcome one way or another, I think they usually say, "Hmm. Sounds good, but I think there's something wrong with it, but I can't put my finger on what it is." For the record, this was my reaction when I first read it. I was incredibly open minded to either outcome. I ended up reading it a few more times and thinking about it for a week or so and I'll have you know, because I'm very proud of myself for this, I independently arrived at the same conclusion that a guy named Immanuel Kant did centuries after

Anselm. He wrote the most famous refutation of the Ontological argument, although my thoughts were no where near as justified as his and he did it with a much different educational upbringing than me, so Kant wins by far. But what he says is that the problem with this argument lies in two main areas, both of which are centered around that initial definition of God. God is "that than which nothing greater can be thought". Why necessarily is something that exists IN reality, greater, than something that doesn't exist in reality? That sounds a lot like a bias inherent in a human that values existing over not existing. The second thing Kant said is that Anselm is wrong to think of existence as a quality of something. You know, you can't think of a banana as being yellow, thin, calorie-dense and existing. Existence isn't the same as the quality of yellow. Without existence, the banana wouldn't have the ability to be yellow, thin, or calorie-dense. If we invented a new fruit and made existence a quality of it like being yellow or thin, what would happen? Let's say we believe in a fruit called a Washington. Washingtons are small little green fruits that are round and they grow on trees and they have an outer shell that you have to peel off to get to the fruit, oh yeah and they exist. Based on our definition, if you thought that Washingtons don't exist you're contradicting yourself because they, by definition, exist. One of the other really popular refutations to it was done by a guy named Gaunilo who lived at the same time as Anselm and was devoutly religious himself. He points out that you can use the same argument to prove that lots of other things exist. His example was a Piland. He says he believes in an island existing, somewhere out there, that is greater than any island you can imagine. An island that than which nothing greater can be conceived. Everything about the island is perfection. We can imagine this glowing perfect island, but if we defined it as an island than which nothing greater can be conceived, then Anselm proves that island DOES exist somewhere out there. But then again, there is a refutation to THAT argument that says that there can't be a perfect amount of trees on the island or a perfect temperature. There is no "perfection" when it comes to those traits, but there can be a perfect "goodness" and "justice", and these are the qualities Anselm was proving the existence of with his argument. Honestly, the best way for you to figure out what you think about it is to be

alone or with friends and think about it. This is the kind of thing I do all the time, and people sometimes think I'm weird. When I'm in a setting where people are sitting around each other and no one is saying anything, like in the car or at a dinner or something, I look around for the person of the group that obviously thinks they're very wise and I ask them what they think about some concept in philosophy or politics that is highly debated. See, I know both sides of the argument, and the last thing this type of person is going to do is say "I don't know". So it's fun to listen to their answer and either find the fallacies or offer the counter argument in a respectful way and hear what they say. I've learned so much about how people arrive at what they think the truth is just by doing this and I highly recommend it. And come to think of it, now that I'm saying it, it sounds a lot like what Socrates did. Hopefully it won't get me killed one day. Real quick, there's also a reading of Anselm that says that because a quality of a perfect God would be that he exists in all possible realms, if there is even a possibility of him existing, he must exist, but all the same fallacies are present in that argument, they're just in different places. Just thought I'd mention it so that people didn't think I'd never heard that reading of it. Now if this argument doesn't convince you that God exists, at the very least let it illustrate that the concept of God is not a narrow one-dimensional conversation. Almost 4000 years ago if you were born in Babylon, if someone stole something from you, "justice" to you was cutting their hands off. You're born in today's world, someone steals something from you and you have a very different idea of what sort of retribution balances the scales. Just how you can't be born into modern times, allow modern social conventions to tell you what justice is and then pretend to understand everything about the term justice, you can't do the same thing with God either. It's not just because it's not fair to great thinkers of the past, it's not fair to yourself. You severely limit your understanding of anything if you experience something once and then pretend there's nothing else to know about it. We talked about the period of time before Avicenna where people read Aristotle once and declared it was practically worthless and then people like Al Farabi were able to look at it from a different angle, update the examples and find a way to make it compatible with Islamic theology. Well there's still two major

monotheistic religions left that could have found a way to make Aristotle compatible with them. Judaism and Christianity. Well Christianity is done unquestionably best by next week's episode: St. Thomas Aquinas. It's a huge episode. But first I want to talk about what many consider to be the greatest Jewish thinker in history Moses Maimonides. The discussion about Moses Maimonides and his philosophy is centered around something we were touching on at the beginning of the show. Should we look at the Bible, or in his case the Torah, the rest of the Old Testament and some other works, should we take those things literally? Should we look at the stories in the Torah and the way that Moses described this monotheistic all-powerful creator and take them to be a perfect account of what God is? Well, Maimonides thought to do that was ludicrous. The first thing we have to understand is that Maimonides was smart. Really smart. He was a highly skilled doctor AND lawyer. If you're a girl, he is the best guy you could ever take home to meet your parents. And he applied his massive brain to philosophy. Have you ever thought about the fact that when the Old Testament talks about God they talk about him as though he has human characteristics? You know, God said let there be light. He's speaking like he has vocal chords and a larynx? They always refer to God as a He as though he has higher levels of testosterone than other Gods. They call him the Father as though he impregnated something. They even use terms like create that have a very human flair to them, so to the untrained reader, this God sure does seem like something humans made up and they didn't think about it very hard. Well Moses Maimonides thought this was a terrible mistake. Firstly, even in his times the Torah was written by Moses a LONG time ago. I mean, Maimonides lived during the 1100's and the Old Testament was written, most people believe around 1400 BC. So, if we use those dates, Maimonides is commenting on a book that was: Maimonides was to the Old Testament as We are to the New Testament. Maimonides said that Moses, when he wrote the first five books of the Old Testament, had a giant task in front of him. See, we have to understand that the people of his time weren't familiar with the monotheistic personal God outlook. He had enough of a mountain to climb just relaying to people that this single God existed, let alone everything else about it. He had to write it in terms that were

understandable to humans in HIS day. It's funny because this is really similar to what we were talking about at the beginning of the show. I mean, what was Moses going to do? Go from zero to calling God an "it" in three seconds? Similar to the way a church wouldn't tell somebody just getting into things about Plato's Timaeus, was Moses supposed to tell the people of his time about this perfect, infinite entity that was beyond any linguistic explanation? No! Maimonides says he couldn't have done that, so that is why he wrote the Bible using personification. God is not a He. He doesn't have a hand. He doesn't speak. These are all metaphors for what he actually did that humans can understand easier. In fact he goes further than that. I mean, when people that believe in God picture god, they must think of something. Do they think of a homo-sapien? What does he look like? Maimonides doesn't just say God doesn't have human qualities. He said that he doesn't have qualities at all. To have qualities is to have a certain amount of plurality. And that begs an obvious question, one that goes all the way back to Zeno and his famous paradox of Achilles running halfway to the finish line and then half way to the finish line and never actually reaching the finish line because he has to go half way before he can go the whole way. If multiple parts exist in ANY sense, the question, "What brought those two parts together." becomes valid. God cannot actually possess attributes because of this to Maimonides. He says: "There is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplicity of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two notions" There are obvious similarities between this conception of god and Plotinus's transcendent "one". Remember the first rule of the "one" is that you can't say anything about the "one". This is the same thing Laozi and Zhuangzi said about the Dao. It is beyond the unfair categorization of words. See, whenever we say anything, even words like Justice and God, to bring it full circle, we're categorizing them. That is the object of language, to convey a specific idea. Language wouldn't work very well if words were like what they are in Hawaii, where one word means twelve different things. But language runs into problems when trying to define or categorize something like God. God is

infinite to Maimonides. Maimonides repeatedly says God is indefinable or other similar things. The way around this, what he thinks is that it's impossible for us to say what God IS, we can only say what God is not. One time I was randomly walking down the road and a mother duck and about seven baby ducklings were walking in a line across the road and a couple people were really impatient, they honked their horns and swerved around them, so I went into the road and tried to hurry the ducks up across the road and I held my hand up to the next car that was waiting like I'm directing traffic or something and when the ducks crossed the person rolled down their window to me and said "You're so benevolent!" and I was like "Thank You!" at least I think that's what he said to me. So, I'm benevolent for helping the ducks, but is calling God benevolent at that point fair at all? To put God's benevolence on the same level as mine for helping the ducks is ridiculous to Maimonides. What he draws from this is that anything the Old Testament says about God is a metaphor. To think it's the truth is naive; you can't actually categorize God with words. In fact, outside of understanding what it says in the Torah as a metaphorical representation of God, there are only two other ways you can accurately say anything about God. One, is by what is known as negative theology or a concealed negation. You can't talk about what God is, the only thing you can talk about is what God isn't. If we were saying that God is benevolent, that would be wrong because we use that same word to describe me with the ducks, instead we would say God is not merciless. We can only say what we know he is not. The only other way you can talk about God according to Maimonides is by talking about what God does and then making inferences yourself afterward. You can say that God blessed me with a certain quality, but you can't say things like God is loyal to his children or loving or anything else you would infer from God blessing you with a certain quality, you would just say "I am blessed." I'd like to end with a quote by Maimonides that has stuck with me for years he said: "When I have a difficult subject before me — when I find the road narrow, and can see no other way of teaching a well established truth except by pleasing one intelligent man and displeasing ten thousand fools — I prefer to address myself to the one man, and to take no notice whatever of the condemnation of the multitude; I prefer to extricate that intelligent man

from his embarrassment and show him the cause of his perplexity, so that he may attain perfection and be at peace."

Saint Thomas Aquinas

Episode #021

This is a transcript of Episode 21 on Saint Thomas Aquinas. There's a song by the musical group The Postal Service called "Sleeping In". Not a problem if you've never heard the song before; the important part is the lyrics to the song because they illustrate a concept that is very important, for many things, when looking back at any point in history; when you're trying to understand what a particular philosopher was thinking, and really when you're trying to understand yourself better. The person speaking in the song is telling the listener about a really weird dream they've been having lately: "Again last night I had that strange dream Where everything was exactly how it seemed Where concerns about the world getting warmer The people thought they were just being rewarded For treating others as they'd like to be treated For obeying stop signs and curing diseases For mailing letters with the address of the sender Now we can swim any day in November" Now, the picture he is painting in this song is an alternate reality. He's having a dream about a world where everything around us is exactly how it initially seems to be to us as humans. Being a modern human that has studied philosophy up until this point in history, we know that there are certain things that although we perceive them with the tools we have as a human being, we perceive them inaccurately because our tools are not perfect. For example, you're walking long enough in the Sahara desert and eventually you start hallucinating things like an oasis in the distance with a fountain of Gatorade. Your senses are failing you at that time. This has been the common criticism of empiricism up until this point, that our senses are flawed. They deceive us, so how can we realistically rely on them to find the truth about anything. Well, the picture being painted in the song is alluding to another type of human failure when trying to find the truth. This alternate reality in this dream of his, is full of people that measure and see that the global temperature is heating up and instead of looking for a scientific explanation of what is causing it, they assume that it's an intervention by a God. They assume that God looked

at the planet and was like, "OK, well you guys are doing pretty good! You're following all the rules, you're obeying stop signs and curing diseases. You know what? You guys deserve a reward for all of this hard work. We all know that everyone likes summer way more than winter. Why do we even need to have a winter? I, hereby, extend your summer by a few weeks, keep it up and we'll see if you guys can earn a year long summer!" Well to the humans in this alternate reality, this was perfectly reasonable. I mean, let's say that you believe that this planet is a terrarium crafted for us by a super natural God, the life on this planet especially humans are his creatures that he's very interested in and heavily regulates them and every now and then intervenes and causes certain things to happen that shift the direction that the world is going in. Now, if you believe that, what reason do you have to anticipate any kind of cataclysmic event on the horizon? Yeah, you have to worry every now and then about God shaking the etch-a-sketch and flooding the earth and starting fresh, but if you saw the universe as put here for you and governed by an all powerful, infinitely intelligent thing, why would you even have an inkling that it was your responsibility to affect things like the temperature of the terrarium you live in? The people in this song are a classic example of mistaking correlation with causation. We've talked about it before. This is another type of failure human beings run into when trying to find the truth; this has been a common criticism of rationalism up until this point, the use of human reason to arrive at truth. You got to be very careful when using reason to arrive at truth, because you're still a human. You're looking at everything with a lot of biases that are at such a fundamental level that you may not even realize you're doing it. This problem isn't something reserved only for people in an alternate reality laid out in a song, these biases are gathered based on what culture you're born into, what time period you're born into; what your level of education is. This is incredibly important when moving forward and talking about St. Thomas Aquinas. This is incredibly important when trying to understand yourself, in modern times. Consider the fact that if you were born in Athens during the time of the ancient Greeks, when you looked around you, there were certain things that just seemed, obvious. I mean, if I lived back then I would look around me and see that everything looked designed. To think that it wasn't would make

me wonder how anybody could be so stupid. I mean, Look at it! You think it's just a freak accident that I breathe oxygen and miraculously there is oxygen all around me? What a coincidence that I eat all the stuff that grows and lives around me. How could you possibly think anything else is the case? Well, eventually Darwin comes along, evolutionary biology, natural selection, and although it is a very charged issue in modern times there's one thing about it that you can't deny and that is that it, at the very least, gives an alternative theory of how things could be seemingly providentially ordered, seemingly designed, but it actually is the byproduct of the survival of the creatures with genetic traits that ARE compatible with the environment we live in. The freak accidents that DIDN'T look designed died off. We have the luxury in modern times to see alternative explanations where, if we couldn't see into space, although it looks like we live in a terrarium put here for us, here's an explanation for how that might only appear to be the case. Here's an explanation for why it might only appear that God has extended our summer so that we can swim any day in November. Just imagine how wonderful it must have felt living in ancient Greek times where even people as brilliant as Plato and Aristotle saw this place that they existed in as something very peaceful. You know, they called it a harmonious, ordered cosmos. Now we know, it's anything but harmonious and ordered, a supernova can go off right next to us and we're done. An asteroid can hit us at any time. And it's almost funny to think that an average citizen of Greece at the time would probably look at the night sky and see a shooting star, and see it as a beautiful light show being put on for them by the Gods and not a near miss of an asteroid that could exterminate them at any second. Well, another thing you think about if you're Plato or Aristotle, specifically Aristotle because he's one of the stars of today's show is how this harmonious, ordered cosmos came into existence in the first place. Beyond that they would wonder, why is there something rather than nothing? They would continue to question the most basic aspects of this harmonious, ordered cosmos and try to reason their way to an explanation. One of those basic aspects of the cosmos is why is everything moving? Why are these celestial bodies; the moon the stars the other planets, why are these moving while Earth just stands still at the center? Why should things be moving as

opposed to not moving? They certainly don't NEED to be moving. Well as we've talked about before, Aristotle was an empiricist. He looked to his experiences, his sense perception, processes present in the sense-able world to find the truth. When he was thinking about why everything is moving as opposed to not moving, he realized something: "Anything that is in nature must be moved by something else likewise this something else insofar as it too is in motion must also be moved by something else similarly that too must be moved by another thing but this chain of events cannot recede forever. for if it did there could be no first mover and thus no other mover. For second movers cannot move unless they are moved by a first mover. In the same way that a stick does not move anything unless it is moved by a hand. In this way we must reach a prime mover which is itself not moved by anything, and all understand that this is god. "Now that quote isn't by Aristotle, it's by St. Thomas Aquinas. He lived in the 1200's and is what is known as a Christian Aristotelian. He loved Aristotle so much, that when he was kidnapped by his own family and locked in a tower for over a year, he did practically nothing with his time but read and think about Aristotle. He loved Aristotle so much, that despite the long history of the church seeing many parts of Aristotle's philosophy as heresy, St. Thomas Aquinas insisted that if you just interpret Aristotle correctly, it is perfectly compatible with Christianity. The quote from Aquinas that I just read is addressing what is known as Aristotle's "Prime Mover" Argument or The "Unmoved Mover" Argument. Basically what he's saying is: Look around you. Nothing moves on its own, without the help of something else. Sure, all things have the POTENTIAL to move, but for them to ACTUALLY move requires some sort of cause. Something to change them from potentially moving, to actually moving. The example laid out by Thomas Aquinas in the quote is a stick. A stick doesn't move unless someone picks it up and moves it. Just how we see that process of nature in the world around us using our human experience, just how we can know that there is no reason necessarily why a stick NEEDS to be moving as opposed to not moving, we can ask like the Epicureans did, like Democritus did, like Empedocles did, how can we explain the reason why ANYTHING in this cosmos is moving? What Aristotle says is that that process of asking what "moved" that stick and

then what moved that thing that moved that stick and so on and so forth...that process can't go on forever. There must be some thing responsible for all motion initially. This thing that is responsible for motion must be the type of thing that is unmoved in itself, or else we could just ask what moved it. He calls this thing, The unmoved mover or the prime mover. It's important to note that movement for Aristotle wasn't just something changing location, like taking a stick and throwing it across the yard. It included that, but it also included many different changes that things had the potentiality to undergo. The example commonly given is that wood has the potentiality to be fire, but for it to actually become fire it needs to be "moved" by something. That is movement too. St. Thomas Aquinas thought that if you take all of this into account, there is no reason why things are moving as opposed to not moving. There needed to be a beginning. There needed to be a thing that initially moved everything, that wasn't moved itself. That thing to Thomas Aquinas, was God. Now this is another example of how you might look at something during an age before some alternative explanation is laid out, and think it is obvious that certain things follow that don't necessarily follow. For example, Aristotle talks about a thing, which is responsible for all motion that is in itself unmoved. When it comes to what causes movement as far as just the change from one location to another, this concept is compatible with the modern idea of gravity. In fact, the current scientific narrative is that there WAS a time during the formation of the universe, a time very similar to what these early Greek philosophers envisioned, where particles WERE suspended in space. You know, there was a phase where the gas that made up the very early universe was spread evenly across space and due to imperfections and the law of gravity, gravity wasn't equally pulling in every direction. The directions it was pulling harder in began to coalesce these particles together and then over billions of years those became stars and then the stars exploded into elements that coalesced into planets, etc. Again, somebody in 500 years will listen to me giving that explanation for how the celestial bodies initially began moving and think me as primitive as we see the ancient Greeks, but the true significance is that it offers another explanation for how we can account for the proximity of everything without there necessarily being a magic wand

waved to make it happen. What reason would you have as an Ancient Greek to wonder why you stay tethered to the earth? See, Aristotle recognized that this mover, you know, that brought things into motion in the first place was a strange kind of beast. It couldn't be as simple as Arnold Schwarzenegger pushing all the planets really hard in a circle. These planets and stars never seem to slow down. Whatever this force is that is moving them must be constant, like gravity, but it is much, much more than just gravity. Remember, movement is many different types of change, not just location. This eternal uncaused thing that is pure actuality, the Unmoved Mover, to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas they call God based on their respective definitions. The significance of this is that it is one of Thomas Aquinas's five logical proofs for the existence of God. Because we can prove that there was an initial mover that itself must be uncaused, and because we refer to this mover as God, God thereby exists. That really seems to be a fundamental difference between modern laws of physics like gravity that explain these processes and the concept of God. God is eternal meaning that it has always existed and will always exist EXTERNAL to time itself. There is no beginning or end to God. The laws of physics do conceivably have a beginning. They exist indefinitely into the future as far as we know, but they still are much different than God. They exist within time. God could have created them as the mechanism he uses to govern the universe, but to talk anymore about modern science is getting off topic. The genius of St. Thomas Aquinas is that he managed to fuse together the concepts of Christian faith and reason. Reason, to Thomas Aquinas was embodied in the works of Aristotle. Christian faith was obviously embodied by the church. There was a lot of tension between people in the west between people that used these two different criteria of truth. More importantly, how can someone who accepts things based on faith alone ever hope to win an argument against someone who uses evidence or logical syllogisms to prove what they believe. Many times, reason triumphing over faith was met with hostility. Kind of like a certain type of person that we've all seen before. You see it often times with a very strong tough guy. You can have an argument with that guy; you could really be arguing about anything but let's just say you're winning the argument. Let's say he thinks two plus two equals five. You can be

perfectly respectful and show him the number line and count up to four and prove him wrong over and over again, and this type of person will react with hostility. They'll threaten to beat you up. They'll puff up their chest and get all intimidating. Now what this is, is them switching the fight. They realize that intellectually they're never going to win this fight, so lets switch the fight into the one they know they can win. A physical fight. Then they never have to give any kind of submission, whether they were wrong or not. For a long time, the differences between Aristotle and the church were seen as irreconcilable and the church always had the physical fight to fall back on when things were going poorly in the argument department with Aristotle. We talked a little last time about the various ways Plato is compatible with monotheism, but there are reasons why Plato's philosophy is particularly similar to Christianity. Plato's allegory of the cave talks about these lost subjects shackled in the cave where all they see is the shadows of reality on the cave wall and then through a process of reason and enlightenment, eventually finding themselves outside of the cave face to face with the sun, the mechanism that "shines light" on everything for us to see it how it actually is. That journey is comparable to the journey of an average Christian during this time period and people like Plotinus and Saint Augustine paved the way for this compatibility. Now if Aristotle was your definition of "reason", there were a LOT of things that seemed incompatible between reason and the Christian faith. But as I said before, Aquinas didn't think that reason and the Christian faith were incompatible at all if you read them correctly. There were some things he accepted on faith, but in the most difficult areas he showed that faith and reason are not incompatible, the most influential of which is within Aristotle's idea of the universe existing eternally. This was by far the biggest point of contention between Aristotle and Christianity. The bible is clear: God created the universe. There was a creation date. You can argue until you're blue in the face about when that date was, but they believed that there was a time when it was created. The problem is: Aristotle was also quite clear the cosmos has always existed. These two ideas for the longest time were seen as irreconcilable. To fully understand why we have to look at what Aristotle used as his basis for claiming that it has existed forever and it lies in his idea of what infinity is. I

picked out a couple quotes from Aristotle's physics that give a nice synopsis of the contradictions that he thought were inherent in the idea of anything infinite: "The problem of the infinite is difficult: many contradictions result whether we suppose it to exist or not to exist. If it exists, we have still to ask how it exists; as a substance or as the essential attribute of some entity? Or in neither way, yet none the less is there something which is infinite or some things which are infinitely many?" "The view that there is an infinite body is plainly incompatible with the doctrine that there is necessarily a proper place for each kind of body, if every sensible body has either weight or lightness, and if a body has a natural locomotion towards the centre if it is heavy, and upwards if it is light. This would need to be true of the infinite also. But neither character can belong to it: it cannot be either as a whole, nor can it be half the one and half the other. For how should you divide it? Or how can the infinite have the one part up and the other down, or an extremity and a centre?" "To suppose that the infinite does not exist in any way leads obviously to many impossible consequences: there will be a beginning and an end of time, a magnitude will not be divisible into magnitudes, number will not be infinite. ...clearly there is a sense in which the infinite exists and another in which it does not." What Aristotle is saying is, does infinity exist? Could it even potentially exist? When you think about infinity as either absolutely existing or not existing you run into problems. When you think of an infinity of anything physical existing you run into a lot of problems that he lays out but how about just the idea that there wouldn't be enough space for them. I mean, if there were an infinite number of dogs then they would take up every ounce of space imaginable, how could anything BUT dogs exist because if they did then that would create a limit for the dogs and they wouldn't be infinite anymore. On the other hand, if we try to prove that infinity cannot exist, that's obviously wrong. We already know of certain infinities. Numbers are infinite, because for every number no matter how high you go or how far into negative numbers you go, there is ALWAYS a next number on the number line. Well Aristotle says that time must work in a similar way, because for every year or month there has to be a preceding year or month. For the record, as a human that thinks of everything in relation to time, you know things have a

beginning and an end, this is one of the most mind numbing questions to think about. It's so difficult to even wrap your head around eternity. Just thinking about going back to the very beginning of the universe and asking what came before that, and realizing that you could do that forever. There would never be a time when you couldn't ask what came before that. That concept hurts my brain. Well this speaks to the genius of Thomas Aquinas. He was fully committed to Aristotle. It's centered around the goal of the time to find a link between faith and reason. Both claim to have the truth, but the truth said in two different ways shouldn't contradict itself. There is one truth. So the big challenge for Thomas Aquinas was not just finding a way to interpret Aristotle in a different way or tack on his own additions claiming that "this is what Aristotle WOULD have said if we could ask him". His goal was to show that Aristotle WAS right. People were just not understanding his brilliance, and that brilliance is perfectly compatible with scripture. Not that it needed a philosophical argument, but the idea of the obvious contradiction between God creating the universe and the universe existing eternally was organized by a tremendously unimpressive guy named John Philoponus in the sixth century. His arguments against Aristotle were bad, but it should be said that Aquinas was responding mostly to his criticisms which were widely touted by the church of his day. What Thomas Aquinas says is that there is a huge flaw in the way of thinking that leads you to believe that the universe existing eternally and God creating it are necessarily contradictions. A great 19th and 20th century neo-Thomist--devout follower of Thomas Aquinas-- sums it up very neatly in his book *Providencia*: "St. Thomas holds that reason alone can never demonstrate that the world had a beginning. And why does this truth transcend the natural powers of our intellect? Because that beginning depended on the free will of God. Had He so willed, He might have created the world ten thousand years, a hundred thousand years, millions of years before, or at a time even more remote, without there having been a first day for the world, but simply a dependence of the world on its Creator, just as a footprint in the sand is due to the foot that makes it, so that, had the foot always been there the footprint would have had no beginning. Although revelation teaches that the world did in fact have a beginning, it does not seem impossible, says St.

Thomas, for the world always to have existed in its dependence on God the Creator." Thomas Aquinas says that God is the efficient cause of the universe. If we think of the universe as a "creation" of God comparable to the way a foot would "create" a footprint in some sand, then if that foot was an eternal foot, it had always existed, then there wouldn't be a time before that footprint existed. God could've created the universe in a way where there was not a beginning. That doesn't necessarily mean that humans and animals have existed from the very beginning. Again reading scripture literally causes people to get confused about what is possible. There is so much more to talk about with Thomas Aquinas, but like Aristotle and Plato, sometimes learning about it is easier when it is in relation to the person commenting on it years later. The thinkers we're about to start covering are the type of people where we're going to want to hear what they have to say in response. Now it's time for the question of the week. Thomas Aquinas was an Aristotelian. Aristotle talked about how everything that exists has four causes that we can use to understand their existence. We've talked about these before. Material cause, what the thing is made out of. The formal cause, the shape or appearance of something. The efficient cause, to over-simplify it, the thing which brought that thing into existence, and the final cause the purpose or function of that thing. Philosophize This! What is your final cause? What is the final cause of a human being? Is there some general final cause that might encompass all the seemingly different final causes that people apply to their lives? Or is it much, much deeper than that? Thanks for listening, I will talk to you soon.

Blast off to the Renaissance!

Episode #022

This is a transcript of Episode 22 on The Renaissance. The term renaissance means “re-birth”, but in order for anything to be “re-born”, there first needed to be a death. We can see instances in our everyday lives where there are figurative renaissances where nothing really bad happens when that death occurs. You can go on a new diet and lose 100 pounds and feel like you're personally experiencing a renaissance; the only death there is the death of your old, unhealthy lifestyle. You could even end a long period of corruption in your local government where you fire a few people at city hall and the city experiences a renaissance; the potholes are getting filled and the lines at the DMV are only three hours long. But what died in order to usher in “THE” renaissance? Well the answer is: between 30 and 50% of the ENTIRE population of Europe. What died was an entire way of life. We say “renaissance” in modern times and there is a pretty positive connotation associated with it; we could easily think about it in a black and white way. It would be really easy to just look at the Renaissance as the catalyst between modern times and the Middle Ages and declare that the Renaissance was the good time period to live in and the Middle Ages was the bad time period to live in. It would be really easy to look at the west during the Middle Ages, see that it's called “The Dark Ages”, that sounds terrible. Who wants to live in the Dark Ages? That sounds much worse in every possible way than the Renaissance. Well this is a common misconception that I want to make sure we don't fall into because it's not that simple and it comes down a great question, one that has been heavily discussed by the greatest philosophers of all time and one that every one of us needs to ask ourselves: How do you define human progress? Most of us listening to this podcast live in pretty extraordinary times. Less than ever before in human history people don't die of preventable diseases, there is less war, more representation for the average citizen, a lower infant mortality rate, people are get more value from the money that they make; the list goes on. Barring 5 countries or so, the

average citizen of every country is better off today than they were a hundred years ago and were better off a century ago than they were a century before that. Despite all this, at least in America, higher numbers of people than ever are on anti-depressants, anxiety medication, mood stabilizers; what metric do we use to measure human progress? Is progress defined by how scientifically advanced we are? Is it defined by how many people have jobs? Maybe you think progress is defined by some sort of happiness index, where progress means an increase in the percentage of happy people. There are people who say that although modern America is obviously much further advanced in areas like science and medicine that society as a whole has actually regressed from times when we lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes. They point to studies where people go to places like Siberia or Papua New Guinea where people still live as our ancestors supposedly did and they find that they have a much lower rate of mental illness and the average member is happier and more fulfilled than the average American. The point of this is that the progress of humanity can be measured in MANY different ways. The Dark Ages were not PURE DARKNESS in every area of human life. To think of it that way is a huge oversimplification. The term, "The Dark Ages", is referring to a period in Western Europe of intellectual stagnation and regression. The Dark Ages is how Western Europe spent their Middle Ages. But just because there was intellectual regression doesn't mean that there was regression when it came to every facet of the average person's life at the time. Most historians don't like the terms "Dark Ages" or "Renaissance" because to talk about the history of humanity in terms of only intellectual progress is not accurate...because intellectual progress or regress is carried out by only a handful of people. 95% of people living at the time had nothing to do with what thought was going to be prevalent in coming years. To think of progress only in terms of the thought of the time period is a mistake. So if you think of "progress" as the progression of human thought then the Dark Ages was a terrible time to live, but if you take other factors into consideration it starts looking like the not-so-dark Ages. There's actually an entire segment of the Middle Ages known as the "high" Middle Ages. There were several steps forward in agriculture, they built those beautiful Gothic cathedrals, but more than ever

there was a feeling of unification in Western Europe because they were all connected by one thing: the church, Christianity. So when we talk about the death of an entire way of life, when we talk about the series of events that took us from the “Dark Ages” to the “Renaissance”, please understand that these events didn't mark the darkest period of a period of darkness, they marked the end of a period of prosperity in many ways. The people were happy. And much like the Warring States period in early China and the beginning of the Hellenistic Age in the Mediterranean, this change from a period of prosperity to a period of widespread political unrest led to what we now know as the Renaissance. Once again, it's only through lifting MORE weight or increasing the intensity of your workout that you get stronger as an individual. And it's only through adversity and political unrest that humanity really shines and is forced to do some soul searching and make large steps forward intellectually. To live during the high middle ages was to live during a time when Europe was so prosperous that it was actually overpopulated. They were using almost every extra acre of land just to be able to feed everybody. But then something happened that changed the course of humanity. This may be the most important event in the history of human thought and it really had nothing to do with thought at all, no one knows exactly how it started, or exactly where it came from. This event and the series of events that follows it would forever change the world and it is known as The Black Death. The current narrative is that it originated in the plains of Asia, traveled along the Silk Road and eventually found its way to Crimea where it embedded itself in fleas that traveled on the backs of rats on merchant ships to the ports in Western Europe. This pandemic disease is like Finding Nemo. People often mistakenly think of The Black Death as just “The Bubonic Plague”, but it was actually more than that. Bubonic was just one form that the plague presented itself in, you also had to worry about the Pneumonic plague, like pneumonia, it would destroy your lungs from the inside out. And the septicemic plague which lead to something called Disseminated intravascular coagulation, which...let's just say you didn't want that to happen to you. When all was said and done, historians estimate that around 400 million people were killed by The Black Death and like I said before between 30 and 60% of the

population of Europe. This is the account of one person describing it: "The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumors. In a short space of time these tumors spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumor had been and still remained." Just imagine how it must have felt to look around you and see 30 to 50% of everyone hopelessly dying of THAT with no end in sight. They weren't just killed, they died hopelessly. Once you saw the tell-tale signs, the black marks start appearing or swelling around the body, you had a week to live. They had no idea what caused it or how to treat it, it must have felt like the world was coming to an end. Just imagine how it must have felt being a Christian during this time. People today have a hard enough time reconciling a school shooting with the existence of a God, imagine how people must have felt watching this disease spreading to everyone all around them. The lives of people in Western Europe changed dramatically and you hear the accounts of people living at the time and these people were living in a nightmare. Here's one of them: "All the citizens did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried. At every church they dug deep pits down to the water-table; and thus those who were poor who died during the night were bundled up quickly and thrown into the pit. In the morning when a large number of bodies were found in the pit, they took some earth and shoveled it down on top of them; and later others were placed on top of them and then another layer of earth, just as one makes lasagne with layers of pasta and cheese. "They had to bury people in such close proximity to each other that they compared it to the process of making lasagne. This was actually a huge problem. One very important part of dying as a religious person during this time period was being buried in consecrated ground. So many people were dying that they actually ran out of acceptable places to bury people, so they started stacking them on top of each other. We build

skyscrapers to stack more office space into the important downtown area of a city, these people had to build skyscrapers of dead bodies. Now as you can probably imagine, this world that they were living in was terrifying, and people started to change. One such change is described here: "...Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety. There was sort of an "every man for himself" way of thinking that emerged from all of this. People saw the horrific way that these people were dying and started staying away from everyone that was sick so that they could survive themselves. People just stopped showing up to work. I mean, why would you go to work if you might get coughed on by somebody and have a week to live? When you think that at any point you could drop dead of this terrible disease, why think long term? The problem is as a society we need people to go to work. The paycheck and stability is their incentive to go to work, but the rest of society relies on everyone else to do something productive that also helps them. That's the beauty of society right? You hear someone every once in a while talk about: "I don't need anybody, I'm just fine all by myself." Well unless if that person is living in a shack on the top of a mountain squirrel hunting all day, they are fooling themselves. This is one of the things that makes society work, we rely on others to do their part so that we can benefit from it and make doing our part easier and we're all better off for it. For example, just eating breakfast, you might have some fruit that was grown and harvested locally, a spoon that was made in Taiwan, a cup that was made in China, oatmeal that was grown and packaged in Kansas, and orange juice from Florida. Society is a group effort and if the people in Florida stopped making orange juice, we would have some issues. Well, especially back in these times, the thing that society MOST relies on and one of the biggest money making industries back then was Agriculture. Now between 30 to 50% of the entire population dying and a large group of people that had this new found sense of apathy about their role in society and going to work, the people in charge of these large Agricultural productions, the people that pay peasants to work the fields and make them money, they were having a really hard time

“fielding” enough people to get the work done. So then the faithful law of supply and demand started to take over. Peasants became increasingly more valuable as more and more of them died. The supply of peasants couldn't keep up with the demand of work that needed to get done to feed society. When a company today can't get enough people to willingly do a job for a certain salary, they are forced to raise the salary, and that is exactly what happened in Western Europe during the fall of the Middle Ages. Though it was completely illegal, the desperate times allowed for peasants to shop around with other land owners to try to make a better wage. These subjugated people were finally seeing what it was like to be a free citizen with a skill set that people valued. What started as merely a pandemic disease that led to a population crisis, quickly turned into an economic crisis as well, because the owners of these fields couldn't afford to pay for the rising cost of their workforce. This threatened a complete collapse of the Agriculture of the region, so what the governments did to try to combat this was impose a wage freeze. Have you ever worked somewhere where someone gets fired, and regardless of whether they're there or not the same amount of work needs to get done? So you just have to pick up the slack and work harder with no increase in pay? Well these peasants were dealing with that times a thousand and imagine if the government made it the LAW that you couldn't get paid any more than you do now. This wage freeze in coalition with several other small regulations and the massive tax increase on citizens to fight the 100 years war with France led to peasants banding together and attempting to overthrow their governments. So what started as a population crisis, quickly turned into an economic crisis that then turned into a political crisis. Why are all of these events significant to philosophy? Because this was a paradigm shift on the largest scale. People began to question the very foundation of the society they had lived in for over a thousand years. These multiple crises are very similar to a couple of examples we have already seen. During the warring states period in China, people like Confucius and Laozi looked to the past to times when things were better to help find the direction of the future of society. People of the time looked to the past and developed the hundred schools of thought. During the Hellenistic Age, the death of Alexander and the political chaos of the

Mediterranean, philosophers looked to the past to times when things were better to build a future that hopefully wasn't like what they were living through. Well just like in those two examples, the people of the late Middle Ages looked at their society that was seemingly coming to an end and looked to the past for times when things were better. They wanted a new beginning. A bacterial plague had just spread across Europe and killed hundreds of millions of people, and now an intellectual plague was spreading across Europe in response. The mentality of many thinkers of the time is summed up by this guy: "I have turned my entire attention to Greek. The first thing I shall do, as soon as the money arrives, is to buy some Greek authors; after that, I shall buy clothes." This is a quote by a philosopher who beautifully encapsulates a way of thinking that was spreading at the time. His name was Erasmus. He wrote his most influential work right during the years leading up to the protestant reformation. He was a Humanist. Now, humanism is an incredibly vague term. It's not like Stoicism or Epicureanism, it is a broad category that many different outlooks are a part of, but the similarity between all of them is that they look at things through the lens of what it is to be a human, as typically opposed to what it means to be a byproduct of a supernatural being. Humanism, during this time was much less than what it would eventually become. But it emphasized moving away from the Scholastic Approach that had dominated for so long, and moving towards the teachings of earlier Greek and Romans. We're going to talk about the reformation and more historical context next time, and by the way if today's episode seems more like a history lesson than a philosophy lesson, it's because it is. Trust me though, the biggest mistake people make when teaching philosophy is just to have one name of a philosopher after another and zero context. The whole subject just becomes one giant blur of names and ideas with no real way to link the information together. We need to understand what it meant to be a human during that time to understand why there are such giant shifts in the way people see existence. The important part to understand now is that Erasmus symbolizes this new "intellectual plague" that is moving across Europe. During the times of Erasmus, religion was not synonymous with faith as is typically seen nowadays. In fact, for the last several

centuries, people like Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna, these people applied their massive brains to the task of fusing together faith and reason. They tried to create a synthesis between faith and reason which for a time were considered opposites. Faith being Christianity, Judaism and Islam and Reason being Plato and Aristotle. They had success, and so Religion and Theology at the time was seen as a weird, conglomeration of Faith and Reason. The interesting thing about Erasmus is that he doesn't fall into either of these categories that great thinkers usually fell into, he falls into a really weird middle place on the spectrum. So as the reformation began, the church and the leadership of the church were seen as increasingly corrupt and evil. But how could this happen? Well, Erasmus thought that the mixing of philosophy with religion wasn't a noble pursuit like they'd thought for the last thousand years. He thought it was the reason why things were so wrong in the first place! Erasmus looked around him and saw all the stuff going on and was like, "Cmon guys what does this stuff really have to do with God." There were many pardons that priests got for committing crimes that were completely irresponsible, several ridiculous rituals, one of which is where the spiritual leaders were somehow able to look at you and crunch the numbers and figure out how long your soul is going to be in purgatory, disputes between the Christian leadership where they argue about small issues that don't really matter to Erasmus like the nature of the relationship between each aspect of the trinity, he was opposed to scholasticism as a whole. All of these things are byproducts of this relationship between philosophy and religion, and to Erasmus these people ENTIRELY missed the point. People are focusing on all of these unrelated things, over intellectualized things, when really the whole time, the point was to just love one another. It was very simple. Instead of all these weird rituals where you access God through some anointed medium like a priest or bishop, you don't need any of that, all of that is a corrupted variant of what you should truly do which is form a more individual relationship with God. He sums it up here: "What hate required these things at your hands? In vain will they make their idle pleas, one that he has lived only on fish, another that he has never changed his sacred hood; this one that he has lost his voice by continual singing of holy anthems, and one that he has forgotten how to

speaking in his strict obedience to the vow of silence. Our Savior will interrupt their excuses and say: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, I know you not. I left you but one precept, of loving one another, and that I do not hear any one plead he has faithfully discharged.' What he's talking about there is all of the various arbitrary sacrifices that human beings have declared are what God really wants us to be doing. He gives the example of a guy who sang worship songs so much he lost his voice or someone that is so committed to his vow of silence that he actually forgot how to speak. These people have missed the point. Theology and philosophy had missed the point. True spirituality is something that is very personal between the individual and God. This is the reason why he is representative of this intellectual plague going around, this individualistic approach that was growing in popularity. When we talk about the protestant reformation next time, we will be able to talk further about this relationship between the individual and church authority, but when it comes to calling out the people that have corrupted religion, Erasmus pulls no punches: "They think to satisfy that Master they pretend to serve, our Lord and Savior, with their great state and magnificence, with the ceremonies of installments, with the titles of reverence and holiness, and with exercising their episcopal function only in blessing and cursing. (he goes on) Their only weapons ought to be those of the Spirit; and of these indeed they are mighty liberal, as of their interdicts, their suspensions, their denunciations, their aggravations, their greater and less ex-communications and their roaring bulls that fright whomever they are thundered against; and these most holy fathers never issue them more frequently than against those, who, at the instigation of the devil and not having the fear of God before their eyes, do feloniously and maliciously attempt to lessen and impair St. Peter's patrimony." Yes, Erasmus had a problem with the church leadership and what religion had become, but he had an even bigger problem with philosophers. Most importantly, these people sit around and tell everyone that the goal of life and the thing that is going to make you the happiest is to sit around and reason and to try to get to the bottom of the nature of things, try to figure out what the truth is. These people say that to live in ignorance, is to live in misery. Well Erasmus couldn't disagree more: "Now I believe I can

hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception and ignorance, but it isn't: it's human. I don't see why they call it a misery when you're all born, formed and fashioned in this pattern, and it's the common lot of mankind. There is no misery about remaining true to type."What he's saying is, how can you say that you're miserable as a human if you live in ignorance of the truth? We are BORN in ignorance of these things. When we're grown up, we don't all of a sudden know everything that is the truth. Living in ignorance is part of what it means to be a human being. And as the old saying goes, "ignorance is bliss". We, as humans, are happiest when we live in ignorance and all of this knowledge these people seek really only serves to complicate things and make their life worse. The key to happiness, to Erasmus, is something that is laid out in the Bible: "The summit of happiness is reached when a person is ready to be what he is."

The term renaissance means "re-birth", but in order for anything to be "re-born", there first needed to be a death. We can see instances in our everyday lives where there are figurative renaissances where nothing really bad happens when that death occurs. You can go on a new diet and lose 100 pounds and feel like you're personally experiencing a renaissance; the only death there is the death of your old, unhealthy lifestyle. You could even end a long period of corruption in your local government where you fire a few people at city hall and the city experiences a renaissance; the potholes are getting filled and the lines at the DMV are only three hours long. But what died in order to usher in "THE" renaissance? Well the answer is: between 30 and 50% of the ENTIRE population of Europe. What died was an entire way of life.

We say "renaissance" in modern times and there is a pretty positive connotation associated with it; we could easily think about it in a black and white way. It would be really easy to just look at the Renaissance as the catalyst between modern times and the Middle Ages and declare that the Renaissance was the good time period to live in and the Middle Ages was the bad time period to live in. It would be really easy to look at the west during the Middle Ages, see that it's called "The Dark Ages", that sounds terrible. Who wants to live in the Dark Ages? That sounds much worse in every possible way than the

Renaissance. Well this is a common misconception that I want to make sure we don't fall into because it's not that simple and it comes down a great question, one that has been heavily discussed by the greatest philosophers of all time and one that every one of us needs to ask ourselves: How do you define human progress?

Most of us listening to this podcast live in pretty extraordinary times. Less than ever before in human history people don't die of preventable diseases, there is less war, more representation for the average citizen, a lower infant mortality rate, people are get more value from the money that they make; the list goes on. Barring 5 countries or so, the average citizen of every country is better off today than they were a hundred years ago and were better off a century ago than they were a century before that. Despite all this, at least in America, higher numbers of people than ever are on anti-depressants, anxiety medication, mood stabilizers; what metric do we use to measure human progress? Is progress defined by how scientifically advanced we are? Is it defined by how many people have jobs? Maybe you think progress is defined by some sort of happiness index, where progress means an increase in the percentage of happy people. There are people who say that although modern America is obviously much further advanced in areas like science and medicine that society as a whole has actually regressed from times when we lived in small hunter-gatherer tribes. They point to studies where people go to places like Siberia or Papua New Guinea where people still live as our ancestors supposedly did and they find that they have a much lower rate of mental illness and the average member is happier and more fulfilled than the average American. The point of this is that the progress of humanity can be measured in MANY different ways.

The Dark Ages were not PURE DARKNESS in every area of human life. To think of it that way is a huge oversimplification. The term, "The Dark Ages", is referring to a period in Western Europe of intellectual stagnation and regression. The Dark Ages is how Western Europe spent their Middle Ages. But just because there was intellectual regression doesn't mean that there was regression when it came to every facet of the average person's life at the time. Most historians don't like the terms "Dark Ages" or "Renaissance" because to talk about the history of humanity in terms of only intellectual

progress is not accurate...because intellectual progress or regress is carried out by only a handful of people. 95% of people living at the time had nothing to do with what thought was going to be prevalent in coming years. To think of progress only in terms of the thought of the time period is a mistake. So if you think of “progress” as the progression of human thought then the Dark Ages was a terrible time to live, but if you take other factors into consideration it starts looking like the not-so-dark Ages. There's actually an entire segment of the Middle Ages known as the “high” Middle Ages. There were several steps forward in agriculture, they built those beautiful Gothic cathedrals, but more than ever there was a feeling of unification in Western Europe because they were all connected by one thing: the church, Christianity. So when we talk about the death of an entire way of life, when we talk about the series of events that took us from the “Dark Ages” to the “Renaissance”, please understand that these events didn't mark the darkest period of a period of darkness, they marked the end of a period of prosperity in many ways. The people were happy. And much like the Warring States period in early China and the beginning of the Hellenistic Age in the Mediterranean, this change from a period of prosperity to a period of widespread political unrest led to what we now know as the Renaissance. Once again, it's only through lifting MORE weight or increasing the intensity of your workout that you get stronger as an individual. And it's only through adversity and political unrest that humanity really shines and is forced to do some soul searching and make large steps forward intellectually.

To live during the high middle ages was to live during a time when Europe was so prosperous that it was actually overpopulated. They were using almost every extra acre of land just to be able to feed everybody. But then something happened that changed the course of humanity. This may be the most important event in the history of human thought and it really had nothing to do with thought at all, no one knows exactly how it started, or exactly where it came from. This event and the series of events that follows it would forever change the world and it is known as The Black Death. The current narrative is that it originated in the plains of Asia, traveled along the Silk Road and eventually found its way to Crimea where it embedded itself in fleas that traveled on the

backs of rats on merchant ships to the ports in Western Europe. This pandemic disease is like Finding Nemo. People often mistakenly think of The Black Death as just “The Bubonic Plague”, but it was actually more than that. Bubonic was just one form that the plague presented itself in, you also had to worry about the Pneumonic plague, like pneumonia, it would destroy your lungs from the inside out. And the septicemic plague which lead to something called Disseminated intravascular coagulation, which...let's just say you didn't want that to happen to you. When all was said and done, historians estimate that around 400 million people were killed by The Black Death and like I said before between 30 and 60% of the population of Europe. This is the account of one person describing it:

"The symptoms were not the same as in the East, where a gush of blood from the nose was the plain sign of inevitable death; but it began both in men and women with certain swellings in the groin or under the armpit. They grew to the size of a small apple or an egg, more or less, and were vulgarly called tumors. In a short space of time these tumors spread from the two parts named all over the body. Soon after this the symptoms changed and black or purple spots appeared on the arms or thighs or any other part of the body, sometimes a few large ones, sometimes many little ones. These spots were a certain sign of death, just as the original tumor had been and still remained."

Just imagine how it must have felt to look around you and see 30 to 50% of everyone hopelessly dying of THAT with no end in sight. They weren't just killed, they died hopelessly. Once you saw the tell-tale signs, the black marks start appearing or swelling around the body, you had a week to live. They had no idea what caused it or how to treat it, it must have felt like the world was coming to an end. Just imagine how it must have felt being a Christian during this time. People today have a hard enough time reconciling a school shooting with the existence of a God, imagine how people must have felt watching this disease spreading to everyone all around them. The lives of people in Western Europe changed dramatically and you hear the accounts of people living at the time and these people were living in a nightmare. Here's one of them:

“All the citizens did little else except to carry dead bodies to be buried. At every church

they dug deep pits down to the water-table; and thus those who were poor who died during the night were bundled up quickly and thrown into the pit. In the morning when a large number of bodies were found in the pit, they took some earth and shoveled it down on top of them; and later others were placed on top of them and then another layer of earth, just as one makes lasagne with layers of pasta and cheese. “

They had to bury people in such close proximity to each other that they compared it to the process of making lasagne. This was actually a huge problem. One very important part of dying as a religious person during this time period was being buried in consecrated ground. So many people were dying that they actually ran out of acceptable places to bury people, so they started stacking them on top of each other. We build skyscrapers to stack more office space into the important downtown area of a city, these people had to build skyscrapers of dead bodies. Now as you can probably imagine, this world that they were living in was terrifying, and people started to change. One such change is described here:

"...Such fear and fanciful notions took possession of the living that almost all of them adopted the same cruel policy, which was entirely to avoid the sick and everything belonging to them. By so doing, each one thought he would secure his own safety. There was sort of an “every man for himself” way of thinking that emerged from all of this. People saw the horrific way that these people were dying and started staying away from everyone that was sick so that they could survive themselves. People just stopped showing up to work. I mean, why would you go to work if you might get coughed on by somebody and have a week to live? When you think that at any point you could drop dead of this terrible disease, why think long term? The problem is as a society we need people to go to work. The paycheck and stability is their incentive to go to work, but the rest of society relies on everyone else to do something productive that also helps them. That's the beauty of society right? You hear someone every once in a while talk about: “I don't need anybody, I'm just fine all by myself.” Well unless if that person is living in a shack on the top of a mountain squirrel hunting all day, they are fooling themselves. This is one of the things that makes society work, we rely on others to do their part so that we

can benefit from it and make doing our part easier and we're all better off for it. For example, just eating breakfast, you might have some fruit that was grown and harvested locally, a spoon that was made in Taiwan, a cup that was made in China, oatmeal that was grown and packaged in Kansas, and orange juice from Florida. Society is a group effort and if the people in Florida stopped making orange juice, we would have some issues. Well, especially back in these times, the thing that society MOST relies on and one of the biggest money making industries back then was Agriculture. Now between 30 to 50% of the entire population dying and a large group of people that had this new found sense of apathy about their role in society and going to work, the people in charge of these large Agricultural productions, the people that pay peasants to work the fields and make them money, they were having a really hard time “fielding” enough people to get the work done.

So then the faithful law of supply and demand started to take over. Peasants became increasingly more valuable as more and more of them died. The supply of peasants couldn't keep up with the demand of work that needed to get done to feed society. When a company today can't get enough people to willingly do a job for a certain salary, they are forced to raise the salary, and that is exactly what happened in Western Europe during the fall of the Middle Ages. Though it was completely illegal, the desperate times allowed for peasants to shop around with other land owners to try to make a better wage. These subjugated people were finally seeing what it was like to be a free citizen with a skill set that people valued. What started as merely a pandemic disease that led to a population crisis, quickly turned into an economic crisis as well, because the owners of these fields couldn't afford to pay for the rising cost of their workforce. This threatened a complete collapse of the Agriculture of the region, so what the governments did to try to combat this was impose a wage freeze. Have you ever worked somewhere where someone gets fired, and regardless of whether they're there or not the same amount of work needs to get done? So you just have to pick up the slack and work harder with no increase in pay? Well these peasants were dealing with that times a thousand and imagine if the government made it the LAW that you couldn't get paid any more than you

do now. This wage freeze in coalition with several other small regulations and the massive tax increase on citizens to fight the 100 years war with France led to peasants banding together and attempting to overthrow their governments. So what started as a population crisis, quickly turned into an economic crisis that then turned into a political crisis.

Why are all of these events significant to philosophy? Because this was a paradigm shift on the largest scale. People began to question the very foundation of the society they had lived in for over a thousand years. These multiple crises are very similar to a couple of examples we have already seen. During the warring states period in China, people like Confucius and Laozi looked to the past to times when things were better to help find the direction of the future of society. People of the time looked to the past and developed the hundred schools of thought. During the Hellenistic Age, the death of Alexander and the political chaos of the Mediterranean, philosophers looked to the past to times when things were better to build a future that hopefully wasn't like what they were living through. Well just like in those two examples, the people of the late Middle Ages looked at their society that was seemingly coming to an end and looked to the past for times when things were better. They wanted a new beginning. A bacterial plague had just spread across Europe and killed hundreds of millions of people, and now an intellectual plague was spreading across Europe in response. The mentality of many thinkers of the time is summed up by this guy:

“I have turned my entire attention to Greek. The first thing I shall do, as soon as the money arrives, is to buy some Greek authors; after that, I shall buy clothes.”

This is a quote by a philosopher who beautifully encapsulates a way of thinking that was spreading at the time. His name was Erasmus. He wrote his most influential work right during the years leading up to the protestant reformation. He was a Humanist. Now, humanism is an incredibly vague term. It's not like Stoicism or Epicureanism, it is a broad category that many different outlooks are a part of, but the similarity between all of them is that they look at things through the lens of what it is to be a human, as typically opposed to what it means to be a byproduct of a supernatural being.

Humanism, during this time was much less than what it would eventually become. But it emphasized moving away from the Scholastic Approach that had dominated for so long, and moving towards the teachings of earlier Greek and Romans.

We're going to talk about the reformation and more historical context next time, and by the way if today's episode seems more like a history lesson than a philosophy lesson, it's because it is. Trust me though, the biggest mistake people make when teaching philosophy is just to have one name of a philosopher after another and zero context. The whole subject just becomes one giant blur of names and ideas with no real way to link the information together. We need to understand what it meant to be a human during that time to understand why there are such giant shifts in the way people see existence. The important part to understand now is that Erasmus symbolizes this new “intellectual plague” that is moving across Europe. During the times of Erasmus, religion was not synonymous with faith as is typically seen nowadays. In fact, for the last several centuries, people like Saint Augustine, Saint Thomas Aquinas, Avicenna, these people applied their massive brains to the task of fusing together faith and reason. They tried to create a synthesis between faith and reason which for a time were considered opposites. Faith being Christianity, Judaism and Islam and Reason being Plato and Aristotle. They had success, and so Religion and Theology at the time was seen as a weird, conglomeration of Faith and Reason.

The interesting thing about Erasmus is that he doesn't fall into either of these categories that great thinkers usually fell into, he falls into a really weird middle place on the spectrum. So as the reformation began, the church and the leadership of the church were seen as increasingly corrupt and evil. But how could this happen? Well, Erasmus thought that the mixing of philosophy with religion wasn't a noble pursuit like they'd thought for the last thousand years. He thought it was the reason why things were so wrong in the first place!

Erasmus looked around him and saw all the stuff going on and was like, “Cmon guys what does this stuff really have to do with God.” There were many pardons that priests got for committing crimes that were completely irresponsible, several ridiculous rituals,

one of which is where the spiritual leaders were somehow able to look at you and crunch the numbers and figure out how long your soul is going to be in purgatory, disputes between the Christian leadership where they argue about small issues that don't really matter to Erasmus like the nature of the relationship between each aspect of the trinity, he was opposed to scholasticism as a whole.

All of these things are byproducts of this relationship between philosophy and religion, and to Erasmus these people ENTIRELY missed the point. People are focusing on all of these unrelated things, over intellectualized things, when really the whole time, the point was to just love one another. It was very simple. Instead of all these weird rituals where you access God through some anointed medium like a priest or bishop, you don't need any of that, all of that is a corrupted variant of what you should truly do which is form a more individual relationship with God. He sums it up here:

"What hate required these things at your hands? In vain will they make their idle pleas, one that he has lived only on fish, another that he has never changed his sacred hood; this one that he has lost his voice by continual singing of holy anthems, and one that he has forgotten how to speak in his strict obedience to the vow of silence. Our Savior will interrupt their excuses and say: 'Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, I know you not. I left you but one precept, of loving one another, and that I do not hear any one plead he has faithfully discharged.'"

What he's talking about there is all of the various arbitrary sacrifices that human beings have declared are what God really wants us to be doing. He gives the example of a guy who sang worship songs so much he lost his voice or someone that is so committed to his vow of silence that he actually forgot how to speak. These people have missed the point. Theology and philosophy had missed the point. True spirituality is something that is very personal between the individual and God. This is the reason why he is representative of this intellectual plague going around, this individualistic approach that was growing in popularity. When we talk about the protestant reformation next time, we will be able to talk further about this relationship between the individual and church authority, but when it comes to calling out the people that have corrupted religion, Erasmus pulls no

punches:

"They think to satisfy that Master they pretend to serve, our Lord and Savior, with their great state and magnificence, with the ceremonies of installments, with the titles of reverence and holiness, and with exercising their episcopal function only in blessing and cursing. (he goes on) Their only weapons ought to be those of the Spirit; and of these indeed they are mighty liberal, as of their interdicts, their suspensions, their denunciations, their aggravations, their greater and less ex-communications and their roaring bulls that fright whomever they are thundered against; and these most holy fathers never issue them more frequently than against those, who, at the instigation of the devil and not having the fear of God before their eyes, do feloniously and maliciously attempt to lessen and impair St. Peter's patrimony."

Yes, Erasmus had a problem with the church leadership and what religion had become, but he had an even bigger problem with philosophers. Most importantly, these people sit around and tell everyone that the goal of life and the thing that is going to make you the happiest is to sit around and reason and to try to get to the bottom of the nature of things, try to figure out what the truth is. These people say that to live in ignorance, is to live in misery. Well Erasmus couldn't disagree more:

"Now I believe I can hear the philosophers protesting that it can only be misery to live in folly, illusion, deception and ignorance, but it isn't: it's human. I don't see why they call it a misery when you're all born, formed and fashioned in this pattern, and it's the common lot of mankind. There is no misery about remaining true to type."

What he's saying is, how can you say that you're miserable as a human if you live in ignorance of the truth? We are BORN in ignorance of these things. When we're grown up, we don't all of a sudden know everything that is the truth. Living in ignorance is part of what it means to be a human being. And as the old saying goes, "ignorance is bliss". We, as humans, are happiest when we live in ignorance and all of this knowledge these people seek really only serves to complicate things and make their life worse.

The key to happiness, to Erasmus, is something that is laid out in the Bible:

"The summit of happiness is reached when a person is ready to be what he is."

Machiavelli

Episode #023

This is a transcript of Episode 23 on Machiavelli. Please realize that if any one of us was born just a few short centuries before we were, we could've easily found ourselves right in the middle of this horrific time period we're talking about: The fall of the middle ages and the re-birth or re-hashing of human thought. This is something that no matter how many times I read about this point in history I just, can't get over it. Life was so different in so many ways, but eerily similar in others. The people were terrified. We talked about the bubonic plague, we talked about how that turned into an economic crisis and then a political crisis, but there are many layers to this parfait. The thing about covering something like the Renaissance is that it's so multifaceted and so vague regarding things like where the beginning was, when and where certain things caught on, and the causal relationships between things; this thing we call the Renaissance had many tentacles and many different storylines and to relegate them to a couple episodes is about as impossible as it is pointless. We will delve into many different thinkers, many times coming from very different parts of Western Europe and living through a different phase than the last guy we covered. But with each episode you'll get a little more insight of the big picture. One piece of the big picture, one piece that is crucial to understand because it qualifies ALL OTHER pieces of the big picture, is to understand this period of transition and what it meant to be human being living through it. Just imagine being born into the world and being told from the moment you're old enough to understand the words coming out of your parents mouths that you are broken. You are a flawed, sinful bag of skin and bones and there are rules you need to abide by. Strict rules. You have impulses that tell you to do the opposite of the rules, you will eventually break the rules, but luckily for you there is still a way for you to get to heaven despite being so weak. The way to atone for your sins, the ONLY way to atone for your sins, was through the Church. Through a sacrament. See, apparently God said, at some point after he said, "let there be

light" the only entity on planet earth that has the authority or the know-how to perform a sacrament and therefore receive forgiveness and God's grace and get the ticket into heaven was the church. Somebody else could technically TRY to perform a sacrament, and it may FEEL like you have been forgiven, but God only REALLY forgives you if the church does it. Conveniently enough, the thing that relayed this policy by God was the church. In fact, they were also the people relaying what the rules were to everybody. The average person had no way of reading about it themselves; the Bible was written in Latin and none of the people spoke Latin anymore. Just imagine if in modern times we were told that we need to corral ourselves into a little herd of people, waddle on down to the local preaching hall and listen to a guy read from the Bible in Latin and we hadn't faintest idea of what he was saying, we just had to accept that our eternal fate rested on whether this guy was telling us what it really said or not. How long would it take before somebody got a copy of the Bible and copy and pasted it into Google Translate and saw if he was telling the truth? How long would we stand for that? Well, needless to say it wasn't THAT easy back then. They certainly didn't have Google Translate, but it was becoming VERY clear that this system where we just listen to what the priest says in Latin and take his word for it wasn't going to cut it for long. The reason why is because the entire world was collapsing around them. The church had a complete monopoly over spirituality. These people living at the time were told that they were being given God's grace and that it was only the church that could give it to them, but yet they looked around them and they understandably asked well if that's true, why is all of this bad stuff happening? Why is 30 to 60% of the population dying? Why are we constantly at war? Why are people starving to death? Why is there all this infighting within the church? But In fact, these people had even MORE reasons to doubt the authority of the church on top of all this! Most notably the complete, categorical corruption and immoral behavior of the leadership of the church. Top to bottom. Not just the Pope or the archbishops, we're talking down to even the very low level priest that would be the head of a very small congregation. There are stories of how most of these low level priests didn't even know how to speak Latin themselves. So when they would read out of the Bible they would just fake it, they'd

speaking in gibberish that sounded kind of like Latin and no one in the audience was going to call them on it because they didn't know Latin either. They were seen as corrupt. These priests weren't supposed to get married so as a loophole they would take concubines, that was kind of seen as an immoral work around. There was a LONG period called the Great Schism where the church wasn't unified under a single pope having as many as three popes at one time; they were fighting each other for who was going to be in charge. That was seen as a needless dropping of the proverbial ball and one that made people question whether these people were as anointed by God as they said they were. There was a growing confusion about transubstantiation. Transubstantiation is a really cool sounding word that refers to the process of, well, you know in Catholicism when you're at church and you get the wine and the cracker? Well these people were supposed to believe that when some guy says a few Latin words that that wine literally transformed into the blood of Jesus. The bread literally transformed into the body of Jesus. Even people back then were wondering how that was possible. Now, people have written entire books on all the various factors that came together to cause the protestant reformation, but the important thing for us is to realize that there was considerable reason for the people of the time to see the leadership of the church as not really knowing what they were doing, and when they looked around them at all the bad stuff happening to them OUTSIDE of church, it makes sense that they would ask themselves, What are we doing wrong? Why is God allowing this to happen? Let me see what is in that book you're reading from. See, all these different crises that were going on led people to CRAVE some kind of personal spiritual experience. The priests at the time were not doing much preaching as we would expect in church today where there is some reading from the Bible and then some overarching takeaway message for the week that you can apply to your life. The function of church was simple: Sacrament. To absolve you for whatever sins you committed since the last time you went to church, so if you died you would go to heaven instead of purgatory. People wanted more than that. They wanted a new, more personal version of religion to help quell the fear that went along with the new pandemic disease crisis, the new political crisis, etc. Now, remember what we talked about last time with Erasmus,

this new Humanistic way of learning and looking at the world through what it meant to be a human being; a more individualistic approach. Well when the sum total of all these factors, most notably when the religion of the day was looked at through a Humanistic lens you end up with Martin Luther TRANSLATING the Bible into German, which effectively TRANSMUTED religion into a more personal, fulfilling experience for people. This new humanistic approach really is the story of the early Renaissance. The protestant reformation was the reformation of one religion. But really, there were "reformations" of practically every aspect of human life during the Renaissance. They weren't always immediately evident to the people living at the time, but the culture prevalent in classical antiquity was SO FAR REMOVED from anything these people had seen, that the intellectual progress couldn't help but go through huge sweeping changes. So if I try to think of the two institutions that keep people in line the most, the two that come to mind are religion and government, and it probably doesn't come as a surprise to you guys that during this time period there were revolutionary thinkers when it comes to the proper way to govern a society. One of the most notorious and most highly criticized by later authors was a guy named Niccolo Machiavelli. You've heard the adjective: Machiavellian. And if you knew what the person meant when they were saying it you knew that it means, this is out of the dictionary: cunning, scheming, and unscrupulous, especially in politics or in advancing one's career. But this would be misleading. That would be like saying that something was Orwellian if it has to do with animals living on a farm somewhere. Machiavelli was actually much less one dimensional than that, but people take away a one dimensional interpretation of him because they judge him based on only his most famous work. Machiavelli was a political philosopher. Plain and simple. Some people don't like to even consider him a philosopher because he only really made contributions in the area of politics, but I like to think of him as just more focused than most. The concept that is really interesting to consider is to think of virtue broadly, and how unspecific the term is in itself. When we think of virtue in modern times, we typically think of how it applies to us on a personal level. We think of virtue and we think of things like patience and honesty and courage and things like that. Now at this point it

would be easy to mistake the term virtue as meaning what the best way to live is. Sort of like a best practices template for being a human being. You act this way and it yields the best life possible; that's what virtue is. But that's NOT what virtue is, really. Virtue concerns itself with what is right and what is wrong. Yes, if our goal is to live the happiest life possible, then the RIGHT thing to do, the virtuous approach to achieving that is to be, patient, honest, courageous, etc. However, if we change the end goal we're trying to arrive at, if we for instance determine that we want to be the UNHAPPIEST person possible, then the right thing to do, the virtuous thing to do if that's the goal you want is to be impatient, dishonest and cowardly. We've all heard the saying that you have to know where you're going if you want to know how to get there. Well, that is the reason why there is no one, single framework of being virtuous. That's the reason why what virtuous behavior changes from philosopher to philosopher. Virtue to Saint Augustine is much different than virtue to Socrates because they had very different goals they were trying to achieve. Again, there may be ideas of right action that are common among people or more popular than other ideas of right action, but there is no intrinsically "correct" way to do things because good or bad is defined by a goal that is trying to be achieved. Now that said, we, as humans, have many goals that we assign to ourselves. There is a decorum that is acceptable for each one of these goals and we would consider certain behaviors right or wrong based on what we were trying to achieve. For example, the decorum that makes a good stand up comedian is MUCH different than the decorum that makes a good doctor. When you're doctor is reading you your test results, you probably don't want him to put on the fuzzy red shoes and the clown nose, unless of course he is Robin Williams in the movie Patch Adams. You don't want him to start berating you or being sarcastic or pointing out ironies in your medical history. However, you would want all of these sorts of behaviors if you were going out to watch some good stand up comedy. Nothing is intrinsically bad about wearing the fuzzy red shoes, but we CAN deem them bad when we have a goal that we're trying to achieve. The decorum of a cheerleader is much different than the decorum of a library attendant. Well, this is a great place to start from when talking about Machiavelli and his thoughts on the best way

to rule a society. Sure the average person walking around living their life should be honest and temperant and things like that because they yield the greatest result for him, but the rulers of an entire population have very unique problems they are presented with, very unique circumstances, Machiavelli thought it would be naive to think that to be a great ruler you could live with the same goals in mind as the average citizen, you don't have the same goals, so because of that you have to act a certain way. His most famous work was entitled "The Prince". This book was a handbook to a new ruler or prince, over a city-state or a population and it gave them a blueprint for how to take control and maintain stability of their empire. Stability is the most important word of all. Remember, Machiavelli lived during this time of constant political unrest. Just during his lifetime the ruler of Florence, where he lived, changed almost 10 times. You read Machiavelli's writings and it is very evident that what he wanted more than anything was a stable, unified Italy, not this collection of city-states constantly arguing with each other. See, what Machiavelli realized is that a ruler can have THE BEST PLAN in the world, he can have a 10 year plan where at the end of it there is going to be a complete utopia in his kingdom, but if his kingdom lacks stability, nothing can happen. When a nation is unstable it doesn't matter how much prosperity you might bring your people, that instability undermines the whole process. Therefore, the chief concern of any ruler should be the stability of the state, and no matter what you have to do to achieve that stability you do it, even if it is outside the confines of what the average person would conventionally see as moral. Murder, deception, war-mongering, none of these things are off the table. Machiavelli would say that people that don't understand what it means to be a ruler would talk about things like human rights and that a ruler should set an example and we should never spill a single drop of blood, Machiavelli would say that these are all noble pursuits in their own right, but it would be naive to think that a ruler can actually be like that in any practical sense. Just think about it. No country ever in the history of the world has been founded on people all coming to a grassy clearing in the forest with a river flowing through it and they all start holding hands and singing like it's Christmas in Whoville and they all look at one guy and say "He is our leader!" and everyone starts

cheering and things go on happily ever after. Machiavelli thought if that sounds like a fairy tale then it's because it is. Noe! Nations are founded on deception, espionage, bloodshed, you name it. Nations are FOUNDED on immorality, how can we expect that immediately after a new ruler takes power, if he wants to maintain stability of the empire that he can instantly live in a moral way? Machiavelli describes it here: "It ought to be remembered that there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things. Because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions, and lukewarm defenders in those who may do well under the new. This coolness arises partly from fear of the opponents, who have the laws on their side, and partly from the incredulity of men, who do not readily believe in new things until they have had a long experience of them. Hence it comes that all armed prophets have been victorious, and all unarmed prophets have been destroyed." Now don't jump to conclusions and think that this is the only way Machiavelli thought about how to run a nation. His second most famous work was called "Discourses on Livy" What is this Livy that he was providing discourse on? Livy was a renowned historian of Rome. He is best known for writing an entire history of Rome. So Machiavelli, again turning to writings of earlier Greeks and Romans for a new model, looked at the success of Rome and wrote about how it would behoove new city-states to try to implement their system of government and experience success on the level that they had. Rome, was a republic for most of the time Livy wrote about them. So at first glance it seems like a contradiction for Machiavelli. On one hand he is advocating a king or a ruler that shouldn't be bound by the conventional idea of morality and then on the other hand he thinks a republic is the best thing for states to model themselves after. There are many explanations for this apparent contradiction, some people even go so far as to say that "The Prince" was a satire. Machiavelli was just showing people how these sorts of rulers actually act so that they would overthrow them and create a republic. That's probably not the case. In reality, Machiavelli was probably talking about what he saw as two different stages in the development of a state. First, a nation is founded on bloodshed and immorality and the

goal of the state should be to maintain stability whatever the cost. Then, through the creation of institutions of control the state could eventually transform into a more ideal form of government, namely a republic. Machiavelli's "The Prince" can be thought of as how that initial ruler can best maintain stability and implement those institutions of control so that the state survives long past his death. But the thing that ruler needs to remember is that without stability first, the republic never happens. He talks about the contradiction in the way people typically think about leaders here: "How laudable it is for a prince to keep good faith and live with integrity, and not with astuteness, every one knows. Still the experience of our times shows those princes to have done great things who have had little regard for good faith, and have been able by astuteness to confuse men's brains, and who have ultimately overcome those who have made loyalty their foundation. You must know, then, that there are two methods of fighting, the one by law, the other by force: the first method is that of men, the second of beasts; but as the first method is often insufficient, one must have recourse to the second. It is therefore necessary to know well how to use both the beast and the man." Machiavelli says that as a prince you need to be willing to maintain stability by using both methods of fighting. One is the law, which is typically used by men. The other is force, which is typically used by beasts. The best ruler is one who knows when and how to use both. Yes, you can kill people or even a group of people in order to maintain stability, even your own citizens, but it might not always be the wisest move just because it solves the problem. For example, if there are people protesting about your princely abilities outside of your city hall, that is a problem for a ruler. So, there are multiple ways to stop that protest. You can invite them inside take them out for lunch, make sure the media is there and make everyone think you really care about their protests. You can use the law, as Machiavelli said. Or you can be like a beast, round up the group of protestors, take them behind the courthouse and put a bullet in their head. Now, all three of these solutions solve the problem. The question is which one is the wisest? Machiavelli says that although the ruler should expect to kill some people, not all cases warrant that response. For example, what if you take the protesters back there, shoot them and then the population turns on

you and has an uprising because they're furious about that? You didn't do a good job of maintaining stability now did you? He sums up the principle a ruler should live by here: "I say that every prince must desire to be considered merciful and not cruel. He must, however, take care not to misuse this mercifulness. ... A prince, therefore, must not mind incurring the charge of cruelty for the purpose of keeping his subjects united and confident; for, with a very few examples, he will be more merciful than those who, from excess of tenderness, allow disorders to arise, from whence spring murders and rapine; for these as a rule injure the whole community, while the executions carried out by the prince injure only one individual." So in other words if you're going to kill someone make sure it contributes to the stability of the nation. The act of killing a group of people should be to prevent future killing of a LARGER group of people. If you kill people with impunity it will lead to the people hating you, which is not the goal of being a ruler. You should appear to be caring and loving to the population, not tyrannical. Killing people should not be based on ego or insecurity, that was the mistake that people like Hitler or Stalin made. Killing people should always yield a better long term outcome for more people. See, there are two ways to maintain stability: to be loved or to be feared. Machiavelli says it here: "Is it better to be loved rather than feared, or feared rather than loved? It might perhaps be answered that we should wish to be both: but since love and fear can hardly exist together, if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved." This concept of acting immorally in the interest of preserving the state is not something that is exclusive to the way the ruler treats his population. This extends to your relations with other nations and the expansion of your empire. Machiavelli talks about how stupid it would be to be a leader of a state and be beholden to typical Christian morals. Imagine having to be completely honest about all of your intentions, imagine having to never spy on what other countries are doing because you don't want to steal. Machiavelli would say that to only use diplomacy or tactics that are compatible with traditional ethics that individuals should hold themselves to puts a nation at a HUGE disadvantage against every one else. And if some nation is plotting a secret attack on you, and that surprise attack leads to instability, you have failed as a leader. Because of this,

Machiavelli advocates acting like a beast. He gives two different beasts that you should model yourself after: "The lion cannot protect himself from traps, and the fox cannot defend himself from wolves. One must therefore be a fox to recognize traps, and a lion to frighten wolves."

Montaigne

Episode #024

This is a transcript of Episode 24 on Montaigne. For the entire life of Michel de Montaigne he was plagued by this terrible, paralyzing fear of death. You know, it's funny. I think 99.9% of people have a terrible fear of death; the difference between people lies in how effectively they've learned to ignore it. Really, it's not something to be ashamed of. We are creatures programmed for survival, and a fear of death is a great way for us to stay away from activities that might get us killed. But ever since we've gathered together and built these fortresses that we call cities and have had an unprecedented level of safety, that fear of death becomes much less useful than it once was. The paradigm to strive for now, is to be a person that can appease that fear of death. To achieve that level of tranquility that civilization SHOULD provide for people. This was the task of all of the various schools of the Hellenistic Age, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Skepticism, Cynicism, people have been experiencing this fear for a long time. But when we're talking about going against processes in the brain that are as deeply ingrained as a fear of death, that task of quelling it becomes much easier said than done. Some would even say impossible. This fear of death is present at a different level in everyone, and for a guy like Michel de Montaigne, it was probably much worse than any of us. One of the things I love about Montaigne is that there is a level of disclosure and honesty in his writing that you don't find with many other philosophers and it gives him a very unique feel. One of the things he discloses, one of the things he is most open about is this fear of death that troubled him for a giant portion of his life. He said: "With such frequent and ordinary examples passing before our eyes, how can we possibly rid ourselves of the thought of death and of the idea that at every moment it is gripping us by the throat?" But that all changed with a single traumatic experience. It's funny how as humans we're shaped by these traumatic experiences. Most of the time the things we are most passionate about as individuals or the causes we care the most about are not things we've reflected on and

arrived at introspectively, they're passions that arose from moments in our lives when life smacked you in the face. Well this is almost literally what happened to Montaigne. The story goes that he was riding his horse IN THE SLOW LANE. Being respectful and some guy rides up behind him and wants to pass him. So he says "Go around me, go around me please." and the guy tries to dart past him on his horse but instead runs directly into the back of Montaigne which causes him to fly off of his horse and land several yards away, hitting his head and mangling him up really badly. His friends rush over to him to see if he's alright and it is immediately evident that things are NOT alright and that he is probably going to die. Medicine back in the 1500's is obviously not what medicine is today. When his friends scooped him up off of the ground and looked at him he was freaking out. He was vomiting blood, he was scratching at himself, it seemed like he was trying to rip his own skin off. To top it off, the whole time he didn't seem conscious of anything that was happening. Long story short, Montaigne made a full recovery. In fact, he actually came out on the other side of the experience a better person. When his friends told him that he was puking blood and flailing around like he was in the exorcist; just the quintessential picture of PURE AGONY, he was shocked. He didn't feel anything terrible like that. He didn't remember feeling any pain. In fact, the whole experience wasn't so bad. To him, it didn't really feel like much at all it kind of felt like the process of falling asleep. Now as somebody that feared death his entire life knowing that nobody REALLY knows what it's going to be like, this experience gave him some insight. He had experienced something very close to death. Based on his experience, what was there really to fear? This turning away from arguing about all encompassing catch all rules about things and turning towards the use of personal experience to arrive at understanding about things is a hallmark of Montaigne's philosophy in every area. We will continue to refer back to it throughout the episode. But let's not oversimplify Montaigne. Saying "What is the point?" of Montaigne's writing is a little bit like saying "What is the point?" of Led Zepellin 1. What is the point of the album Rumors by Fleetwood Mac. It's not like these artists set out with some grand message in mind beforehand and then they wrote an entire album with the purpose of delivering that

message. No, they wrote a bunch of songs that have meaning to them with individual messages. You listen to the songs; you get takeaways from each one of them; two songs may play back to back on the album and may not seem even remotely related to each other, but there definitely is a single intelligence that is being portrayed through the songs. Rumors by Fleetwood Mac is not them writing educational songs; one song after another laying out an organized system of how to navigate the tribulations that you face in your relationships. The delivery method is not systematic and it's not intended to be. Well, this is a pretty good parallel to Montaigne's philosophy. We've seen other philosophers lay out an organized system that you can live by. They usually have maxims and useful techniques to practice and all sorts of tools that will lead you to the end goal that they've designated. For example, the philosophy of Siddhartha Gautama was very clearly laid out with his Four Noble Truths. There was a very clear practice regimen that if you followed diligently enough, you would remove yourself from the chains of suffering and attachment. Some people like Epictetus had their philosophy distilled down into books like "The Enchiridion" which means "The Handbook". But although Montaigne offered what he thought was the most effective way to live life, he didn't organize it as well as these other guys. He's actually the inventor of the "essay". The word essay also means "attempt". And that's exactly what they were. For this reason, this episode may seem less systematic in its approach. Because it's emblematic, of Montaigne. The essays of Michel de Montaigne may seem rambling and tangential and he may start making a point about something and then go off on a ten page anecdote about something semi-related, but they are beautifully written and to this day if someone has never read any philosophy before is the collection that I would recommend for them to start with. The reason why is because he doesn't talk about what we would consider metaphysics much at all and he talks about issues that every human being can relate to and he does so in a very unique and candid way. Sometimes a little overly candid giving me a breaking news report on his private areas and private activities. He says in the beginning of one of his works: "I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray...I am myself the matter of my

book."But he doesn't just offer up this stuff for no reason. When you read his essays you feel almost like you're having an email exchange with someone who is one of your closest friends that share these intimate details about their life with you, but it makes you feel a little bit better about the fact that you have these problems too. Montaigne, if I had to categorize him, is a very interesting mixture between all four dominant schools of thought in the Hellenistic Age. His way to approach life is the sum total of different pieces of Stoicism, Skepticism, Epicureanism and Cynicism; plus a whole lot more. But if there was one school that affected his thinking the most of the four, it would be Skepticism. There are parts of his essays where there is a very Stoic ambiance; there are passages in his essays you could take out and say these are lost fragments of Diogenes the Cynic and aside from the writing style people wouldn't be able to tell the difference. But, Skepticism is the foundation on which all of his other thoughts are based. In other words, the reason why he is able to make conclusions that sound very Stoic based on personal experience is because his skepticism led him to value that personal experience as the most valuable data. There's a popular saying nowadays that Montaigne would have loved: The plural form of anecdote is data. Have you ever been talking to somebody and lets say you tell them that you read in the paper the people at the local fish and wildlife office did a study where this river in your area has the largest quantity of fish swimming through it in the country and that through years and years of research they've found that you are more likely to catch a fish at this one river than ANY other river in the country. And then the person your talking to says, "No! My Aunt Beatrice went fishing there one time and she didn't catch anything. That article is wrong!" Well, that would be a perfect example of ignoring the data and basing what you think about the reality of the world, in this case a river, on anecdotal evidence. But it's funny; what is the data really but a collection of anecdotes? For years, some guys at every local fish and wildlife office around the country went down to the rivers in their areas and recorded how many fish were swimming by. Each one of those measurements could be considered an anecdote. Montaigne understood that the sorts of conclusions that people were trying to arrive at when collecting data were sweeping ones. It makes sense: do experiments and

collect many micros to try to arrive at a macro. By collecting data, by collecting lots of individual examples, maybe we can arrive at laws or rules that are always the case. If, in theory, we could arrive at these sorts of truths through experimentation, we might be able to use them to our advantage and understand the world we live in more effectively. But Montaigne thought most of these sweeping generalizations that people tried to make in science, medicine, law they were not useful. The reason why, among other things, is that they almost always seem to be proven wrong. I mean, think about it. Montaigne is living during a time where long held principles, things that had been held as absolutely true for thousands of years were crumbling all around him. All of these truths ended up being dis proven and replaced with another theory and then dis proven and replaced with another theory; and the whole process to Montaigne was just exhausting. Why waste our limited time on this planet agonizing over trying to come up with scientific or medical rules that apply to every circumstance without exception? He trashes people that spend their time doing this stuff quite a bit in his essays, this quote is one of my favorites when he is talking about the medical sciences in particular: "Physicians have this advantage: the sun lights their success and the earth covers their failures." There's always an exception to the rule. Theories will continually be accepted as truth and then dis proven by another theory; that process is going to go on forever. Montaigne thought that maybe the solution is just to not over think things and to base things on the way we experience them as individuals. Don't get him wrong: he understands the value of medicine and science, but he wants to keep our focus on things that are immediately useful to us, not ethereal things like what everything is made of or what the origins of the universe are. For this reason, Montaigne didn't write much about Metaphysics. He was... just interested in other stuff more. Maybe he felt that based on his own experience he wasn't qualified to talk about these things that exist at a level of reality that he can't experience. Regardless, this disinterest in Metaphysics because we lack the ability to truly know based on experience is a great example of the skepticism that underlies the rest of his more practical philosophy. Now if you think back to our episode on skepticism you can remember how Pyrrho used a fundamental doubt about everything around us as

a tool to arrive at ataraxia or a freedom from disturbance. By reserving judgment about everything around us we prevent ourselves from making negative judgments that might ail us in some way. Montaigne can be seen as a less extreme variant of this. He actually references Pyrrho several times in the Essays so it is clear he was heavily influenced by him. But instead of reserving judgment about everything and walking around not really believing anything that goes on around us, Montaigne thought that the most productive view of the world should be one where we pull from the vast bank vault full of experiences that we have garnered throughout our lives. I mean, after all: we are the catalyst for our experiences. My personal experience of something offers a very unique insight into what I might expect to experience in the future, an insight that I can't really be sure surveys can offer me or even the anecdotes of other people. Really, how can I be sure that anybody experiences things in the same way I do? This is another reason why even the PURSUIT of collecting these all encompassing RULES without exceptions about the world around us is flawed. There is a section that says, "For truth itself does not have the privilege to be employed at any time and in every way; its use, noble as it is, has its circumscriptions and limits." The thing that Montaigne feels most comfortable trusting is his own experience. This is the reason why he feels comfortable making a conclusion about death after having his own near death experience. That said, one of Montaigne's most interesting works is titled "To philosophize is to learn how to die". Now, he wasn't the first to say that, it actually goes back all the way to the Greeks. But it definitely encapsulates the aim of many of Montaigne's essays. Life, from the very moment they snip your umbilical cord, you are decaying. You're getting closer to death. You've heard people say things like "We're all dying." Because for every day you live you get closer to the only inevitability that a human being has. Wesley Snipes proved LONG AGO you don't need to pay taxes. So that should terrify us really, we are all slowly decaying. Montaigne saw that people have a lot of creative ways that they deal with this inevitable death that is coming. Some people exalt that death onto a pedestal to try to come to terms with it. There was actually a very common way of thinking back then that philosophers came up with to try to stifle this fear of death and it was to CONSTANTLY

dwelling on your death. Think about it all the time. When you walk over a bridge, imagine the bridge collapsing and you being crushed between two beams. When you are driving on the freeway, imagine one of your wheels flying off of your car and you flying out the moon roof somersaulting down the freeway being torn into pieces. The thinking was, by constantly thinking about death, you would eventually come to terms with it because you were exposed to it so much. This is how a lot of people conquer fears in today's world. If you are scared of flying, fly a bunch around the country and eventually you will realize there isn't anything to fear. But Montaigne thought this was dumb. You're just needlessly scaring yourself by thinking about death all the time. That might actually make your fear worse because now you're in the habit of thinking about it. You shouldn't exalt death. On the other hand, some people exalt life. They try to distract themselves from death they exalt certain worldly pleasures like glory and fame and wealth but these things run into the same problems. To philosophize is to learn how to die because through the introspection of philosophy we realize how baseless it is to exalt these things. Instead of trying to endlessly rationalize things and instead of trying to have this intellectual approach to coming to peace with our death, we should accept that we don't know. Wise people accept their own intellectual limitations in the same way they would accept physical limitations. They wouldn't come across a bear in the wild and think they could fight it and win. They would recognize there are physical limitations preventing them from making that outcome a good one and they would move on. When you remove all of this needless worry about death or life you remove the need to fear death at all. You know, he famously said, "Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know." The parallel to his lack of Metaphysics is clear. Don't agonize over things we can not know, accept your own limitations and come to the best conclusion you can with your current experience. He writes in a section of the essays where he sounds like he is feeling very in touch with Stoicism at the time about instead of intellectualizing things we should allow our own nature to prepare us for death. I wanted to get an old person's perspective on death for the show this week to see if there is anything to Montaigne's theory that our own nature prepares us for death and that we should trust it. I didn't really feel

comfortable going to Shady Acres Retirement Home and asking people I don't know about something that they face every day and probably have an aversion to. I wanted to ask a family member, because at least they are obligated to put up with me. Now, I don't have any family so I had to use the second best option which was my wife's grandma. This is the value you get from Philosophize This! everybody don't you forget it. But anyway I asked her when she wanted to die. And she said, "I want to live until I want to die." What a beautiful statement. We have a desire to live until our quality of life becomes so bad that we would rather die than live. Now, in her case it comes in the form of deteriorating health where one day she will be in so much pain or on so much medication that she won't be losing much. Certainly not losing as much as if she died when she was 25. Couldn't this be considered a way that our own nature prepares us for death? Now this seems like an end point, but when I was first reading Montaigne this is where I started having the most questions for him. Sure, you remove this glorification of life and death and you arrive at a peace of mind that other people can only dream of. But how do I do that? Especially considering the fact that it presents itself in many ways, some of which we might not even be able to identify. Well, Montaigne doesn't disappoint. He talks a lot about all of the individual ways this manifests itself in people's lives. As you probably expect, there are a ton of things that humans worried about back then that people still worry about today. Why is it that it is a stereotype for an old man to walk around naked, to dress in an absentminded way, to talk to people with no reservations. The reason why is because he just doesn't care anymore. He has lived on this planet long enough to realize that the embarrassment and the desire for respect and all the various things that motivate people to follow social conventions are really pointless. What else does he have to prove to anybody? He realizes that even if everyone on planet earth rejects him he is still going to be able to watch The Price is Right tomorrow. Well this is a form of wisdom to Montaigne. This is another way that our own nature prepares us for death by removing these pointless anxieties that we have. He sounds a lot like a Cynic during the parts of his essays when he talks about this dynamic in particular. He actually goes on a multiple page diatribe about animals and how they are much wiser than

humans in many ways. I think everybody can relate to what he is talking about. Who listening to this has never looked in the mirror and nitpicked something about themselves and wished that their physical presence was different than it was. Do you know how much I want cheekbones like Ashton Kutcher or Don Draper? How many of us do this to ourselves all the time? Well, Montaigne gives example after example of people who hold themselves to these brutal standards. He says that we despise our own beings. And is there any condition that is really worse than that? You're imprisoned in this tomb of self-proclaimed ugliness. We should try to recognize that we are animals just like your dog is an animal. Your dog doesn't have a laundry list of corrections for his body. He isn't embarrassed about anything. We should recognize that the differences between our brain and an animal's brain do bring us certain benefits, but they also bring us needless anxieties, like that. We should recognize social conventions for what they are, and while we may follow them we should recognize them for what they truly are. If I had to try to distill Montaigne's approach to life I might begin with a very Buddhist concept. The removal of attachments in our lives that are brought on by our relationships with others. We constantly strive for the approval of others. The problem with this, Montaigne would say, is that as long as you care at all about what other people think of you, as long as you care at all about whether people like you or not, you will never be able to achieve complete peace of mind. What the Stoics would call ataraxia. What the Buddhists would call enlightenment. When we care about the acceptance of others too much we are more likely to do things, not because they are the wisest thing to do, but because the people whose acceptance we desire are doing it. This always reminds me of the common thing that a child will say, "well everybody else was doing it!" "well if everybody jumped off a bridge, would you?" This is a good way to think about what Montaigne is saying here. We shouldn't completely reject the actions of everybody else around us, but we should aim for what he refers to as "Solitude". But he doesn't mean solitude in a literal sense, he means solitude in action. We should base the decisions we make on more than just what everybody else is doing. We shouldn't be tempted to fall in line simply because it is easy. For example, there are stoplights and street signs all over the road. We follow those

stoplights. They benefit us greatly. They keep us safe on the road, they help us know where we are going, they help us know what speed is safe in a certain area. But it would be complete madness to be enslaved to those stoplights where no matter what happened around you you couldn't disobey them. If a volcano erupts behind you and lava is flowing down the street, the wisest move would not be to wait until the light turns green. Well Montaigne would say that it's complete madness to be enslaved to the social conventions that seek the admiration of other people. Now it's time for the question of the week, but I kind of want this to be the reflection of the week. There's a fantastic quote by Montaigne where he challenges the way that we typically look at the world by allowing us to look at it through the lens of a goose. It actually reminds me of something I read in a Jerry Seinfeld book one time where he was talking about how if Aliens came down and looked at our society, they would have to conclude that dogs were really the dominant species on the planet and that humans were their slaves. The dogs get to sit around and sleep all day while the humans go out and work 40+ hours a week to pay for their food and pet them and they just get to lay around enjoying life. Well I want you to think about your life in the way Montaigne asks us to think about how a goose might look at his life. He says: "Why may not a goose say thus: "All the parts of the universe I have an interest in: the earth serves me to walk upon, the sun to light me; the stars have their influence upon me; I have such an advantage by the winds and such by the waters; there is nothing that yon heavenly roof looks upon so favorably as me. I am the darling of Nature! Is it not man that keeps and serves me?"

The Social Contract, Thomas Hobbes Part 1

Episode #026

This is a transcript of episode #027 on Thomas Hobbes pt. 1 - The Social Contract. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Want to begin the episode today with a little thought experiment. I want you to imagine that something happens to society as we currently know it, there's a downfall of the standing government of whatever country you currently live in, and all of a sudden you find out that the new system of government that is going to be erected is a monarchy. Now, as modern citizens of democratic societies we're supposed to be appalled by the idea of this ever happening. I mean, we saw what happened in world war two, we saw what has happened categorically throughout history: absolute power corrupts absolutely. This monarchy is never going to work, no matter who the ruler is. Well let's say we had to for a second. What sort of qualities would you want that monarch ruler to have? What sort of personality traits? In fact, let's take it one step further and go a little bit ridiculous here: What would their spirit animal be? What animal from the animal kingdom possesses the sorts of qualities that you would want in a monarch ruler if you had to live under one? Machiavelli gave us a couple. Would you want him to be cunning and sneaky like a fox, to be able to always stay one step ahead of other rulers? Would you want him to be a lion, strong, brave, king of the jungle, keeping us safe from everything? Maybe you'd want him to be like one of those angler fish with the lantern on their head, guiding us through dark waters. Well in the 1600's a man named Thomas Hobbes asked himself that question too, and the animal he chose, was a Leviathan. Now, for anyone unfamiliar, the Leviathan is an animal from mythology, it is known as monstrous and terrifying, kind of like the alpha-predator of the ocean. You don't have to take my word for it, they describe the Leviathan in several different books of the Bible, In Job 41:18 : "His sneezings flash forth light, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the dawn. Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. And I saw a beast rising out of the sea, with ten

horns and seven heads, with ten diadems on its horns and blasphemous names on its heads."Now personally I think this sounds terrifying. I mean, why has this thing evolved ten horns? I want to know what sort of world this thing was living in where natural selection allowed to live the ones that could fight 10 predators simultaneously. But it's not important what I think of this thing, it's what Thomas Hobbes thought of this thing. These are the descriptions he read when he was racking his brain for the thing he wants his leader to be most like. A Leviathan? That doesn't sound very fun. It sounds like he would be almost too powerful. Well he was speaking metaphorically. He needed to go to mythology to find a creature to compare his vision to. The title of his most famous work was Leviathan, and he actually helped design the front cover of the first printing. What he chose for the cover was a giant human shaped figure, its body made out hundreds of small human bodies representing the citizens of a potential state, the head of the giant, was one man. What he referred to as, the sovereign. But before we dive into Leviathan, it is going to be useful for us to understand where Thomas Hobbes is coming from with all of this. Let's get a little background on him: Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 and was instantly made an orphan. Shortly after that his uncle, who happened to be quite well off, agreed to take care of him, which is significant because without his uncle as his guardian, he may not have ever had the resources to acquire the education that allowed him to affect generation after generation of future philosophers, which you will soon learn all about. He lived smack dab in the middle of the English civil war that took place in the 1640's, so he was uniquely aware of how easily the bricks that hold society together can come crumbling down. This also can offer us some insight into the world he was immersed in and how it may have shaded his views on humans in general and what is inevitable in any political system. So maybe some of us have heard of the term "social contract". What is a social contract? Well we can get some insight into that by thinking about what a contract is at all. Well, the dictionary defines contract as: a written or spoken agreement; usually by two or more parties. The social contract that we are going to be talking about today is one of several social contracts that will eventually be laid out by philosophers and what it concerns itself with at its core are two fundamental

questions: One: why do humans need government in the first place or how did people come to realize that government was a good idea at all? Two: what is the role of government in the lives of the individual citizens, or how much authority should that government have. The social contract, is something you are very familiar with, because whether you realize it or not, you have signed it and lived in accordance with it every, single day since that fateful day at the hospital when your mother gave birth to you. But to be fair to you, it really wasn't an EXPLICIT choice you made at first, the choice was made for you by thousands of years of human civilization. But to be fair to them, in the eyes of Thomas Hobbes, it was without a doubt the correct choice and you should be thanking them. Let's talk about why. Thomas Hobbes says that in the beginning, man lived in what he called a "state of nature". Nature typically comes with a positive connotation in today's world, you know, we're going to go on a Nature walk, want to come? You wouldn't want to come on the Hobbes nature walk. The state of nature is a ruthless, dog eat dog, perpetual state of warfare where anything goes and any act of violence is justifiable no matter how seemingly unnecessary. This sort of world is the default state of man when no laws and government are in place to maintain order. Maybe the best way to picture the "state of nature" that Thomas Hobbes describes is to think of what it might look like in modern times. Have you ever seen the movie "The Purge"? Well, for anyone that hasn't, the premise of the movie is that for various reasons that supposedly benefit society, the tag line of the movie trailer is that: all crime, including murder is legal for 12 hours. I still have no idea why they need to make the distinction that murder is legal. I'm pretty sure that is included in "all crime" but anyway, this 12 hour period in this movie is a great depiction of what the "state of nature" would look like, if all of a sudden laws and government ceased to exist. There are no private property laws, people are taking whatever they want, trespassing wherever they want, killing whoever they want if it benefits them in some way, there are no police to come to your home if someone attacks you, there are no firetrucks to come if your house is set on fire, there is no FBI to track down your kids if they are kidnapped. Thomas Hobbes paints an identical picture when describing the state of nature. He says that because there is no

private property, nothing belongs to anyone. Now the thing about that is that it's not like when that happens we instantly enter a society of communal property. No, the inverse is true as well: that everything belongs to everybody. This sort of dynamic makes everything CONSTANTLY up for grabs. This sort of dynamic also makes you perpetually at war with the rest of the potential grabbers, which is, everything that exists on planet earth. Hobbes describes the state of nature here: "In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Not only are you constantly at war with starvation, and the elements and any renegade asteroids that might want to come end your existence, but you are at war with every single other human on planet earth. You are living a subsistent lifestyle. You have nobody to trade with, there is no specialization. Your life becomes very similar to an animal's life. Looking for food and other necessities of survival, constantly paranoid of predators watching you, living a solitary, brutish life as Hobbes would say. Things are not very fun. The reason you have to be paranoid and expect people to undermine your survival in the name of theirs is that morality doesn't exist in the state of nature that Hobbes lays out. He continues here in the Leviathan extrapolating from the inevitable state of war that we are in: "To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. They are qualities that relate to men in society, not in solitude." What he's saying here is, if you were living this terrifying, subsistent lifestyle in the "state of nature", when somebody sneaks up behind you, beats you in the head with a

rock, steals your wife from you, kills your children and takes all of your stuff before you regain consciousness, you would feel kind of irritated at the guy. That was a messed up thing to do! Totally unfair! Right? Wrong! Hobbes says there is no "injustice" when no laws are put in place. Whether something is "good" or "bad" or "right" or "wrong" really only is present when there is a goal that is trying to be achieved. There is no system of laws that people in the "state of nature" can look to and feel a sense of injustice. There is no "good" or "bad" behavior as we would typically see it. The ONLY thing that can really be considered a "good" in the state of nature, the single, goal that is in place for humans when in this state of nature is self-preservation. Self-preservation is the goal, therefore, in every action that we take, while in this state of nature, we should strive for it. You come across somebody else's camp, he's gone, you take all of his food and supplies: perfectly justifiable because you are acting in the interest of the ONLY good self-preservation. To Thomas Hobbes, this is obvious and understandable. This is perfectly compatible with his view of what human nature is: to be selfish. We are self-interested, survival oriented machines. We have deep impulses to slight each other in the name of self-preservation. Now, this is the biggest point of disagreement with Hobbes by future philosophers. Are all humans at their roots fundamentally selfish? Well it's not weird if you feel attacked when he says that. It's not weird if you disagree with it. I mean after all, how does Hobbes explain someone who volunteers their time and performs good deeds like helping an old lady across the street? Certainly these people who are altruistic aren't selfishly driven at their core. Well there are good arguments on either side. Hobbes would probably respond to that that people who are altruistic do so because of their selfish drive to assert themselves as superior to other people. Morally superior to others who could have helped but didn't and physically superior to the old woman he is helping across the street. When you start getting into the intentions behind why people do what they do, things can get a little hazy, but the important part is that Hobbes views human nature as fundamentally selfish. In fact, if you're one of those people that think that deep down, people are good at their core and not selfish, Hobbes says, "Why do you lock your door at night then?" If that's truly what you believe, then

leave your door unlocked! Hobbes isn't interested in thinking about utopias or how he would like for the world to be, he is interested in what the world actually is. And humans, to Thomas Hobbes are selfish creatures. Humans will declare war with other humans and other creatures for their own preservation, and when he breaks it down, he sees three main causes for enacting this state of war. "So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, Reputation. The first use Violence to make themselves Masters of other men's persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their Persons, or by reflexion in their Kindred, their Friends, their Nation, their Profession, or their Name." To Thomas Hobbes, there are three main reasons we "go to war" with each other in this state of nature and he just said them in that quote: personal gain of some type, personal safety, and personal reputation. Now the common thread among all three of them is that they are a personal interest that they are pursuing. See, Thomas Hobbes isn't a believer in the idea that certain people are born and they are naturally superior to other people. Sure, some people may be stronger, or faster. They might be able to complete an obstacle course faster than someone else; they might be able to lift more weight or beat somebody else senseless in a direct engagement, but that other person has gifts too, gifts that in the eyes of Thomas Hobbes, makes the two of them equal. So if the strong, athletic guy is out in the wild and he comes across a fruit tree that he wants some fruit off of, but he sees the less athletic guy put a stake in the ground next to that fruit tree and say that it's his. The athletic guy wouldn't be the odds on favorite against him in the eyes of Thomas Hobbes, because the less athletic guy has other gifts that make them equal. Maybe he is a better tactician, maybe he has the ability to manipulate the athletic guy with words or trick him into falling into a spike pit he dug. The possibilities are endless and it doesn't take much thought to see where Hobbes naturally goes with this: "From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both

enjoy, they become enemies, and in the way to their End, . . . endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another . . . If one plant, sow, build, or possess a convenient Seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him, not only of the fruit of his labor, but also of his life, or liberty . . . "And from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself so reasonable as anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can so long till he see no other power great enough to endanger him:"What Hobbes is saying is that all three of these reasons why humans quarrel with each other: competition, diffidence and glory, really all three of these can be distilled down to one thing: self-preservation. What humans naturally recognize when they are out in this "state of nature" is that this constant state of war is incredibly taxing both mentally and physically. Like I said before, humans are constantly behind enemy lines fighting to defend everything from everything. There MUST be a better way! Hobbes says what humans eventually realize in this state of nature is that they could achieve a higher level of self-preservation, that is, a life without all of this constant looking over your shoulder and uncertainty, they could achieve that life if they could eliminate this threat of other humans. Hobbes says that humans must seek peace. Now there are two main ways of doing this, you could try to use your natural gifts to overpower them and make them your slaves. But as Hobbes says, that won't ever work for very long if it ever works at all. They have natural gifts just as you have natural gifts, and eventually they will escape or kill you and take all of your stuff. That hardly eliminates the anxiety caused by constantly having to watch your back. The second way you can do this is by signing a contract with your neighbor. Let's take our example from earlier. The really athletic guy comes across a fruit tree with another less athletic guy, they both realize the tree produces more fruit than they could ever eat alone, so they make an accord. Since we are neighbors right next to each other, doesn't it benefit us to make an agreement NOT to attack each other. I mean, since we are both acting in the interest of self-preservation, and since there isn't a scarcity of anything that would cause us to have to hurt each other to get what we need, wouldn't the BEST thing to do, if we were TRULY acting for our own preservation be to agree that,

"I won't attack you, you won't attack me, we will share the fruit from this tree equally down the middle, and if anyone tries to come take it we can defend it together, both of our strengths combined. This really is a win, win. We get what we need and we don't need to constantly watch our backs, at least on one side of our houses." But what Thomas Hobbes says is that this agreement, this hand shake agreement is not enough. Hobbes says it would be WONDERFUL if we could just put our hands on a Bible and take an oath that we will NEVER attack this other person we made the agreement with, but that just will never be enough. Never underestimate just how selfish humans can be, and never underestimate the evil things they can do in the name of self-preservation. Hobbes says taking an oath isn't good enough, so how can we insure that the athletic guy will follow the contract he signed with the little guy? Well, let's say there was no government or legal system in place to enforce contracts in today's world. Let's say you were buying a fish tank from someone off of Craigslist and they looked sketchy. Let's say you don't trust this guy at all, you can't just instantly transfer the fish tank and the money. Someone needs to give their end of the bargain first! We see this sort of situation in movies all the time. You know, the protagonist and antagonist meet somewhere. The antagonist usually has the leading female and love interest of the protagonist in a headlock with a gun to her head saying, "Give me that briefcase full of money or the girl gets it!" Well, the hero of the movie doesn't trust this guy, why should he? He says, "No, you give the girl over... THEN you get your briefcase full of money!" Now all of a sudden there is a stalemate. Who gives their stuff over first? Both parties can't trust each other. In fact, whenever someone DOES hand over their half first and the other side reciprocates, my first thought is always, "You idiot! why did you do that? You could've had both!" What Thomas Hobbes is saying in Leviathan is that when humans get into this weird bargaining stalemate, where they are bargaining for a safer, less anxiety filled life, when one person is saying "give me the briefcase" and the other person is saying "no, first you give me the girl, THEN you get your briefcase", we need the guy with the AK47 pointed at both of them saying, BOTH of you better hand over your half right now, or you both die. This person holding the AK47 is the Leviathan. The sovereign. The leader with absolute authority to do whatever he

wants, whenever he wants in the interest of maintaining the contract. While in the state of nature, we have complete control over our lives to go where ever we want, take what ever we want, kill whoever we want, but when we sign the social contract, which is without question a more self-preserving lifestyle, we forfeit much of that control over what we can do to the sovereign. His job, is to keep us OUT of that terrible, perpetual state of war that we would otherwise find ourselves in. Because there was no previous moral code when you were in the state of nature, the laws the sovereign puts in place in the interest of keeping us OUT of a perpetual state of war ARE the moral order that you are beholden to. Because the sovereign is the moral authority, it doesn't matter how tyrannical or seemingly terrible he is to you, no matter how bad it is he is still keeping you out of the state of nature, which is without question, much worse for you. The state of nature is the state of war and the end that all of us should really be striving for is the opposite of that: a state of peace. The enforcer of the social contract, the sovereign, maintains that peace at all costs. Your job is to follow his laws even if you don't understand why they are laws. There are a lot of examples of this. Let's say you're driving down the highway and you come across a sign that says "speed reduced to 15 mph". and you say "COME ON! I'm not slowing down. This city is ridiculous, they're overly bureaucratic, completely overbearing, just trying to nickel and dime the seconds of my life away so that they can..." Then you hit a little kid that was playing in the middle of the road and you couldn't stop in time. Just imagine how angry the parents of that kid would be. Hobbes says you may not understand why the laws are put in place, but because you benefit from the fruits of society, you should follow the laws of the sovereign because they are meant to keep the peace, they are meant to prevent us from declaring war on each other. Government is a necessary evil to Hobbes. The sovereign is the way we can insure that humans are safe and can pursue things that further benefit and preserve human life. Once we are in this social contract, once we have established that self-preservation is the only thing that we can really draw a moral compass from, Hobbes says that because we are reasoning creatures, that if we use our ability to reason and think about what behavior would yield the greatest quality of self-preservation, we

naturally arrive at certain principles. This is why the collection of them is aptly named "Natural Law". There are many earlier and later interpretations of natural law, but Hobbes is unique in that they are so closely tied to his social contract. The idea is simple: if the main goal is self-preservation, then any act that is destructive to yourself in any way in the long term, is bad. Any act that is truly helpful to you, is good. These good and bad actions are not always immediately evident to us, but Hobbes says these things are known innately by all and if we use our ability to reason well; Natural Law is ultimately what follows as a set of fundamentals to live by. The first one is familiar: "That every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he can hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps and advantages of Warre. The first branch of which Rule, containeth the first, and Fundamental Law of Nature; which is, to seek Peace, and follow it." By using reason we arrive at the idea that to TRULY act in the interest of self-preservation, we must seek peace. Hobbes lays out 19 different laws that make up his Natural Law. Most of them are pretty obvious and straight forward and I highly recommend you read through them before next episode, I'll have them on the page for this episode on the website. The reason why, is because to understand the true significance of this natural law, we need to dive deeper into Hobbes and his view of what humans are. Maybe a good way to think of the social contract is by comparing it to a football game. The monarch appointed to uphold peace is kind of like the quarterback. We, as citizens, are like the players on the field and Hobbes' natural law is like the playbook that keeps us running our route and not colliding with other players on the field.

Thomas Hobbes, part 2

Episode #027

This is a transcript of episode #028 Thomas Hobbes pt. 2. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So as we get more and more into this period of philosophy; as we get more and more into the period when we actually have concrete things to read by all of these various philosophers, it is very difficult for the show to not start feeling exciting for me. See, previously we've had very little to go on. We've had fragments to read that experts have interpreted, or we've had a translation of a translation that makes reading some parts of the work difficult. But now we're starting to have entire bodies of work that not only give us more stuff to talk about with each guy, but a lot of this stuff are things that have directly affected me. Thomas Hobbes and his Leviathan is a beautiful work with all sorts of messages woven through it, and one of these messages that stuck with me when I first read it was about the nature of fear. This is something that I think a lot of people can relate to...so I first read Leviathan when I was 16 years old, and without going too much into it, because of situations that I found myself in throughout my life I looked at the world as being a much more hostile place than it actually was. I was a scared kid and my behavior reflected it. I would be sitting in a coffee shop watching the people that came in, being hyper-vigilant, checking to see if there were bulges coming out of their jacket in case if they came into that Starbucks ready to open fire on all the innocent people drinking coffee. I was scared about ridiculous things; like I was scared of flying. I had these visions of the captain and all the stewardesses doing a conga line in the cockpit of the plane while were flying directly into the side of a mountain. I was scared that some hydraulic component was going to fail or that somebody was going to hijack the flight. Bottom line, there was no real, substantive reason to fear any of this stuff and I always found some way that other people were going to try to hurt me. This fear pervaded every single other aspect of my life. The worst part about it all is that I FULLY recognized it. I remember explicitly thinking, because I had just finished reading the

Enchiridion by Epictetus right before Hobbes and with his time spent as a slave early in his life and how that experience flavored a lot of his philosophy, I remember acknowledging that it was absolutely POINTLESS to worry about any of this stuff and how stupid am I for worrying about it. But I couldn't stop! These patterns of thought were so DEEPLY ingrained that merely being conscious of how pointless it all was didn't do anything. Now, this episode is not titled, "Confessions of a previously neurotic person." This fear is obviously much more extreme than most people face, but the patterns of thought are not entirely different and I think everybody listening to this has some irrational fear that Hobbes can give you some insight on. Being so young and having these irrational fears and feeling enslaved to them, I had this feeling like I was needlessly putting myself in Hobbes's state of nature that we talked about last time. I think when you recognize that you have an irrational fear, yet despite recognizing it you still can't stop it, it is easy to get frustrated with it. What I started to do is hate fear in general. Now, at the time I defined fear or anxiety as any anticipation of some negative future outcome and the distress caused by that. The solution for these irrational fears, up until I read Thomas Hobbes was just to try to eliminate fear completely. Fear was the enemy and was pointless in modern civilized society, lets try to be the most zen Buddhist monk on planet earth. But I learned a huge lesson by reading the Leviathan. One of the main recurring concepts that Hobbes brings up throughout the Leviathan is the different ways that fear motivates and effects us. Let's think about it in the most obvious and physical sense: When you're stranded out in the woods and you're trying to survive, when you're in the state of nature, what motivates you to not sit around on a tree stump all day, but to try to find some berries or lasso yourself a deer or something? Hobbes lays out multiple things that can all be distilled down to self-preservation, not the least of which is a fear of scarcity or a fear for your own safety. That same fear that saves your life in many of the situations where you might be killed or get months of work stolen from you, is the same fear that eventually washes over you like a tidal wave. That same fear completely takes over your life and it is so devastating and so terrible that you forfeit much of your freedom to a sovereign leader just to be able to escape it. See, fear to

Thomas Hobbes, is a little bit like Nyquil. If you are experiencing cold symptoms and you want to get rid of them, you can take a cap full of Nyquil before bedtime and sleep pretty well. You drink the entire bottle of Nyquil and you're probably not waking up in the morning. But is Nyquil intrinsically bad because it can cause you harm? Well, no of course not, and just like Nyquil, fear shouldn't be seen as something intrinsically bad either. This was life changing for me when I thought about it. Think about it: fear really does help us in small doses. Just imagine yourself walking around the world with complete impunity. Zero fear of anything happening to you. You'd probably look like Mr. Magoo. Not scared of any cars hitting you, not scared of intruding on other people's personal space. You wouldn't want to be completely fearless, but you also wouldn't want to walk around terrified of everything that has a very small chance of happening that you really have no control over anyway. You shouldn't feel stupid or beat yourself up for having irrational fears or not being able to stop the mental state of fear entirely. In fact, fear is what has gotten you this far to begin with. We should be proud of some fear, and if you think about it, it really is a good thing that you are a forward thinking person. This gave me a tremendous amount of acceptance. When I started viewing my irrational fear as not a part of my naive brain that was short circuiting, but a useful portion of my brain that was working overtime, Hobbes not only changed the way I saw fear, but the way I saw almost every other mental state. For example, whenever you talk to people, you probably have certain objectives. You don't want to offend the person, you don't want to say something mean about something they are insecure about, you want to say something the person is interested in. But this self-censorship is another example of something that can be useful to us in small doses but when taken to an extreme can be detrimental. When we apply it to Hobbes's idea of fear, Hobbes would say that you certainly don't want to speak with impunity, or not censor yourself at all, if you do you are going to say stupid stuff. People are going to get mad at you for not thinking before you speak. But if you take that censorship too far then you are stuck in a sort of analysis paralysis. You stumble over your words, you never really convey the points you want to. This same dynamic applies to most activities that we could find ourselves doing. And

while moderation in all things is nowhere near revolutionary, the idea of understanding that these relics of our evolutionary past are not intrinsically bad is very useful. Hobbes would advise that we shouldn't artificially create a state of nature in our lives when none exists. After all, we signed the social contract. This is the insight that really helped me get past a lot of my irrational fears, and they all came to a head on a single day in my life. I had just finished reading the Leviathan so all of these ideas were fresh in my mind, and not only did this crazy experience show me first hand how the way I was looking at fear was drastically incorrect, but it also is a great representation of the next thing we're going to talk about which is why Thomas Hobbes has a different view of the best way to make scientific progress and why he thinks Francis Bacon is off-base. I'll never forget this moment it was so ridiculous. Subway, the restaurant not a station. Part of Francis Bacon's idea of how to arrive at scientific progress had to do with conducting experiments using our own human experience. Thomas Hobbes didn't feel the same way for reasons that will be familiar to us. I remember when I used to live next door to some Mormon people who came over and tried to convert me on a regular basis, a question they asked me was, if you were on trial for murder, what is the one type of evidence that you would want on your side more than anything else? I said, video evidence? And they said, NO! Eye-witness testimony! And I said, that is the worst kind of evidence. Human experience is very shaky, multiple people can all experience the same event and have very different accounts of what actually took place. Not only do biases that we hold prevent us from seeing reality, but we are gathering evidence through flawed senses to begin with. These things that make eye-witness testimony unreliable are what Francis Bacon would call the idols of the mind. Thomas Hobbes would call them the reason why we need a better way to arrive at knowledge and what Hobbes says in the Leviathan is that our method should be more centered around language than human experience. He says: "For though the nature of that we conceive, be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body, and prejudices of opinion, gives everything a tincture of our different passions. And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words; which besides the signification of what we imagine their nature, have a signification also

of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker."To understand where he is coming from, let's talk about the Leviathan for a second. Thomas Hobbes is in a sort of scientific coalition with Francis Bacon. Both he and Bacon represent this shift from the humanistic way of thinking that sparked the Renaissance into a more scientific approach. Hobbes lived as a contemporary of people like Galileo, people that are seen as the fathers of the scientific revolution. Because of this, he has a tremendous amount of reverence for the process used to arrive at scientific and mathematical proofs. He says: "In Geometry (which is the onely Science that it hath pleased God hitherto to bestow upon mankind), men begin at settling the significations of their words; which settling of significations, they call Definitions; and place them at the beginning of their reckoning." Let's go back to the very beginning when mathematics didn't exist; humans needed to look at the world and arrive at first principles. Fundamental concepts that can be obviously agreed upon that we can then base further progress on. For example, some guy somewhere initially recognized that One rock added to One rock gives you two rocks. Two rocks and two rocks equal four rocks. You can add rocks or take away rocks...then you can look at this triangle shaped thing on the ground and see that this side is 3 rocks long, this side is 4 rocks long, so because this angle is ninety degrees, this side has to be five rocks long. From these sorts of first principles we can extrapolate from them and arrive at more complicated concepts, but those more complicated concepts are reliable because they are soundly based on the first principles. Hobbes admires this way of reasoning so much, that he lays out his Leviathan in a very similar way. The entire Leviathan which is multiple books long, the first book having about 15 chapters, and for the entire thing he is walking us down this path of reason based on the principles he has already laid out. For instance, the first chapter of the Leviathan is centered around explaining how and why we sense and form thoughts and ideas. Then from there he goes on to say that through reason we arrive at the stage where we use speech as a means to convey these ideas to others and be able to record them for future thoughts to be based on. He says: "The Use and End of Reason, is not the finding of the summe, and truth of one, or a few consequences, remote from the first definitions, and settled signification of names; but to begin at these; and

proceed from one consequence to another. For there can be no certainty of the last Conclusion, without a certainty of all those Affirmation and Negations, on which it was grounded, and inferred."Anyway, so the Leviathan is a philosophical work structured not unlike something a scientist or mathematician would make. By using this way of reasoning and being so scientifically minded in the first place, he produces a really unique body of work. He eventually says, that everything in the entire universe is made of physical matter. No exceptions. Each and everything thing has dimensions, and if we talk about a substance that doesn't have dimensions then it does not exist at all. But this raises a very obvious question for people in Hobbes' day. How can he explain things that we know exist, but we don't perceive dimensions of any sort?Well, Hobbes' explanation is that these things DO exist in a physical form, but who said that just because something exists in a physical form that our senses need to necessarily be able to see it? Humans are a purely physical being as well. We are machines made of bones, skin, flesh and blood, just like all the other animals in the world, and what we should take from this is that we have components, like those of a machine that are not perfect. No matter how much arguing or discourse happens to try to arrive at truth, we still are fighting a losing battle if we are trying to arrive at knowledge through our senses. He arrives at what he thinks is a much better way of arriving at what we would call science:"Reason is . . . attained by Industry; first in apt imposing of Names; and secondly by getting a good and orderly Method in proceeding from the Elements, which are Names, to Assertions made by Connexion of one of them to another; and so to Syllogisms, which are the Connexions of one Assertion to another, till we come to a knowledge of all the Consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand; and that is it, men call SCIENCE."Hobbes describes science as the knowledge of all of the consequences of words. Hobbes saw the same problems with human experience that Francis Bacon did, but he thought they weren't idols of the mind that could be controlled, he thought that our knowledge should be based on things that were more secure and trustworthy. What Hobbes is talking about is what we talked about in the Francis Bacon episode. When I say microphone, a different image of microphone comes up in the head of everybody listening. But if we are trying to

arrive at scientific principles about the microphone that I am talking about, how can we ever accurately do that unless if we have a word, or a super specific way to describe THIS PARTICULAR MICROPHONE. Sure, we have adjectives. I can say a black studio microphone with a pop filter, I can even say that brand name and model number, but it still wouldn't be nearly trustworthy enough. Hobbes thinks that as a society we need to sit down and define EXACTLY what everything is. A good way to think about it is that Hobbes wants us to walk around and make the ENTIRE WORLD one of those Ikea sample rooms where you can look at any particular piece from the room and it has a serial number attached to it. Now you may be saying, OK this is great if you're a scientist, but how does this have anything to do with me in my everyday life? This problem of different words conjuring up different images in people's heads is a HUGE problem that can easily lead to a misunderstanding. If you're a guy out on the Golf course driving around on the golf cart at the country club and your wife calls you and says "Where are you?" and you say I'm at the club. Well she could easily start freaking out! At the club? Are you dancing with other women? Are you doing drugs? No! I didn't say In DA club...I said at the club! The country club! These sort of misunderstandings based on language might only be a temporary inconvenience in our personal lives, but when it comes to arriving at scientific first principles that we will base all of our future knowledge on, you can see how what's at stake changes how accepting people might be about human experience. These fundamental problems lead to fundamental disagreements. Disagreements that Hobbes thinks do nothing but needlessly divide humans from each other and only serve to challenge the preservation of peace that we aim for with the social contract. So these misunderstandings that we have are not just things that get you into an argument with your wife, they are obstacles when trying to maintain the peace provided by the social contract and Hobbes thinks that his method helps to prevent these misunderstandings from happening.

Descartes pt. 1 - A little context

Episode #028

This is a transcript of episode #028 on Descartes pt. 1. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Rene Descartes is one of these people whose reputation precedes him so much that to dive right into the episode and start talking about his life would be a little cavalier for me. He's one of those names from philosophy that even people that have little to no experience trudging miserably through philosophical treatises, pretty much everybody has a little bit of an idea of who he was. Most people I've directly spoken to typically can identify him as the guy that said "I think, therefore I am". Maybe you're listening to this trying to figure out what that even means. But Descartes is much more than just this single sentence. He is often credited as being the father of modern philosophy. To truly understand why he is so influential, I think it is important to talk about his life and the time period he was living through. When you just take the sentence at face value "I think, therefore I am." What is that even saying? It sounds like the most painfully obvious statement in the world to a modern layperson. I mean, this is how dumb they were back then? It took them thousands of years just to figure out that they were thinking? Well, no. Not exactly. I suppose the best way to begin is to say something that we've touched on many times before in this podcast: The world today is very different than the world back then. People were lost and confused. It's pretty easy to understand why; just think about what they've been through recently. Things weren't always this chaotic for these people. They used to know everything. For a long time, Humanity was the smartest guy he knew. There were a lot of things that EVERYBODY thought they knew for certain but then that came crashing down in a big way. In multiple different ways. We've seen the Protestant Reformation where the implementation of the religion of an entire millennium came crashing down. People were told this stuff was the word of God; the way the church did things was endorsed by God; the rituals you performed earned you favor with God. For a thousand years these people were told that this stuff was infallible. And it better be,

considering that your eternal fate is at stake. I mean, if you believed that an omniscient, omnipotent God laid out a set of behavioral restrictions for you to follow centuries ago in a language you can't speak, then you need to be pretty certain about what's expected of you because it's not exactly easy for you to get the guy on the phone and ask for some clarifications on all this stuff. The one path, the one correct set of behaviors that actually earned you a place in God's kingdom instead of etching your name into the charred walls of the damned, these behaviors changed drastically with the protestant reformation. And as an average person living at the time was there anything else you needed to be more sure about than that? Alright so just imagine living back then. How terrified would you be? How can you know for certain that you are going to heaven? What if the way these people told you was the way to earn your salvation, what if this whole time you had been doing it wrong. You've thought this whole time that you and God are on pretty good terms, but what if you've been doing it wrong all along? What if this is the reason why bad stuff is still happening to you? What if this is the reason you got that flat tire the other day? And then once you decide that the church authority has been misrepresenting this stuff, how can you be confident in what replaces it? How do you know THAT stuff is the correct way to earn your spot in the club? Can we ever interpret the words of God written down by the select few chosen people and arrive at a system that we KNOW is accurate? With COMPLETE certainty. Can we? I want you to remember this question. There were other entire areas of thought that were being called into question at the time. For example, Scholasticism, the dialectical method of reasoning and education that was dominant throughout the entire Middle Ages that was slowly being overthrown by the new Humanistic way of looking at things which really wasn't that new because it was a hearkening back to classical antiquity. People had started to question the role of government in the individuals life. Was this feudal system that we had used for so long where a large peasant class lives a symbiotic lifestyle with overlords the best way to do things, or should we revolt and try to overthrow this outdated system. Concepts that were older than the new testament itself were being shattered. The Ptolemaic model of the universe with the earth at the center and the sun and the rest of the celestial bodies

revolving around us; it was becoming very clear that it wasn't true. Copernicus came out with *On the Revolutions of the Celestial Spheres*, Galileo was working on a mathematical approach to physics. That was thrown out the window. For the longest time, Humans thought they were the smartest guy at the party. They thought they had everything figured out. But much like that guy at the party that talks really loud and is overconfident and thinks he knows everything, it just takes someone with a marginal amount of critical thinking to ask him the right questions to make him realize that he might not know as much as he thought. Socrates comes in and asks him a question and his voice gets a little softer and he's a little less confident. Then he figures out something else is completely wrong and he gets a little more timid. Well eventually humanity became Michael Cera. This stuff we thought we were SO CERTAIN about for SO LONG is garbage. What do we do now? Alright, let's start over, let's try to figure everything out again, but this time let's try to base our knowledge on something a whole lot more substantive than we did last time. There are all different kinds of people emerging on the scene now. There's a group of people that say, like the question people asked about religion truth, can we know anything for certain? Maybe we can't! But then on the other hand there's this group of people out there like Francis Bacon that think not only CAN we arrive at certain knowledge, but it is the savior of humanity! It's gonna solve all of humanity's problems! We will be living in a utopia! There are other people out there that think maybe it won't solve all of humanities problems, but it seems possible to find a SINGLE method that can unite all of the different sciences into one. A single method to arrive at scientific truths, which would obviously speed things up drastically. What we see emerging in the scientific approaches of Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon is this search. But nobody is satisfied with what they have found yet. What emerges from these people is one of the most famous divides in the history of philosophy and the man that started it...the man that put his stake in the ground for people to oppose was Rene Descartes. This famous rivalry of thinkers poised on different sides of a single issue brought us so many brilliant ideas and insights that it is what we are going to be talking about for a while. I'm talking about the famous divide between the continental rationalists and the British empiricists. We know

what rationalism and empiricism are. Rationalism is the idea that knowledge can be arrived at through the use of reason. Empiricism which is that knowledge has to be arrived at through sense experience. These can be seen as the two premises from which people argued in this age of confusion to try to arrive at knowledge that is more trustworthy than what we had before. This famous divide in thinking goes like this, although some people make slight adjustments: The three big British Empiricists were John Locke, George Berkeley and David Hume; the three big continental rationalists were Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz, but there were some other thinkers thrown in there as well that we are certainly going to talk about. Some people lump Immanuel Kant into the rationalists, some people say he was the guy who managed to fuse together the two approaches, either way he is the climax of this famous divide between the continental rationalists and the British empiricists. But Descartes started it all. It's funny. The best way to understand where Descartes was coming from is to think of this guy...this guy that throughout their life has been conditioned to have the most extreme, oversimplified viewpoints you have ever met. But I'm not talking about Descartes when I say that, I am talking about who Descartes is responding to in his work...this guy with the oversimplified viewpoints represents the entire human race. This is the reason I got into philosophy in the first place. I noticed that I was scared and so was everybody else around me. And really, who can blame them? There is no user's manual for living as a human being on this planet! There's no community college class you can go to that teaches you the way everything truly is. In fact, you can go to school for 10 years and learn about one subject and AT BEST you are an expert in one tiny little sliver of this incredibly diverse, complicated world. And when things are diverse and complicated they can easily become overwhelming to people. When things are overwhelming, we try to simplify them. As a young whippersnapper, I recognized I was young and stupid. I looked around me and saw that pretty much everyone I had ever met has some black and white way of looking at certain issues that may help them FEEL like they are an expert in the field, but really they're just as confused as I was. They just were willing to mask their uncertainty with complacency. I mean, you see it all the time: This particular race of

people are ruining the world. Religion is ruining the world, Democrats are ruining the world. And this is just one form of it. You ask most people what their most firmly held conviction is...what is the thing that you believe in the most and it doesn't take many questions for them to see that it might not be that simple. Francis Bacon has a quote from during this time period where he said "Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know."The world is not black and white. There is black and white, but then there are about a million different shades of grey in between them where reality always lies and the last thing I wanted to do as a young adult is fall into this trap simply because it was easy for me to do it. For some reason I was willing to admit to myself that I was a dumb kid. I was willing to admit that I didn't know anything. Well in this example, Descartes represents this way of thinking and the conditioned beliefs of humanity during his time period are represented by this over-the-top extremely oversimplified guy talking really loud at a party. Just imagine a guy that was born into a really strange household. His parents are good parents, they engage him a lot and try to educate him about the world the best they can, but they have a really oversimplified, unrealistic view of the world. Through years and years of conditioning, this guy becomes this cocktail of black and white views. You can insert your favorite ones here: He's a racist, doomsday prepper, probably believes in some sort of reptilian shape shifters at the head of our government...take your pick. Well once that guy is that far off the rails with oversimplified views, once that guy has a criterion of truth that is THAT easily met, lets say we had to prescribe some method for him to be brought back to reality, what would he have to do? Well this is the problem Descartes was faced with back in his time. Thinking lazy is what got us into trouble in the first place. Europe got so far off the rails with all the things we THOUGHT we knew so well because it had a criterion of truth that was shaky. Descartes thought that in order for us to arrive at certain knowledge that was trustworthy enough to base our future knowledge on and could transform humanity as we know it, in order for us to get there, we needed to start over. We needed to establish first principles, things that are absolutely true, so true they are self-evident and then through reason arrive at further conclusions. The way he did this is through a rigorous

method of doubt, one comparable to Pyhrro in ancient Greece."I must once, for all, seriously undertake to rid myself of all the opinions which I had previously accepted and commence to build anew from the foundation, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences."Remember, one group of people he was fighting against was the radical skeptics, people that thought there was no way to EVER know anything for certain. And to be fair, nobody knew if there was. In many ways, people still don't know if there is. Descartes decided that in order to refute these radical skeptics he had to prove to them that some things CAN be known for certain and that THOSE things should be known as first principles that we can then use to reason and find further knowledge. But he had to be certain. He couldn't just sit down and come up with a couple dozen things he knows for certain and then expect the skeptics to take his word for it. They would ruthlessly tear anything he said apart. If there was ANY room for doubt, he would fail."[Since] reason already persuades me that I ought no less carefully withhold my assent from matters which are not entirely certain and indubitable than from those which appear to me manifestly to be false, if I am able to find in each one some reason to doubt, this will suffice to justify my rejecting the whole. "The only way he could be certain that his knowledge would hold up to the radical skeptic scrutiny is if Descartes himself made sure to argue against his own thoughts just as well as the greatest skeptics certainly would. This method of doubting absolutely everything in order to eventually arrive at first principles to base future philosophy on is really what he is best known for. Let me explain how Descartes did it and then we can see how it applies to our loud, naive friend at the party that we've been talking about. Descartes starts by asking the easy questions. We'd probably ask questions like: Is this Job REALLY the best job for me? Is this spouse of mine REALLY the love of my life? But then he goes deeper into doubt. He starts asking, what is it exactly that I am? And then deeper into doubt. He goes so deep that he questions whether the world around us is actually real. I mean, couldn't it be true? He says haven't our senses fooled all of us at some point in time? A mirage in the desert? You look at an optical illusion, your eyes play tricks on you? Descartes says that when he is dreaming, at least when he is inside of the dream, he thinks he is awake. He

doesn't know until after he wakes up with the sheets sticking to his body that he was actually dreaming. How can we know for certain that we aren't dreaming right here, right now? This is kind of embarrassing that I am using this example because it is so widely used, but there is so much ninja philosophy sprinkled around in the Matrix trilogy that it becomes a very useful tool when trying to explain these things. Morpheus asks Neo at a certain point in the first movie, how would you be able to tell the difference between the dream world and the real world? Descartes asks, centuries before the Wachowski brothers did LSD for the first time, how can we be CERTAIN this world that we perceive is real? "I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep." But wait! Descartes says that sure, our senses may always be at least potentially deceiving us, but certain things must be true even if we can't use our senses to accurately measure them. The things that make up the framework of the universe, things that are ALWAYS true, things like $2+2=4$ and the parallel postulate. We may not be able to use our senses to arrive at truth, but we can use reason to arrive at these constants of the universe. But wait, there's more! Descartes goes even further! He says that even these things that are seemingly constant might not be true because there could be an entity whose whole existence is dedicated to deceiving us. How do we know that isn't the case? "I shall then suppose . . . some evil genius not less powerful than deceitful, has employed his whole energies in deceiving me; I shall consider that . . . all . . . external things are but illusions and dreams of which this genius has availed himself to lay traps for my credulity." Descartes asks, how can I be certain that there isn't some evil demon assigned to me and my life that spends every second of every day trying to deceive me into believing the world exists. Kind of like in Monsters Inc. when there is a monster assigned to every child in the world...how do we know that we don't have Sully assigned to our senses and he spends all day every day trying to convince us that cars exist, that food exists, that other people exist. How can we be CERTAIN that is not the case? Descartes says, we can't. But we can be certain about one thing. That we are thinking. Because even if the demon feeds us a thought that is intended to be deceptive, we are still thinking. A deceptive thought is still a thought, so

therefore we must be thinking things. Descartes then reasons that simply by arriving at the self-evident point that we are thinking, we thereby exist. To him, we have to be in order to be thinking. I think, therefore I am. Descartes talks a lot about this method of rigorous doubt. He himself says that each individual person shouldn't apply this method to everything in their life as he did. That would be pointless. What possible benefit could we really get from doubting whether a hairdryer really exists. But what he does mention briefly is that this method of doubt is one that we must apply to our own critical beliefs. We should hold them up to the most intense skeptical scrutiny because like us pretending to know that that hair dryer exists, we can be conditioned to believe other things are the case. Things that can cause us harm. Things that prevent us from living life fully. We shouldn't apply this method to ALL of our beliefs. There are definitely beliefs that we all hold that are useful, but should we vilify entire groups of people or put needless obstacles in front of us in our personal lives simply because we want the world to be more simple than it actually is? Let's go back to our racist friend at the party. He's got this whole elaborate system of oversimplified beliefs that he's been spoon fed and conditioned to believe by his parents and now he lives his life as though they are the gospel truth. Think of how much more centered and based in reality his thoughts would be if he applied the method of doubt that Descartes outlines. What would happen if he put his racist views under the microscope? What if this guy was forced to ask himself, "Is it possible that this single race of people, this group of people whose ancestors hailed from this small proximity with more or less sunlight, is it possible that they are not the downfall of the human species?" Is it possible that the true cause is really much more complex based on historical events, trends and forces, government inefficiency, whatever it is. Descartes would say that if there is even a shadow of a doubt that you should throw that belief out and start over again. How would a philosopher think about this? Just think of how much of a positive change abolishing that one oversimplification could make in this guy's life. Now that he isn't denouncing an entire race of people, he frees up a lot of things that used to be impossible. Now that he isn't denouncing this race of people he has a lot more people he could potentially be friends with. This one change yields more

meaningful relationships in his life. Now he doesn't have to walk around in a public place scowling at certain people based on their ethnicity, he doesn't have to have all the negative thoughts racing through his head when he sees them. "There they go, walking through the Farmers Market, RUINING THE WORLD AS USUAL." Think of how much that benefits him. One byproduct of this change in his thoughts might be that he has more influence in the world than he initially thought! I mean, if this guy thinks the world is being brought down by a single race of people, he must also feel a certain amount of helplessness. How can he nurture the positive growth of the world when the simple PRESENCE of these people brings it down in his head? By thinking that the problems in the world are caused by societal forces, maybe he would feel a sense of empowerment, like he could actually make a change if he dedicated his time wisely! And think of what every Greek Philosopher would say about the satisfaction he stands to gain simply from the intellectual pursuit. Learning about all of the different opinions from anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists and maybe one day arriving at the greatest gift to a mind imaginable: the understanding of truth. What criterion of truth is ample enough as a basis to marginalize entire groups of people? Descartes talks a lot about these conditioned biased thoughts. He actually gives a really great metaphor about apples. When you have a barrel of apples and you know that somewhere in that barrel are some bad apples that might spoil the whole bunch, what do you do? You can't go sifting through trying to delicately pick out the bad ones, what if you miss one? That one bad apple could ruin all of the rest of the good ones! Instead, you should dump all of the apples out and start over that way you are certain that you got all of them. One biased thought arrived at based on conditioning is enough to spoil the whole barrel so to speak. Now next time on the show we're going to go further into Descartes life, the relationships that shaped his thought and more about how his Metaphysics shaped the famous divide between the continental rationalists and the British empiricists. Whenever you were forced to graph something on a Cartesian plane in mathematics, you can thank Descartes for making it possible. Before Descartes came along math was clearly separated into two parts: Geometry and Algebra. They were seen as two completely different areas of study.

There weren't any algebraic equations to explain aspects of geometrical shapes and the people of the time period saw no reason to draw visual aids when practicing algebra. Descartes changed all of this. Although he never drew a second axis, he used the same tactics. He developed a way to show points in a uniform, evenly segmented plane around two perpendicular lines. By doing this, he not only connected the two practices but revolutionized mathematics by creating the foundations for analytic geometry.

Descartes pt. 2

Episode #029

This is a transcript of episode #029 on Descartes pt. 2. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Have you ever met one of those annoying people that always holds the opposite opinion of whatever the popular consensus is? No matter what it is, your life is a Shakespearean play and this guy is the contrarian to everything that everybody says. You could say I love the movie UP! by Pixar, what an incredible job they did at merging the elements of a film that both kids and adults like. This guy would go: yeah, no, I just couldn't get into it because...Balloons on a house? I just don't think that's very realistic. You could say: You know what I love? Fresh tuna. Directly from the ocean Fisherman catches it, takes it to the dock, somebody buys it and cooks it within hours. Doesn't get much better than that does it contrarian friend? Yeah, no My thing is I really like it from the can. Yeah, I really like it when it gets to sit at room temperature for 6-8 months and THEN I get to eat it. That's my thing. There are a million examples of how this conversation may go and with some of them you just want to say, "No." You're dead wrong. There's nothing you can ever say that would make you right. Some things are just inherently BETTER. There is NO POSSIBLE WAY canned tuna is better than one freshly caught out of the ocean! We're talking about the beginning of this famous divide in philosophy between the continental rationalists and the British empiricists and this argument is not that far from what these philosophers were feeling. The reason this contrarian friend of yours is so annoying is because you can't prove that you are right. It seems so obvious. What sane person chooses canned tuna over fresh tuna? But every single preference we have, from the taste of this hamburger vs that hamburger or the color of these curtains over those curtains, all of these preferences are based on our own individually flawed sense organs and their map of the world. See, if you talked to this annoying friend of yours and told them that you think $2+2=4$, they couldn't argue with you. Nobody is saying, maybe $2+2=4$ to YOU, but to ME it equals 17 and you need to be

respectful of that. No, these are mathematical certainties; there is no room for interpretation. Now if you were living during a time when the collective goal of Europe and the task that you've dedicated your life to was trying to find a foundation on which truth can be arrived at, what gauge do you use to decide what "facts" are up to the standards? Are you content with basing all future knowledge on Disney/Pixar's UP! is a very good movie? Or would you feel more comfortable basing it on $2+2=4$. This is how Descartes viewed the world. The collective goal was to find what Descartes labeled and envisioned as a *Mathesis Universalis*. Or a sort of universal language that relies heavily on mathematics to try to arrive at scientific truths and hopefully combine all these different areas of study into one comprehensive one. See, there was thinking at the time that all of these different areas that we're dedicating our thought to, all of these different natural sciences physics, chemistry, biology and then other things like algebra, geometry, there was a thinking that all of these things were needlessly fragmented. Maybe ALL of these different areas had a cohesiveness that has eluded us until now. Maybe there was a logic that applied to all of them. Maybe there was a single method we could apply to all of these seemingly different areas of study that could lead to progress in all of them. You know, by the time of Descartes, we had been working on geometry for quite some time, but compared to geometry we were neanderthals when it came to algebra. Descartes and others thought that maybe the universe was so well ordered that the connections that we've made in a field like geometry, the relationships between different advancements, maybe that would be compatible to other fields as well. Maybe we could find an overall outline and then put some tissue paper over it and trace it out for other fields as well. Yeah, sounds pretty straight forward doesn't it? Well, Descartes thought he could do it. If someone told you they were going to try to undergo a task like that in today's world, you would probably look at them like they were straining, red-faced trying to push their car down the road with the E-brake on. Times have changed! To even understand ONE of these fields you'd have to go to school for a decade of your life, probably more! How are you going to A) learn enough about all of these fields to be able to be considered an expert and B) actually find the similarities? Well, back in the time of Descartes and this

famous divide, we didn't know as much in all of these fields. It was a perfectly reasonable ambition to think that a single man with no life and an inferiority complex could find a universal approach to these things. This is fascinating to me and if you love a good mystery, you have to be interested in this time period. Nobody knew whether science was possible, how to get there or even what sort of benefits it would bring to human life if we ever found it. But just the possibility that it was out there sparked all of these different people we've been talking about to search for it. It was like the Apollo Program for the advent of science. It was like JFK stood up there and said I believe we can have a scientific method by the end of the decade, and these were the people that blindly dedicated their life to a task that may have been impossible. What sort of person does that take? What sort of person does it take to be a visionary challenger of the status quo? To take an idea that may not even be possible from their imagination and to not only execute it, but to change the course of human history with it? I've been watching a lot of these Game changers things on Netflix about people like Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg and it's really interesting to see the common personality traits that these people have with Rene Descartes. So let's make today's episode a little like one of those episodes on Netflix. The way it typically works is you learn about the life and story of one of these Game changers and then you learn how they actually changed the game, you learn a little about how they think and you typically come away with a few nuggets of wisdom. So let's learn about Descartes' life and then we can talk about how if he lived today his personality would make him a good candidate to be one of these people like Steve Jobs or Mark Zuckerberg. Descartes had one of the most meandering, oddly-employed lives I have ever read about. If you were the hiring manager for a modern day company and looked at Descartes resume and gave him an interview, by the end of the interview you might think he was the WORST employee that has ever existed. If you asked him if he could wake up at 6am and work the day shift, he would say no: he slept in until noon almost everyday of his life without exception. If you asked him what his five year plan was and if he had the ability to settle down, take one vacation a year and be a loyal servant of corporatism, he would say no: he traveled almost constantly

throughout his life and wouldn't think of sitting still. But despite these personality traits that make him a horrible employee for any modern company, if you were bad enough at hiring people to give him a shot he would be the most brilliant thinker you have ever encountered. He was born on March 31, 1596 in France. He had three older siblings and his mother died very shortly after he was born while trying to give birth to what would have been his younger brother. With his mother gone, his father needed to step up and spend double time with all of his kids to try to make up for it, but he had a job as a judge which required him to be absent for many months at a time. Because of this, Descartes spent most of his childhood completely alone. But that wasn't all! He also was notoriously sick as a youth. He talks frequently about the predispositions he had to different ailments, and being left alone to wallow in his thoughts about all of the constant health problems ended up turning him into a severe hypochondriac throughout adulthood. After getting his education from the Jesuit College Royale, the only thing he really learned from it all was how inaccurate he thought it all was. He compared his education to the world of fiction, he talks about how as a rational person it is difficult for him to read fiction when he sees all of the apparent contradictions of the story and reality. But he saw the same contradictions when being taught all of these CERTAINTIES in school. This supposedly led him to ask the question, Can we know anything for certain? He didn't think he knew anything for certain, and all of these teachers yelling at people at the Jesuit College seemed to be just as confused as he was. His dad wanted him to follow in his footsteps, you know get a real job in law, like him. After studying it for a few years he decided he didn't like it and ran off to Paris. He basically sat around all day, learned about stuff and wrote treatises on that stuff. This life seems like absolute paradise for a philosopher, but he didn't know that he was a philosopher yet, so he got tired of that too. Too many people polluting his thoughts, coming around doing terrible terrible things to him, like trying to talk and hang out with him. So he moved away and lived in solitude. But then he got tired of SOLITUDE, so he did the most logical next step imaginable, he signed up for the army as a volunteer officer. Now you'd think, that when you're in the army that the last thing you are going to be allowed to do is wake up at noon

and live like a transient, but apparently it wasn't a problem until one day when Descartes even got bored of the army! But then he finally found it. He finally found something that he could be passionate about and when he tells the story you can't help but think of that famous scene from the movie Good Will Hunting when the professor posts the unsolvable math equation on the wall and then Matt Damon solves it when he's taking a break from scrubbing the toilets of the university. One day Descartes was wandering down the road and came across a posting on the wall that showed a very difficult to solve math problem and challenged anyone and everyone to try to solve it. But there was one problem. Descartes was in Holland at the time and he didn't speak any Dutch, so he didn't know exactly what the instructions were for solving the problem. So he turns to his right and asks the guy next to him to translate it for him, the guy says "I'm only going to translate it for you if you try to solve it.", and then the next day Descartes shows up at the guy's house with the problem perfectly solved. This is the first time Descartes spoke to Isaac Beeckman. Beeckman was the friend and mentor that got Descartes focused. He was so turned off from mathematical pursuits from his time in school that he forgot how good he was at it. He forgot how much he loved it. Beeckman helped him rekindle this love. The next big event in Descartes life may have been facilitated by the weather. There was a historically cold winter one year where he was living. So cold, that he claims he couldn't take it anymore and decided to live in a stove. Some people think he was joking when he said "stove", some people think he was speaking figuratively and just meant a really warm, heated room; but even if he spent his days curled up inside of a stove nothing could be more bizarre than what happened to him during this cold, desolate winter. Descartes says that one of these days as he was sitting inside of his stove thinking about stuff, he had a vision. There are a lot of different interpretations of exactly what he saw or what happened, but what seems to be clear is that he saw something that made him certain that the universe was ordered in such a way that some undiscovered mathematical system could be used to fully understand it. Then, that very same night as he drifted off into his 12 hours of sleep, he had a series of vivid dreams that underscored everything that he had a vision of while sitting in the stove. In the first dream he was

walking down the street trying to get to his church, but there was a MONSTROUS wind pushing him back. He was fighting against it as hard as he could, he looked like a small market weatherman trying to make a name for himself, going out standing in the middle of a hurricane being hurled around by the wind. Then somebody randomly says to him that somebody wants to give him a melon. In the second dream he is sitting in a room that is pitch black and a terrified and then a giant crashing sound happens and sparks start flying all around the room. The last dream is up for debate. Some people don't even think he had a third dream, but the important part is after this series of visions that he had, his view of the universe and his place within it was changed forever. This is the moment when he leveled up from transient genius to effective visionary genius. This is what fascinates me the most about Descartes and people like Descartes. I am absolutely convinced that Descartes is the Steve Jobs of his generation. If nothing else, he definitely represents this extraordinary type of person that is needed to progress the human species. Descartes was a sickly child and a hypochondriac as an adult. He could've accepted that he was a sick person and just spent his life trying to be as healthy as possible. Descartes didn't need to do any of what he did, so why did he? There are two very distinct approaches to adversity in life that probably are opposite ends of a giant spectrum and how many of each of these types of people exist really depends on your individual world view. On one end of the spectrum you have a type of person, we've all met somebody like this before, it is the type of person who approaches life as a tourist. Life is about enjoying yourself as much as possible. When this guy's walking down the path of his life and there is a fork in the road and a boulder drops in front of him and is blocking the path he wants to go down, well it's not immediately enjoyable to exert yourself to climb over the boulder. It's not fun to try to find a solution to the problem, so this guy meets adversity with resistance. In the metaphor he kind of shrugs his shoulders and walks down the other path saying to everyone, "Well, this obstacle was in my way, so I had to go down this path." This guy is not a bad person, but he does live his life circumventing adversity and as a victim of circumstance. Things HAPPEN to this guy, he doesn't make things happen. On the other end of the spectrum there's this person like

Descartes or Steve Jobs. It's this type of person that when that boulder drops down in front of them and is blocking their path, they don't see it as an annoying obstacle. They see it as an opportunity for growth. This is the type of person that embraces adversity. This is the type of person that can visualize a future where that boulder no longer exists, where future people walking down the path can just walk by where this giant boulder used to sit and these people find a way to make it happen. Keep in mind, Descartes didn't need to adopt this approach to adversity. Like we talked about last time, the main problem that he faced, the main problem that many thinkers faced during his time, was uncertainty. Was knowledge even possible? What is science? Let's say we can find a method to understand the natural world, what benefits are we really going to gain from all that? To us in modern times, it's very easy to look back and wonder how anyone could doubt the possibility of science and the ability of science to drastically improve the lives of human beings everywhere but it wasn't clear back then. Just how Steve Jobs visualized a world where a functional, practical, all-in-one device existed that most people could afford; Descartes visualized a world where a functional, practical, all-in-one mathematical system existed that could help up understand the world. Let's not just gloss over that word "system". This is a big part of who Descartes was. I think by talking about the systematic way Descartes approaches thought in general, we can learn something about ourselves. Systematic thinking is a hallmark of this type of effective person who embraces adversity and removes these obstacles from their path. You know, we talked in the episode covering Aristotelean Ethics about achieving a "mastery" of life. Whenever you master any sort of activity, really what you are doing is developing a substantive reason for WHY you are doing each and every individual thing you do. Even something as simple as cooking eggs I was doing horrendously bad. I used to just crack the eggs into a pan, keep the heat low, when it turns white you scramble it up, put a little seasoning on it and you're good to go. But after watching Gordon Ramsey cook eggs, after listening to a true master talk about all of the different considerations he makes and contingency plans I realized that I hadn't the faintest idea how to make eggs properly. I want everybody to think right now of the thing that you are the best at. If somebody compiled a world

rankings for every activity in the world, which activity would you be ranked the highest in? Now think back to the first time you ever did it. You were probably doing it the same way I was cooking eggs. But through hundreds of hours of practice, conducting little personal experiments, creating decision trees in your mind, developing contingency plans, eventually by doing all of these things you developed a system for doing it. Descartes was essentially trying to create a system for the universe. The catalyst that he thought would make that possible was mathematics. This guy was not just wandering throughout life complaining about all of the bad things that happened to him. He grabbed the helm of the ship and navigated the waters. You can't help but notice when you read him talk about the way he used to go about his everyday life that he applied this systematic approach to almost every object of his thought. In fact, late in his life he worked on a philosophical treatise that he never actually finished that was titled Rules for the Direction of the Mind. He lays out 12 rules that we should use to ensure that we are thinking about things in an appropriate way for science or philosophy, and he does a fine job. But what he also does is give us a realistic and systematic way of approaching any adversity we face in our lives...ANY BOULDER that is blocking our path. The hardest part of handling adversity in our personal lives is uncertainty. Very similar to the uncertainty Descartes dedicated his life to destroying. Descartes understood that committing to a solution and moving forward with it would be much easier if we could identify with certainty what the problem actually was. Once we knew what the problem was, if we used a systematic approach and understood how the problem related to everything else in our life, we would be in a much better place to solve it. He talks about this level of efficiency throughout most of his works, and really it was what he was all about. Developing certainty. He says: "Divide each difficulty into as many parts as is feasible and necessary to resolve it." Rule nine in his Rules for the Direction of the Mind says: "We ought to give the whole of our attention to the most insignificant and most easily mastered facts, and remain a long time in contemplation of them until we are accustomed to behold the truth clearly and distinctly." What he's saying is that when you have a problem, be it scientific, philosophical or in your everyday life, if you're having

trouble trying to solve it, break it down into the smallest pieces you possibly can and then behold the truth. The thinking is, these smaller pieces are much less complex, much easier for our minds to manage, so with less moving parts involved there is less opportunity for error. Much more opportunity for us to see truth clearly and distinctly. Rule number three of his Rules for the Direction of the Mind is: "As regards any subject we propose to investigate, we must inquire not what other people have thought, or what we ourselves conjecture, but what we can clearly and manifestly perceive by intuition or deduce with certainty. For there is no other way of acquiring knowledge." On that same note he said: "So blind is the curiosity by which mortals are possessed, that they often conduct their minds along unexplored routes, having no reason to hope for success, but merely being willing to risk the experiment of finding whether the truth they seek lies there." What he's warning against is the tendency for humans to have a preconceived idea in their head of what they want the truth to be and then allowing that preconceived notion to shade the way that they view reality or the way they interpret the results of experiments. This is something we see ALL THE TIME in modern "science". (and I put that in quotation marks because it is not science). You have people that conduct surveys or scientific experiments, and before they even take the first sample they already have in their minds what they want the outcome of the experiment to be. So either because of their own human biases or because they are paid to, they look for every possible thing to reinforce what they WANT the outcome to be. Just watch any presidential debate in the last few election cycles and you'll have both people citing studies and surveys that came to conclusions that were DIAMETRIC opposites of each other. So there is definitely a scientific application for this rule, but it also applies to us in our personal lives. For example, let's say that you have a strong suspicion that your wife is cheating on you. You watch her sneak out of bed late at night and have a "mysterious" phone call. You walk in the room she hangs up the phone quickly. You notice she gets needlessly dressed up one morning and then you call her work at lunch time and left work early so you race home to catch her in the act and you storm in through the front door and she's setting up a surprise party for you. Let's not conduct experiments or

gather evidence with too much confidence about what the outcome is going to be. It's fine to have a hypothesis, but at a certain point you may be misreading what is actually happening. It's hard sometimes because we all think that the experiments that we've conducted up until this point in our lives is the greatest collection of scientific research ever undertaken. We all think we are looking at the world through a more accurate lens than everyone else around us, even if we acknowledge that we make more mistakes than others. Descartes said: "Common sense is the most fairly distributed thing in the world, for each one thinks he is so well-endowed with it that even those who are hardest to satisfy in all other matters are not in the habit of desiring more of it than they already have." This quote is hilarious to me, and absolutely true. People ask for a LOT of stuff. They tell other people about all kinds of stuff that they're lacking that they need, but one thing you never hear even the lowliest street beggar ask for is common sense. He thinks he's got it all figured out. There's a great quote by Abraham Lincoln: Common sense is the collection of prejudices we acquire from birth until the age of 18. Anyway, next episode we are going to be talking about Descartes' proof of God's existence. This is one of the most widely studied proofs and naturally one of the most commented on. Get ready for a spirited debate between Descartes and some of the greatest minds who ever lived. I'll talk to you guys next time.

God Exists

Episode #030

This is a transcript of episode #030 Descartes pt. 3 - God Exists. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So being me, Stephen West, distinguished host of the podcast philosophize this!, I receive a good deal of email. That's right, I said it. Mountains of email that is very difficult to get through and the reason why it matters right now is because there are certain emails that are reoccurring. One of the most frequently reoccurring emails that comes my way is people asking me to help them respond to people trying to convert them. There used to be door to door vacuum salesmen...in today's world there are door to door spokespeople of God. It is their duty when living on this planet to spread the word. When they see someone that obviously hasn't heard about how easy it is to get into heaven...all you have to do is BELIEVE!...they want to tell them about it. These are not bad people. Most of them have great intentions and genuinely care about people. But I think the reason why so many people ask me for responses to their typical questions is because they put people in a really weird spot. When someone comes to your door and asks you about what you think happens when you die, the situation gets awkward really fast. But why? Why are things so awkward. I think situations are awkward when there is some level of dishonesty present. There is something that one person knows that the other person doesn't know and the feeling of awkwardness is one person trying to find a politically correct way to break the news to them or avoid having the conversation. For example, when some nerdy guy at work comes up to you and says some obnoxious catch phrase that he came up with that isn't even remotely clever, you feel awkward because you have to think of a way to tell him that you don't like his little catchphrase and that he ISN'T funny without actually saying it in a brazen way. Well the same thing applies with the aggressive conversion experts. This person comes into your house, you pour them a little lemonade like they're on To Catch A Predator, and they say, so How do you think all of this got here? That's a little bit like walking into somebody's house and saying Why did

you break up with that ex-girlfriend of 10 years? The answer is always “It’s Complicated”. Just like you have a decade of history in a long term relationship to try to sum up in a single sentence, you have decades of contemplation about the nature of existence and they’re basically asking you to do the same thing. This is a very difficult task. Now I absolutely love being tested. I seek out these sorts of conversations with random people; I love it. My friends have told me that when they look through the peephole and see someone in a bicycle helmet wearing a suit and tie that they close all the blinds and crawl around pretending not to be home. I ALWAYS answer the door. One thing I’ve learned about the way they ask questions over the years is that there are two main avenues this conversation can go down, and the onus is on them to breach one of them. They usually ask the question “Do you believe in God” outright, or they will ask how you think the universe was created in the first place. The point of this question is so that they know where their efforts need to be focused on. If you answer “Yes.” that you believe in God, then their task becomes to try to move you from one book of behavioral restrictions to another. If you say something like, I was raised a Muslim then their task becomes to try to convince you into accepting their rule book as opposed to your old one. You say something like yeah, I was raised a catholic but I stopped going to church because I felt like it started to not be aligned with what I believe and I just haven’t found a new church. When you say that you believe in God, these are the sorts of conversations they have with you. But what if you say no. What if you say that you aren’t sure whether God exists? Well this is the other avenue these conversations typically go down. If I were one of these people, when I went door to door this would definitely be the conversation that I enjoyed the least. The reason why is something that we’ve touched on in the past and it is something that is very relevant to understanding Descartes and his cosmological argument for the existence of God. Let’s imagine that Rene Descartes was one of these door to door salvation salesmen. Let’s imagine what Rene Descartes would say to you if you told him that you aren’t sure whether god existed. Make no mistake, Rene Descartes would be the most annoying Jehovah’s Witness that ever knocked on your door. He would be brilliant. He would also be arguing for the existence of something just a little bit

different than your typical Jehovah's Witness. As we've talked about before, there is a HUGE logical leap from believing that God exists and believing that the Christian or Muslim God exists. There are dozens of different takes on it: God is simply a master craftsman, God is a collective mind stream, God is the universe itself. There is a big difference between believing that some thing, some being brought this universe into existence and believing that that thing also exalts humans as a species above all the other ones and cares about whether you get that job that you just applied for. There are 50 shades of God. To convince someone that God exists is not to convince them that Jesus died for their sins. When Descartes set out to prove the existence of God, his task was not to convert people into Christians, he was referencing some infinite first cause from which all things initially sprang. Descartes WAS a Christian, but proving the concept of God was to have a basis for his rationalist philosophical system, not to get more money thrown in the collection plate. You know, there are several instances in his work where he echoes a sentiment that Montaigne talks about a lot. He says if you live in a society or a culture where something very important to the culture is WIDELY accepted as true, that even if you could destroy it with argument, maybe it is best to just go along with it if you want to be productive in other areas. I mean, if you walk around all day looking for things that you don't agree with, and whenever you see one of them you assign yourself the burden of CORRECTING that person or group, can you ever get anything substantive done aside from that life? I could spend every second of every day supposedly correcting people around me, and what has changed at the end of the day? There needs to be a line drawn somewhere...Descartes isn't saying that you should just blindly trumpet the status-quo, but with Descartes living in a world where people are being prosecuted and brutally punished for going against the previous teachings of the church, we can be empathetic; we can understand why Descartes might adopt certain appearances in the interest of keeping the powers that be happy. And this is not conjecture...we see it in his work. He wrote a treatise, he actually never finished it, but for years of his life he was researching and constructing a treatise arguing for the validity of Copernicus and several other scientific findings that directly challenged what the church had been teaching for

so long and then right when he was wrapping things up, the whole Galileo thing happens and Descartes says "Alright, well. Onward and upward. Those were some productive years I just spent." He never finished the work... and it really wasn't that crucial in the grand scheme of things anyway. So when Descartes comes to your door and you tell him that you're not sure whether God exists or not, this is a big road block for him. This is an equally big road block for him back in his time. But why does Descartes need for a God to exist? Why does he need this infinite being that gave rise to the universe as we know it? Well to understand that, we need to reference what we talked about a couple episodes ago. Cogito Ergo Sum: I think, therefore I am. or I think therefore I exist. Remember Descartes started by subjecting everything in the world to the most rigorous doubt imaginable. He did this in order to find some irrefutable truth. Some mathematical axiom for the world, if you will. The reason I say mathematical axiom, is because he needed a foundation that he could use as a basis for making future claims. Now he talks about how he doesn't know whether ANYTHING around him truly exists because after all, an evil demon could be constantly deceiving him into believing these things exist. But there is one thing he can't deceive him about and that is that he is thinking. Because even if he is having a deceptive thought, he is still having a thought. So he can be sure that he is a thinking thing that exists. The mathematical axiom...the basis from which Descartes is trying to build a full philosophical system is that he exists. So from here he asks, okay, well if I know that I exist, then because something cannot come from nothing, something must have caused my existence. So what was it? Well it was my parents when they were 20 years old and had a little bit too much to drink. My parents caused my existence...and this begs the question: What caused their existence? Well it was their parents. When you look at every single thing that exists, every rock, every tree, every planet, every moose frolicking around they all eventually come back to the same point. What caused that point? Descartes isn't even necessarily talking about the beginning of the universe...if there is a creator of this universe, what caused that creator to come into existence? What caused the creator of THAT creator to come into existence? This infinite thing or being is what Descartes calls God. This is a mainstay of philosophy at the time of Descartes...we've

talked about it before with Aquinas and a couple of the Persian and Islamic philosophers...it is what is known as the Cosmological argument. Descartes needs this God as part of his picture for many reasons. One: Although we CAN never stop doubting what is around us and say that it is possible that an evil demon is constantly deceiving us, Descartes obviously doesn't want to stop the discussion there. We can be pretty sure all of this stuff exists, even if we can't prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt, and by saying that this infinitely great God is responsible for our perceptions of the world, it takes out the possibility of the evil demon. He says that as an infinite, perfect being God would never deceive us, so therefore we can be certain that what we see about the world is the way that is actually is. Please reserve your objections to this for later on. The point of me saying this is to explain why God is so important in Descartes worldview. Another big reason god is important is because Descartes is a rationalist and mathematician. He is setting out on a pretty daunting task: to prove that the universe and everything in it is connected to each other. Causal relationships, logical relationships...there are lines connecting every thing and everyone. The problem with that is that if that is a possibility then there must be an endpoint. There has to be a bookend from which everything is derived from, or else these connections might all be invalid. These connections can't go on into infinity. This is a problem that not just Descartes will run into...we will see it in the other continental rationalists Spinoza and Leibniz. The bookend that Descartes uses as a starting point is this infinite perfect being known as God. So, famously Descartes uses two main arguments to prove the existence of God. One we've already heard of before it is called the ontological argument. St. Anselm talked about this. If we define God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, and we can conceive of an infinite perfect being, then because something existing in reality is at least marginally greater than something that exists only in thought, That infinite perfect being MUST exist in reality: Therefore God exists. We've talked about that one, and it really isn't worth talking about how Descartes uses it because he uses it later on in his Meditations and it seems like more of a supplementary argument because his first argument gets a little sketchy. You know...this is the: If you didn't buy my FIRST argument, here is one

that seems to be rock solid. His first argument is notoriously confusing. I think philosophy professors around the world are forced to teach this argument and all of them struggle to find a way to convey it in any sort of memorable way. It's also notoriously oversimplified. I took a philosophy 101 class where I needed to write a paper on this argument and in the book it explained it...I thought that I understood it...and then six months later I actually read Descartes meditations and went back to the book and realized that it was completely wrong. This was in a textbook, so you can imagine how many different interpretations of this argument there are and as a podcaster I will do my best to give you a well-rounded account. Descartes would be sitting in your house...sipping your lemonade and he would begin his proof of God's existence by talking about an important distinction when it comes to existence. He would look around your house or your apartment and pick something out...say a table for instance. That table has two forms of reality: formal reality and objective reality. And he even breaks it down more than this, but let's not go there. Each thing has a different level of formal reality...if God existed he would have an infinite level of formal reality...that table sitting there has a finite level of formal reality and a few other obscure things like qualities of things including ideas of things have what Descartes calls modal formal reality. Modal being an even lesser form of formal reality than finite. The point of this is that everything has varying degrees of this thing called formal reality. But what about things that exist as thoughts? I mean, if I have an idea of something in my head...does that idea exist? Well yeah it does. But the idea of a table in my head does not exist as much as that table actually existing in physical form. For example, I can imagine the idea of an absolutely perfect triangle, but that perfect triangle doesn't exist anywhere in the physical world...why would it. That would be kind of random...just a triangle floating around. Descartes talks about things that exist as ideas...or objects of thought and he gives them something he calls objective reality. Now, just like everything that exists has varying levels of formal reality, all IDEAS have varying levels of objective reality, and what determines their LEVEL of objective reality is the thing that they are representing. If you have an idea of God, that idea has an infinite level of objective reality, if you have an idea

of that table, it has a degree of finite objective reality and if you are thinking of qualities like blue-ness or sharpness, then they have a modal objective reality. Now Descartes says that ALL humans have an innate idea of this thing we call God as being infinite. I mean, to create everything in the universe this thing needed to be un-caused, so therefore necessarily existing always. Outside of the boundaries of time, so therefore eternal and timeless. To give rise to everything physical, it itself cannot be a physical being, so therefore it must be incorporeal or spiritual. So Descartes says we ALL have an innate understanding of this being as being infinite. And because of that, our idea of God has an INFINITE objective reality. He says that every idea that we have, everything with objective reality, was created by something with a higher level of formal reality. For example, we can have ideas of tables, rocks, chairs or mooses frolicking around because we have a higher level of formal reality than these things. Yes, we have a FINITE level of formal reality, but we have MORE formal reality than a rock, so therefore we can create ideas about that rock. If this logic seems confusing it is because he is deriving it from the laws of cause and effect that he studied endlessly in his life. There must be as much reality in the cause of something as in the effect it generates. So if we as flawed humans are not infinite beings...where did we get this idea of an infinite being from? What caused that infinite idea to come into existence in the first place? Well, based on the laws of cause and effect it needed to be something infinite. A finite being cannot bring into existence an infinite idea. The infinite being that brought that idea into existence, is what we call God. Alright so at this point I would like to thank God that we are done explaining that. Imagine Descartes sitting on your couch and he just got done explaining that to you. I mean what do you even say? Do you just point to the door and say..."Leave this house." There was a video that went viral a couple months ago where this couple has this dancing Halloween toy that is malfunctioning and they are convinced it is possessed by a demon and they are going crazy saying: "I REBUKE THEE IN THE NAME OF JESUS CHRIST! LEAVE THIS HOUSE!" I was absolutely rolling on the floor laughing and that is how I would treat Descartes if he came into my house with his formal and objective reality. Let's talk about how you SHOULD respond to Descartes...Let's talk about how people

typically criticize the argument. By far the most common rebuttal to Descartes system is what seems like a logical inconsistency that has become known as "The Cartesian Circle". What it points to is his circular reasoning when it comes to proving that a non-deceptive god exists. Remember, he uses God as the being that insures there is NOT an evil demon constantly deceiving him, but he relies on his thoughts being non-deceptive to arrive at the conclusion that that God exists. This really isn't as much of a contradiction as it would initially seem. Descartes argues back that he doesn't rely on God to feed him non-deceptive thoughts ALL the time. While we are attending to what he calls a "clear and distinct" perception where it is so clear and distinct that we can't doubt the validity of it, we don't need God. The insurance that God provides is to prevent us from doubting things while we are not looking at them anymore. As a very crude example, lets say you're a UPS delivery guy and you deliver a box to the same front porch every day. At one point you determined that there are two stairs leading up to the front door, and then each day after that the box you are carrying obstructs your view of the stairs. You are no longer ATTENDING to the stairs. The insurance that God provides is that those stairs have not changed since the last time you did your analysis. Now imagine this example as it would apply to a series of logical connections throughout the universe. There is a lot of argument against Descartes and his creation of this idea of objective vs formal reality. Many people wonder why there even needs to be a distinction and what basis he has for making this distinction. On one end he relegates the existence of ideas and makes them lesser than things that have finite formal reality, but on the other end he makes their existence greater than things with finite formal reality. Another common objection is that it is a huge logical leap to arbitrarily say that beings with finite formal reality cannot possibly conceive of something with infinite objective reality. But the largest disagreement is probably when he says that we all have an innate idea of this being known as God as being infinite. Why is that necessarily the case? Many cultures throughout history have vehemently believed in a creator that in itself was not infinite. If this idea of an infinite entity is TRULY innate, which is what Descartes NEEDS to prove, why do these people not have it? The common explanation is that they don't. The only

people that do are people that were born into a society or culture that regularly plants the seeds in the heads of their young that an infinite creator exists. That constant reinforcement shades the direction of their thoughts, so although everyone around Descartes may have had this conception from a very young age, it might not be inherent. This may be the chickens coming home to roost. This may be a manifestation of what we talked about earlier where when the bulk of society believes something that we should pick our battles and sometimes just go along with it. Maybe Descartes should have fought that battle. One thing is for certain...which as we continue our journey through philosophy we will realize...is that if he had fought this battle, if he had questioned whether the idea of an infinite God TRULY was innate...it would've been a lonely, depressing road ahead. Talk to you guys next time.

Pascal's Wager

Episode #031

This is a transcript of episode #031 on Pascal's Wager. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So last week we visualized what it would be like if Rene Descartes came to your door, kind of like he was a Jehovah's Witness and tried to talk you into believing the way he does when it comes to the nature of existence. We talked about how these conversations where these people come to your door and try to convert you typically go down two paths: to prove the legitimacy of their ethical doctrine or to make you believe in God. We visualized Descartes sitting on your couch, drinking your lemonade and trying to PROVE to you that God exists. Now if you thought this visual was ridiculous, that's because it was. I mean think about it, nobody comes into your house and when you say that you aren't sure whether you believe in God or not, nobody sits you down and starts trying to rationally PROVE the existence of God with charts and graphs. They just don't. And as people thrust out of our mothers into this modern world, we aren't very familiar with this way of thinking. I mean, have any of you tried to tell anyone about St. Anselm's Ontological Argument? What is the typical reaction you get from them when they first hear it? Its probably the face of utter confusion. It's the exact same face they gave you when you told them you were quitting your job and trying out for America's Got Talent. This way of PROVING the existence of God just isn't used anymore at a door to door level; The guy we're going to talk about today took a slightly different approach, one that is going to be much less foreign to us as modern readers and one that we probably all can weigh in on at a certain level. His name was Blaise Pascal. Contemporary of Rene Descartes. He was a French Polymath Genius, who would probably define himself as most notably two things: a mathematician and a Christian. We're going to be talking a bit about Pascal, but I want to start with what he is most commonly known for. It's called Pascal's Wager. Now it should be noted directly from the top that Descartes was setting out to prove the existence of merely an infinite, perfect being...a sort of metaphysical

bookend from which he could derive the rest of his rationalist philosophy. Pascal on the other hand, although his Wager could be applied to most faiths, at least of the modern monotheistic variety, Pascal was trying to show that to not believe in the Christian God was irrational. This is a very important distinction: Instead of trying to PROVE to you that God exists beyond a shadow of a doubt...Pascal recognized that we could never be 100% CERTAIN of whether God exists and his argument was centered around the idea that it didn't matter. The Christian God was the most likely one that exists to Pascal during his time and setting and he set out not to PROVE the existence of God, but to show that to NOT believe in God was just a dumb decision. To give us some perspective, and because this week it will be a lot more believable in your head, let's pretend that Blaise Pascal came to the door with Rene Descartes that day and after Descartes was done trying to PROVE to you that God existed and you weren't satisfied, let's hear what Blaise Pascal has to say about it. This really isn't that far from the truth because Pascal's Wager is one of the most common conversion tactics that these door to door salesmen use on people. But a lot has changed since the times of Blaise Pascal...right? He would be knocking on the doors of people much different than people of his time. Because of the centuries of advancements in science that people like Descartes and Pascal were facilitating during their time, most people that are agnostic in today's world think of truth and belief in terms of evidence. I mean, in today's world if some random guy comes out with some harebrained theory that, you know, Thales was right! The world really IS made of water! ... Most people listening to this would be like...OK buddy. Get out of here. World is made of water...why don't you go and do some experiments and studies and come talk to me when this is something other than WILD speculation. Come talk to me when you have some evidence to back your claims. Well this way of thinking naturally starts to creep its way into thoughts about God, religion and the rest of it. Blaise Pascal would be talking to an agnostic person that believes something quite different than the people of his time. This type of person applies critical thinking 101...they ask themselves: well, if THIS is true, what else MUST be true as a result of it. People like this would say to a devout Christian like Pascal whose God claims to offer PERSONAL salvation that if the

Christian God existed, he must be very smart. All-knowing if you will. God must recognize that as someone born into modern times that there are dozens of choices to focus your spiritual efforts on, and none of them have any more credibility than the next. There is nothing objective about them. There is nothing undeniable separating Catholicism from Islam from Judaism from Mormonism, etc. ALL of the adherents to these various different religions are forced to have faith that theirs is the one that is actually real while the members of all the others are condemned to hell. Now the typical thing one of these modern agnostics will say is, why does it make sense that it would be this way? They would say if this earth that we are living on is truly just an ethical obstacle course where we are going to be met with temptations and struggles and relationships and based on how we act during this short 80 year period, that will determine whether where we go for eternity, if that is true: why does it all need to be shrouded in mystery? I mean, God is all-powerful. We don't NEED to be born with zero conception of what the earth is. For all intents and purposes we could begin life in spiritual form up in the clouds with God playing some sort of bizarre game show where he lays everything out for you. Some bizarre version of Wheel of Fortune where God is the host and he says to you, OK. I exist. Jesus was my son, he died for your sins you should appreciate that, but let's not talk about that now...it's all laid out in the book...you can read it once you get down there. But now that we've gotten that out of the way let's spin this giant wheel and find out what body you're going to be programmed into: will it be inner city youth? Will it be stock broker? Ferris Wheel repair man? Let's see what you get! You spin the wheel...you get sucked down and get made into a fetus and you are born with knowledge of what this existence TRULY is. These modern people would say...why can't THAT be the case? Well the fact of the matter is that it's not the case. So these people use critical thinking again and they would ask, well if God COULD choose to NOT make the most important thing EVER a mystery...your eternal fate hangs in the balance and God CHOOSES to make it a guessing game. He doesn't NEED to do that by any means, so why does he? More importantly they would ask: Why is someone BLINDLY conceding to a religion more valuable to God than someone who is presented by God with a decision and CHOOSES to

abide by the moral code laid out in the Bible? These modern agnostics would ask: why does it mean more to God when someone is born into a home where their parents believe in what might be one of the dozens of religions that could send them to hell, given the fact that he could at any point remove all the mystery, why does blind acceptance to a religion mean more to him than reasoned acceptance? If Blaise Pascal came to the door of one of these modern agnostics this is the question he would be faced with. And generally speaking, this is where most of these people sit because they say...well if Christianity is true, none of this stuff makes sense to me, but I'll tell you what does make sense to me: Humans doing dishonest stuff. Humans leveraging control over other people and marginalizing anyone who doesn't agree with them so that they can maintain power. This is seen all throughout human history. I mean, it totally makes sense that someone that understood the benefits of living an ethical life that was just a little bit smarter than the people around him would write a book laying out, on one hand, a good way to act that benefits society and on the other hand a story about an infinitely powerful being that will punish you if you don't. This is a very plausible scenario even to Blaise Pascal because in his view, that's what all of the other religions are: false prophets that lied to harness control over people. So Blaise Pascal is presented with a problem with this line of argument. He can't prove the existence of God with any certainty and there does seem to be a bunch of needless mystery on one end and a rational explanation on the other. But this is how brilliant Pascal was. He manages to find an argument that does an effective job of showing that even if there is mystery, the best choice for the layperson might be to just believe. Blaise Pascal was a mathematician. He often times thinks about life and existence in mathematical terms. He talks about how humans are not God. We, as humans, walking around going about our daily lives, we don't have complete control over what happens to us. In fact, Pascal says, at best we make calculated risks where the calculations are based on all of our prior experience in that given field. For example, let's say you want to start a small business as your family's means of income. There is a very REAL uncertainty as to whether enough money is going to be coming in for you to pay your bills. So in the interest of security, you choose not to start your business and instead

you get a job at a big company in the city. Now that is security you can count on. Now, at least you KNOW the paycheck is going to be coming in, right? Well, no that's not true. At any point that company could downsize or the economy could tank and they would drop you in an instant, but it certainly DOES assume LESS risk than starting your own business. In this way you are hedging your bets. Neither of the two options are absolutely certain, but the outcome of one decision puts you in a favorable position more times out of 100 than the other one, so you choose it. Let's talk about another example of this: you want to go on vacation to Hawaii. The only way you're going to get to Hawaii is on a plane. The odds of you getting to Hawaii in one piece are ENORMOUSLY favorable for you. It is something like a 1 in 10 million chance for you to die in a plane crash and I'm pretty sure that is a worldwide statistic so if it was limited to just the United States and Canada it might be even better. But do you have absolute certainty that you will make it there? No. You are hedging your bets. This decision is ALSO a calculated risk. You are assuming the one in 10 million risk in order to be the type of person that goes on vacation to Hawaii as opposed to the type of person that sits around and types Maui into Google images on a bi-weekly basis like yours truly. Except, for me it is not because I'm scared of flying it's because it costs thousands of dollars to go. We will go into this more on another day, but Pascal talks about how these calculated risks encompass virtually every decision that we make on this planet. Every decision that you make and every belief that you hold is a calculated risk. Your thoughts about God, your eternal fate and the nature of existence should be no different. Keep in mind that when Pascal talks about this he is appealing to an agnostic. There were a lot of these people in France during his lifetime in light of all the scientific progress that was being made. If on one end you had Christians and on the other hand you had Atheists, there were several pockets in the middle of that spectrum and one incredibly large pocket during the time of Pascal was someone who wasn't completely satisfied by either explanation. So instead of trying to PROVE the existence of God, Blaise Pascal asks these people to hedge their bets like they do with every other belief that they hold. He presents them with what is known as Pascal's Wager. He says that if you don't believe in God and he doesn't exist...then you

die and nothing happens. You rot in a pine box until the sun explodes in a couple billion years. On the other hand, if you don't believe in God and he DOES exist, then you made a huge mistake. A mistake that is going to cost you infinitely. You are now banished to a lake of fire, pushing boulders up a hill for all eternity. Things are not too good for you either way. The other option is to believe in God. Pascal says if you believe in God and he doesn't exist...then it's the same as the first one. You die and nothing happens. But if you believe in God and he DOES exist, then you have an infinite amount to gain. You never have to die! You get to spend eternity talking to people in heaven about how right you were! The most common way it is summarized is if you believe in God and he doesn't exist then you have lost nothing. But if you believe in God and he exists, you have gained everything. Therefore, it is downright irrational to NOT believe in God. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose. Now, just for the record Pascal would never say that you have NOTHING to lose. How about every Sunday morning for the rest of your life? How about 10% of your income? How about being an autonomous adult with the ability to choose an ethical system that yields the life you want for yourself and your family? The list goes on. Pascal would've never said that you have NOTHING to lose, he would say that what you have to lose is finite. It is all those things I just said and more, but when it comes down to it you are losing something finite and standing to gain something infinite. We can see his logic here and with a slight changing of the wording it becomes a very compelling argument. We've probably all heard this argument in some form or another. In my experience the most common variant of it in today's world is someone asking you, What if you're wrong about what you believe? Then what? Let's talk about some of the famous rebuttals to Pascal's Wager...I asked on Twitter this week for people to send me their favorite ones. Chris Bush (@cbush) on Twitter said that "Either I believe or I don't. It's not a matter of choice. Belief has a certain irresistibility about it." This has to be one of the most common ones and it is very true. Let's say that everything Pascal said is true and I am an agnostic, even if he shows me how impractical it is to NOT believe in God, can you really make a conscious choice to BELIEVE in something? What if Pascal said you should believe in Santa Claus because you have a stocking full of presents

to gain and nothing to lose. Could you just decide to believe in Santa? You can pretend to believe in something. You can tell yourself something over and over again trying to brainwash yourself into believing something. But when you believe something it is beyond choice. You just believe it. Pascal's Wager doesn't address any of the things that caused doubt in the agnostics mind in the first place. Jonathan D'Angelo (@future_jonathan) on Twitter said that "How about the biggest flaw: that it presupposes the selection of the correct god." I'm not sure this is shining light on a flaw in the argument itself, but it does underscore the fact that Pascal's Wager could just as easily be used to justify belief in the existence of some other God: Allah, or Zeus or Tom Cruise. The significance of this is that many of these religions are incompatible at the most fundamental level. If you believe in one and another one of them end up being correct, you burn in hell. So the thinking is, Pascal paints this picture as though a belief based on this criteria only might yield infinite gain, when it might also yield infinite loss. This doesn't destroy Pascal's Wager, but it is something interesting to think about. But let's talk about the other side and what advocates of Pascal's Wager would say. The typical place this conversation goes is that they start talking about exactly what is it that you stand to lose by not believing in God and living your life as a non-believer. They're talking about that one part of Pascal's Wager that presents a downside to believing in God. He says that if you believe in God and he doesn't exist, then you've lost nothing, or you've lost a finite amount. Well, there are a lot of people who say that losing that finite amount is actually losing A LOT! The other side says, "Really? Are you really losing a lot?" They say, what's the alternative to living a Christian life? You live a hedonistic life where pleasure is the highest good! Being a Christian requires sacrifice, no doubt about that. But by not sacrificing...by eating whatever you want and having sex with whoever you want and living a godless life hellbent on attaining pleasure, is that lifestyle really better? Usually these people end up with terrible relationships and health problems and a lack of priorities. They don't have a sense of purpose and they're scared all the time. If that is the FINITE thing that you stand to lose, is it really worth clinging on to? I have heard this argument probably from 50 different people in my lifetime. It is absolutely

fascinating that so many people parrot this line of thinking. They must have success with it or they wouldn't have said it to me, but I wonder what type of person doesn't see the obvious fallacy in it. What's the alternative to living a Christian life? Leading a hedonistic life! Why is that necessarily the case? They created a false dichotomy. Why is the ONLY alternative to a belief in the Christian God a life of hedonism where pleasure is the highest good? Hedonism is an ethical doctrine, just like the one laid out in the Bible. Do these people really think that there are two ethical doctrines that exist in the history of man? Hedonism and Christian ethics? No, there are hundreds. And let's talk for a second about what one of these modern agnostics would say about ethics. Nothing is intrinsically good or bad. A system of what is right and wrong, or good and bad, what we call a system of ethics is only possible if there is an end goal attached to it. There is an ideal life that we want for ourselves and then a system of behaviors to follow that will yield that outcome. Let's say the ultimate goal of your life was to have the most meaningful, deep, trusting relationships possible. What sort of behaviors yield that outcome? You certainly need to be honest. You certainly need to be temperant. You certainly need to exercise self-control. What one of these modern agnostics would say is that the bible is two things. On one hand a beautiful ethical doctrine that helped usher in an age of egalitarianism in the world...an ethical doctrine that they largely follow whether willingly or not because it yields a life desired by many. On the other hand it is a story that is used to get people to follow that ethical doctrine. The positive benefits afforded by Christians that someone making this argument would contrast with a life of hedonism are a byproduct of following a solid system of behaviors, not a belief in God. They would argue that anyone could follow the system of behaviors laid out in the bible and see extremely positive effects in their life, the difference would be that a believer would see them as a supernatural God reaching his hand down and getting them that job they just applied for, and the other person would see it as the natural byproduct of being a virtuous person. People want to give honest, patient, temperant, courageous people jobs. The only alternative to Christianity is Hedonism? A way of thinking that is WIDELY denounced by almost every philosopher that ever created a system of ethics? Hedonism

is a straw man. It's an easy target when in reality there are hundreds of systems to choose from. So what is at stake for someone arguing the other side? Autonomy. The ability to choose the end goal of their life. And while, inevitably, much of their personal ethical doctrine may overlap with the one laid out in Christianity, the belief in God, to these people really has nothing to do with it. Real quick some other common arguments against Pascal's Wager are that he pigeonholes the possibilities that can come after death. For example, couldn't you be an atheist and still have an afterlife in some spiritual form? There are other possibilities that he leaves out. Uh, another is that the BASIS for the argument is that you are taking the best calculated risk, but because of the thousands of Gods already proposed by man in various civilizations throughout history it actually makes the chances of this single, Christian God minuscule. But it should be said that probability is EQUALLY as minuscule as all the other ones, it's not like any other religion has it more correct by any means. One other common criticism is that if God is an infinitely perfect and therefore infinitely just being, why would he condemn a person to hell if they follow his system of ethics but cannot bring themselves to believe in him. Why is BELIEVING so important to God? Doesn't that make him an unjust God? This is a good question in itself, but it doesn't do anything to Pascal's argument and is easily explained by most Holy Books. Look, when it comes down to it, Pascal's Wager has been heavily commented on over the centuries by great thinkers. There is a lot of firepower up against it at this point. But make no mistake, Blaise Pascal is one of the most astoundingly brilliant figures in the history of philosophy and next week we are going to talk about a famous paradox that I guarantee everybody listening will relate to immensely. Thanks for listening, I will talk to you soon.

+EV your way to success!!

Episode #032

This is a transcript of episode #032 on Pascal pt. 2 - +EV your way to success! Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Blaise Pascal famously said that all of us living...and the condition that we find ourselves living through, this crazy roller coaster that we're on, he refers to it as the "supreme paradox of creation". Man is the great paradox of creation. He said that as humans, we constantly live in a state of the highest grandeur and the deepest misery. Simultaneously. But why? What is it about man that could possibly account for that sort of variance? I mean, he is obviously calling us out as a species. He didn't say living creatures on planet earth are this way...he said Man is the great paradox of creation. Why did he say that? Well to fully understand where he is coming from, we need to set the stage and get a little perspective on what sort of world Pascal was living in and what sort of person Pascal was. We'll gain that perspective through the show today and near the end of the show, we'll come back to that famous quote and it will make a lot more sense to us. So. Blaise Pascal. He invented the calculator. Not kidding. All the way back in 1642 at the age of only 18 years old his dad was an accountant and for anybody that has done any sort of personal accounting in today's world or taken a class on this you can relate to it, but there was a TON of monotonous, menial calculations of arithmetic that were incredibly time consuming and Pascal, filled with ingenuity and the mind of a polymath genius created a device in 1642 that could add, subtract, multiply and divide and became not only an object of admiration from the people immediately around him for actually inventing the thing, but he became his father's favorite son. I mean come on, at that point what does he say to his other kids. I love you guys just as much...just differently. Nope...nobody was buying that garbage anymore, Pascal was the man. But it's not like his father didn't see this early representation of his genius coming, he had been facilitating it and trying to nurture it for years. Blaise Pascal lived in a pretty amazing time, obviously, because the show is chronological, it wasn't that far removed

from the time we've been talking about for a while now, the scientific revolution. Well, the exact decade that Pascal was born was a time of UNPRECEDENTED change. Change on a scale that no one EVER could have foreseen. If you were someone who wanted to create something or think of some idea that spreads like intellectual contagion and changes the way that people around you view the world, Pascal's lifetime was the perfect time to be born. Whenever there are HUGE breakthroughs throughout human history, it is always very shortly after those breakthroughs come to pass that some person is born that is seen in retrospect as incredible. This period of time after this huge paradigm shift is a time of HUGE opportunity if you were trying to change the world. Pascal was part of a new age of thinkers. He was 14 years old when Descartes released his Discourse on Method. This text as we talked about before sparked a huge debate and in that sense it was revolutionary. Pascal, was the first generation to benefit from those insights. Kind of makes you wonder about what is possible and what sorts of people are emerging as the first generation able to benefit from something as revolutionary as the internet in today's world. I mean, imagine if someone as brilliant as Blaise Pascal had access to the internet. What could a polymath genius accomplish if he had the collective knowledge of the history of man available at his fingertips instantly? Probably wouldn't be Nyann Cat that's all I'm saying. Anyway, Pascal's father was a very intelligent man and he understood the inherent biases in the way that people were being educated back in the 1600's. During the time of the upbringing of Pascal, the average school of the time was riding the tail end of this wave of Scholasticism, and they were riding it directly into the ground. See, for a long long time if you were learning about something like, the natural sciences in school, you just read Aristotle. You studied him. You memorized him. He was the unchallenged authority on that sort of stuff. But now that we're trying to navigate the dark waters of the post scientific revolution...now that we're searching for certainty about natural causes, we don't want to be creating people that just blindly accept whatever came before them as the truth. We want to move forward. So Pascal's father, with an incredible amount of foresight, decides to keep him out of the school system and educate him at home. Pascal talks about how his father didn't dive right in to teaching him stuff

from the very beginning...no he spent a lot of the time at the beginning just talking to him about the subjects in general. His father would talk to him about what mathematics is in a broad sense and why it is important...and because of this approach it apparently really got Blaise Pascal excited about doing it. His father actually forbid him to study math until the time was right and this cause him to want to do it so bad, the story goes that by the age of something absurdly young like 11 years old he had independently worked out all of the geometrical axioms that Euclid had laid out millennium ago. I wanna try that with my kids when I have them one day...You can play all the video games you want...I'll buy you all the drugs you want...but one thing that is NOT gonna fly under my roof is Immanuel Kant. That book is forbidden. It is to stay on the shelf at all times. So anyway...this extremely novel approach to education coupled with a genius mind and the luxury of being born into incredibly interesting times gave Blaise Pascal a very unique perspective on truth. Truth, as we've talked about on several shows, is a very slippery thing. But to Blaise Pascal, being the generation that everyone is looking to to solve this problem of science and truth...people thought it would come out of his generation if it came at all. Blaise Pascal in particular had a very hard time proving beyond a shadow of a doubt that scientific truth was possible at all. In this way, he shared the struggle of one Rene Descartes, but the good news was that it didn't matter to Pascal anyway. He thought that we COULD arrive at religious truth, but scientific truth was impossible to achieve. The reason why is something very similar to what Montaigne talked about, who Pascal was influenced by tremendously: that is that the scientific truth of today is tomorrow's punchline. We are constantly, especially in the times of Pascal, PROVING things to be true and then finding out in a couple years that the mechanisms we were using to measure it or collect whatever it is we were trying to prove were flawed from the start. But look, don't get Pascal wrong here. He isn't using this as a basis to denounce ALL of science. The reason he is saying this is so that we NEVER STOP LOOKING! So that we never grow complacent. The last thing Pascal wants is for us to arrive at something we determine to be scientific TRUTH and then say ok! dust our hands off and move on to other things. We should NEVER consider anything in science to be absolute

truth, that is a dangerous precedent to set. This is not only a very central and important point within the thought of Blaise Pascal, but it something all of us can relate to in our own lives and something that is a very special idea to me. Do you know what three words are the most honest words you can ever say? I don't know. Try it sometime when somebody asks you a question about something important that you SHOULD have thoughts on. There is never a time when I feel more confident about how well I know about a subject than after I just finish reading the first book I've ever read on it. I feel like an authority on the subject. I feel like going out and educating all my friends and coworkers, because now I feel like I know everything about it. At least that's how I used to be the first couple times because what inevitably happens is I read another book on the subject and that confidence dwindles a bit. Suddenly the picture isn't so clear...now there are all these other things to consider...now my thoughts on it can't be relegated to a single tag line...it is a couple-three tag lines now. And then I listen to experts talk about the subject and I feel a little less confident...and then I start to seek out the opposing viewpoints of what I believe and I start to realize there are a lot of really intelligent people with great arguments on the other side of this issue too and then I start to see how deep the rabbit hole goes and how which side of the issue is right or wrong really hinges on things that nobody can predict and nobody has control over. This process has been my ENTIRE adult life. The first time I ever wanted to educate myself on American Politics, I was looking for a place to be educated about it and the first thing I ran across was conservative talk radio. For like, six months of my life all I listened to was Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Mark Levin and I can't imagine how different of a person I would be today if I just assumed these people were right and what I mean by that is that I took the first thing that presented itself to me and accepted it as the gospel truth. It would have been much, much easier for me to never question anything. To grow complacent. And this is what Blaise pascal was worried about when it came to the human race moving forward scientifically. Let's not, figuratively speaking, listen to a few episodes of Sean Hannity around election time and think that we know everything about the universe. Pascal says, why don't we never be satisfied? Why not ALWAYS keep

looking for more? So this is a noble cause and one that I would think most people listening to this agrees with, but it brings up very real implications when it comes to our lives. The most notable of which is probably: If we can't know anything about this natural world that we exist in for CERTAIN...where does that leave us? I mean, isn't that a really weird task? How do you navigate a world where you know nothing for certain...Well, Blaise Pascal and a couple of his mathematician contemporaries were already trying to solve a problem that was much, much more important but dealt with the same kind of thing. Pascal focused on the REAL problems...How can two people...if they are in the middle of a gambling bout...whatever it is and they have to stop the game early...how should these two people divide up the stakes evenly and fairly? Certainly the guy that is ahead at the time they decide to stop it shouldn't just be declared the winner. But then again, is it fair to the players to just split the money based on where the players were when the game was stopped? I mean, what if one person had a statistical advantage to win the game but was on a bad streak? Leave it to Pascal to find a revolutionary solution to a problem. He laid the foundations for probability theory and expected value. Two things that we can't imagine not existing today and two things that offer us some insight into how Pascal thought about decision making in our personal lives. Let's talk about how Pascal solved his friend's gambling problem; let's talk about expected value. Let's say that I have a die: a six sided cube. 1 through 6 written on the sides and I tell you that for just \$1 you can have a chance at winning \$10. Here's how the game works: you pick one of the numbers...let's say you pick 5 for example...you give me a dollar...I roll the dice and if it comes up on ANYTHING but 5 you lose your dollar, but if it comes up on five you win \$10. Should you take that bet? The answer should be an immediate and resounding YES. The reason why is because this bet has a positive expected value. Let's talk about why. You have a 1 in 6 chance of winning ten dollars and a 5 in 6 chance of losing a dollar. For every six tries, you should win ten dollars. How much does it cost you to roll the die six times? Six dollars. For every six dollars that you spend, statistically speaking you should win 10 dollars. You may the first 100 times in a row, but eventually, if you played long enough you would be in the black. By the way, if someone ever actually offers you this bet

and you lose the first 100 throws, I would just stop...he is probably scamming you. The way Pascal would be explaining it is by assigning values to each potential outcome. In the case of the die, numbers 1,2,3,4 and 6 would have a value of -1, because we paid a dollar to roll the die and we lost that dollar. The number 5 would have a value of 9, not 10 because remember we paid a dollar in to try to win before we rolled it. All you math buffs out there know that there is a mathematical formula to calculate this and for the record it is much better because you can account for things much more complex than a roll of the dice. But for the sake of an audio program, add up all the values. 1,2,3,4, and 6 are -1 so we're at -5 plus 9 for the value if we rolled a 5 and what do you get? 4. A Positive number. This wager can be said to have what's known as a positive expected value, or +EV in gambling lingo. This is how professional gamblers think about things. You may ask...professional gambler? What skill are they a professional at, pulling the lever of a slot machine? No, it is calculating the expected value of various wagers. Professional gamblers are experts at wagering their money in places that yield a positive expected value. They may lose 100 gambles in a row, but it doesn't matter to them because as long as they keep "getting their money in good" as they say or wagering on +EV bets, in the long run, with enough times wagering, they should be profitable. The significance of this, the revolutionary thing that Pascal can teach us is that rolling a dice is not as chaotic and random as it might initially seem...as it seemed back in the times of Blaise Pascal. When you graph the probability of certain outcomes, you are left with a bell curve. A high occurrence of certain outcomes that makes up the tall part of the graph and the lower portions of the graph made up of outliers. A SINGLE roll of the dice may be unpredictable, but over time, if we keep rolling the dice thousands and thousands of times and make a graph of the results...that graph is symmetrical. Therefore, Pascal reasoned, the roll of a dice, or some seemingly random and chaotic event is actually quite predictable. Now knowing the benefits of making +EV gambling decisions over the long term can help us understand Pascal's Wager better. Now we can see what Pascal was talking about. There are no certainties in this life. Each and every decision and action we make is a risk, to Pascal. His basis for saying that it is impractical not to believe in God is

that while in this state of uncertainty and risk, ALL you can do as a wise person is make a +EV play in life and hope for the best. When it comes to the nature of existence, he argued that that included a belief in the Christian God, but I don't think many of us would argue with his point when it comes to every other decision in life. How can we navigate living in a world where we can never arrive at scientific truth? We make +EV decisions. Now it should be said that when it comes to life, calculating +EV decisions becomes ENORMOUSLY harder than calculating it when it comes to the roll of the dice. The reason why is because there are just so many variables. See, in the dice game you are wagering your money, and that's it. When it comes to life, you are wagering all kinds of stuff, your time, your emotional state, your health...and it comes even more complex when you think in terms of what you are winning by betting. But by and large, these calculated risks that pascal talks about, using the best information you have and trying to yield a positive expected value is what separates people who succeed at creating a good life for themselves and those who fail. Let's talk about an example of this. Barack Obama. President of the United States. Like his politics or not, the guy is pretty tremendous as a human being. He is effective, hardworking and what he has constructed for himself in this life is incredibly impressive. Now every decision that he has made throughout his life can be thought of as a gamble, similar to the dice game we laid out earlier. He could've made many BAD decisions that he didn't. Well, those decisions are kind of like a street hustler coming up to him, telling him about a dice game where he bets 5 dollars for a chance to win 6 dollars. Barack Obama said no to those games. The decision to drop out of prep school and sit around collecting unemployment playing video games and watching sports wasn't a +EV decision. So he didn't do it. I like to think of Barack Obama as the physical manifestation of thousands of gambles made with a positive expected value. Barack Obama is the equivalent of the bulging wad of money that makes up a professional gambler's bankroll. So at the risk of the secret service storming my condo and taking me away, I'd like to continue this thought experiment a little and imagine if Barack Obama had a lot of bad things occurring in his life, one after the other after the other. Because after all, betting a dollar to win 10 on that dice game is

NO GUARANTEE of success. You could theoretically not roll a five thousands of times in a row. In that same way, you can make great decisions in your life and just get tremendously unlucky over and over and over. Let's pretend it happened to Obama. Let's pretend he gets kicked out of office. Michelle leaves him, his kids want nothing to do with him. He loses every penny he's ever earned. He hands in his resume at 100 businesses and no one gives him an interview. He has no where to stay but on Dick Cheney's couch and then HE kicks him out. Picture a series of events so unfortunate that the former president of the United States finds himself living under a bridge for a night trying to develop a plan. Well what would Pascal say? We live in an uncertain world! This was possible all along! There is no guarantee of success...What can we do about it other than continue to make the best calculated decisions we possibly can and hope for the best. I believe that no matter how low someone like Barrack Obama EVER found himself, eventually, with enough rolls of the dice making +EV decisions, he would be immensely successful again. While trying to relate someones life to the probability of success with the roll of a dice is pretty much a lost cause, consider something for a second. What separates someone blindly rolling the dice and somebody that understands the expected value of that dice roll comes down to looking at all of the potential outcomes. The professional gambler thinks about each number that could pop up on the die: He says at some level...OK if it comes up 1 then I lost a dollar. Am I willing to accept that? How likely is that to happen? Where will I be tomorrow if that happens? And so on. He does this with all the numbers 1 - 6. In that same way, Barrack Obama weighs all of the potential outcomes when making +EV decisions in his personal life. Whenever he makes a decision he thinks of all the possible paths he could take to get there. Like numbers on a die. He thinks about the cost associated with each path. He thinks about worst case scenario. Etc. If nothing else, it is really interesting to consider the fact that many times what lands people in bad situations is a lack of considering all possible options and what the consequences of each of them are. Like the professional gambler, like Barrack Obama, Pascal would advocate deep thought on major decisions in your life to insure that you make the best calculated risk possible. All of this leads to what we talked about at

the beginning: what Blaise Pascal refers to as "The supreme paradox of creation" that man lives in a perpetual state of both the highest grandeur and the biggest misery. See, we as humans are at least a little bit different than all the other animals of the animal kingdom. At least ostensibly. We have the magical power of foresight. We have the ability to weigh the pros and cons of our decisions. We have the ability to imagine an electronic device that will change the lives of millions of people and bring it to market. You know the common reflection on the world that everything around you, every table, every building, every book, everything was at one point just a figment of someone's imagination. This imagination and this gift of foresight has allowed us to manipulate our environment much more than any other creature. It has allowed us to improve the quality of our lives more than any other creature. It leaves us in the highest state of grandeur in the animal kingdom. On the other hand, that same ability also leaves us in a state of the deepest misery. Because it allows us the ability to imagine a life better than what we can ever possibly achieve. Pascal isn't talking class warfare here, although it certainly applies to people that think they are stuck in whatever economic situation they are in. Pascal is talking about the inevitability of being a human. What is the only certainty in life? Death. Death, pain, suffering...these are things that we ALL experience sporadically, some more often than others. But Pascal points out that our ability to imagine also allows us to imagine a life devoid of death, pain and suffering and because of this we feel poisoned with no possible remedy. Pascal talks a lot about the power and detriment of using your imagination. He said it is an incredibly complicated thing to master because it is both right and wrong on occasion, but there is no way for us to know which it is when we are imagining it. He talks about how we use our minds to impose characteristics on people based on incomplete information. He talks about when we see someone dressed in a uniform or dressed importantly, we tend to take their thoughts more seriously than someone dressed like Barack Obama under the bridge. Pascal asks, what is that really based on? A half-inch thick piece of fabric hung over their skin? On the surface this may seem trivial, but the point he is getting at is an important one. This single thing that we call the imagination brought into being every great piece of

technology and progress in human history, but simultaneously it serves to misguide us and imagine things that might hurt us. The implications of this are that VERY IMPORTANT THINGS like our sense of what happiness is or what justice is, these things could be as flimsy as our judgment of the guy dressed in rags. “Imagination disposes of everything; it creates beauty, justice, and happiness, which are everything in this world.”

Spinoza pt. 1 - From Baruch to Benedicto!

Episode #033

This is a transcript of episode #033 Spinoza pt. 1. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). For us to truly understand who Baruch De Spinoza was we need to put ourselves in his shoes. One thing that's really easy to do as you're trying to learn stuff about history is to look at these people as though they're just some guy that you met at the mall on a Saturday. I feel like, we learn things about people, we experience their personality and we judge them. Sometimes, and I was guilty of this for a long time, we don't fully consider the fact that these people might as well be from another planet than us. What frame of reference do we have when looking at someone like Spinoza? At least when you think of primitive man and what it must have been like to live as a hunter gatherer, at least we can look at modern hunter gatherers...Papau New Guinea, the Kalahari Bushmen, people like that, we coexist with hunter gatherers. There is no where on earth today that really mimics the sort of political or religious uncertainty that pervades this time period were talking about and there aren't many places that can mimic the sort of ruthless, gruesome acts that are being committed in the name of these competing interests. And it's entirely complicated because there is SO MUCH change going on in the world at such a rapid pace...there isn't just one war going on. This time period can't be characterized by saying two religious views were butting heads...or that faith and reason were butting heads...this intellectual war spread across the entire continent of Europe and there were dozens of battles taking place simultaneously in this sharknado of change. This rapid change is what makes this one of the most fascinating points in history and it is impossible to list or describe all the different areas where things were changing...and even if it was I wouldn't do it...that's not what this show is about. But what I can do, is talk about one of these scenes that took place during Spinoza's life that illustrates the sort of world that he found himself living in. This event crushed Spinoza and it can give us some insight into how he was forced to act during his lifetime. How the events of his life shaped his behavior. This is the story of

Johan De Witt. So one of these battles that were going on in this larger intellectual war zone had to do with government. What is the role of government in a civilized society? How should the government implement its strategy? How coercive is it justified to be when meeting its goals? Lots of questions. And just like in modern times where there are fights going on between special interest groups and one special interest group may hire a lobbyist to try to influence legislation or they might start an organization that is dedicated to pushing forward their agenda, specific "political" special interest groups back in the time of Spinoza organized in a similar way. Not everybody wanted their government to be a republic, which was becoming an increasingly popular thing around there at the time. One of these "special interest groups" was called orangism. Now at first glance orangism...sounds pretty good! I mean, what's wrong with oranges? Well it had nothing to do with the fruit, they were supporters of what was known as the House of Orange-Nassau at the time, essentially a big group of people that wanted a monarchist form of government whose sole purpose was to oppose the other big political group at the time who was trying to erect a republic. The fanaticism of these people. The idea of a mob of people organizing together and willing to conspire and lie and commit terrible acts of violence against someone who just didn't agree with them about something. Johan De Witt was the recently deposed leader of the pro-republic political group at the time and he was seen, by some, as one of the most brilliant political minds in the world and by others as an enormous threat. See there was this wave of change going through Europe, but just like many points in history where there are changes going on of this magnitude, what inevitably happens is that not everybody wants to change. No matter how bad things used to be, there are people that BENEFITTED from the way it used to be and they are going to fight to keep things the same. They're going to rally people. They're going to organize. They're going to do whatever they need to do to return things back to normal. So on August 20th 1672, they did what they had to do. Johan De Witt was visiting his brother in prison who was being held on a charge of attempted murder that was almost unanimously considered to be false. There was a mob of people working on behalf of the House of Orange who were waiting for him when he exited the prison with his

brother. There are stories of how the ring leader of the mob told the guard who was supposed to be watching the area during the time...that a couple farmers were stealing stuff and that he needed to go check it out, but it was just to give Johan De Witt zero chance of survival. What happened next is one of the most horrific scenes you'll ever read about:"every one of the miscreants, emboldened by his [Johan's] fall, wanted to fire his gun at him, or strike him with blows of the sledge-hammer, or stab him with a knife or swords, every one wanted to draw a drop of blood from the fallen hero, and tear off a shred from his garments.And after having mangled, and torn, and completely stripped the two brothers, the mob dragged their naked and bloody bodies to an extemporized gibbet, where amateur executioners hung them up by the feet.Then came the most dastardly scoundrels of all, who not having dared to strike the living flesh, cut the dead in pieces, and then went about the town selling small slices of the bodies of John and Cornelius at ten sous a piece."This mob of people first beat and stabbed them to death, then they stripped them naked, hung their bodies upside down and cut them into pieces and sold them around the town. There are other accounts that they cut out their hearts and either ate them, or put them on display at one of the ring leaders houses...like a souvenir baseball he caught at a baseball game. Let's keep this in perspective...they did all of this because they didn't agree with someone.This is something that we should talk about when thinking about this time period. There are a lot of people that oversimplify what causes gruesome violence like this to occur. They'll say stuff like "religion should be abolished because, look at all the terrible atrocities that have been committed in the name of religion!" 9/11, the crusades, all the bloodshed during the reformation...what these people fail to realize is that religion is not the problem. Look at this example that we're talking about with Johann De Witt. This guy was torn apart and eaten by a mob of people for a political cause. Should we abolish government because of that? Dictators have invaded countries and killed millions of people in the name of some nationalistic sentiment. You know, we did this for the good of America! Just like it is possible to have a country that doesn't commit genocide in the name of nationalism...it is possible to have a religion that doesn't subjugate, enslave or kill people in the name of their religion.

There is an Indian religion whose origins go WAY back to around the 7th century BC and it's called Jainism. Now if you're a follower of Jainism, you live by a strict principle of non-violence towards ALL living creatures. That is the ultimate good. It is just a beautiful religion...the promote complete equality among all living things and they wouldn't ever THINK of mobbing together and disemboweling someone, let alone fly planes into buildings. My point is not to find an exception to a rule and say that people are wrong...my point is that if it is possible to have a religion like Jainism, and many other religions that don't have violent extremists, if it is possible for those to exist, then maybe there is something that underlies religion that is the real problem. Maybe that thing can ALSO be found in all of these other things, like the Orangists from the story we just told, or people that commit violence in the name of their country. Maybe the real problem is man's ability to attach themselves to a tribe and marginalize other groups of people that don't agree with them. And if you are someone that truly wants the violence to stop and not someone that just has an ax to grind with religion, you can see that abolishing religion doesn't solve the problem, it just delays it. We can see this in the example of Johann De Witt. Spinoza was absolutely devastated when this happened. Leibniz, a contemporary and friend of Spinoza and the third of the great continental rationalists wrote later about Spinoza telling him about the day when the mob attacked them: I have spent several hours with Spinoza, after dinner. He said to me that, on the day of the massacres of the De Witts, he wanted to go out at night and post a placard near the site of the massacres reading *ultimi barbarorum*. But his host locked the house to keep him from going out, for he would be exposed to being torn to pieces. Spinoza was so angry at these people, so mad at them for massacring "reason itself"...that he painted what amounted to a big piece of poster board and wanted to post it at the murder site calling the mob the most ruthless of barbarians imaginable. The only reason he didn't is because his landlord locked him in his house because he didn't want him to get killed to. That landlord may be the sole reason I am recording this episode right now. This story really encapsulates the character of Spinoza throughout his entire life: dedicated to reason. Strong, stood by his beliefs no matter the cost. Living in a world of people who were not

his intellectual equal, groups of people willing to commit terrible acts of violence against people that merely disagreed with them, and Spinoza having beliefs that disagreed with almost everybody. But more than that, Spinoza embodies what this whole time period was about. I mean, the way he made his living was by grinding lenses for telescopes and microscopes. There is no job that is more "scientific revolution" than that. If you were making a movie about someone from this era and his occupation was lens grinder, the writers would tell you that it was TOO over the top. Spinoza grew up Jewish. He was a proud, card carrying member of the nation of Israel until the age of 22 when his father died and he didn't need to keep his opinions quiet anymore for fear of embarrassing him. He was living during the time of the Spanish Inquisition which created a pretty interesting and complex situation for you if you were Jewish or any religious authority in the nation of Israel. Above all else, they wanted to keep Spinoza quiet. See, Spinoza had this long upbringing of what we would equate in modern times to catholic school. He talks about it being this long, monotonous slog through the Jewish religious texts and the old testament and what eventually happens is Spinoza thinks the story is childish. He said this God that is portrayed in the Old Testament, how can anyone honestly believe that this is true? And if it is true, is this the God that you want to exist under? No, God is nothing like this, what some guys wrote about in this really old book that you guys are following. He thought that whoever wrote the Torah wasn't a bad person, they understandably had no idea about science or cosmology, but let's not pretend like they did. He said that these miracles that are written about most likely were just natural events that were misunderstood by humans and recorded to be supernatural acts to give credence to the set of behaviors that are attached to them. He talks about how God could never be relegated to a human form...God didn't say "let there be light". He doesn't have a hand that he reaches down with and touches you. God is much, much more than that to Spinoza. God is an infinite being that could never be described in these sorts of terms. Now, we're going to do a whole episode on Spinoza's God because it is an incredibly fascinating and useful worldview, but the significance of this right now is that, with views like this, he obviously wasn't fitting into a world where the nation of Israel has

the Spanish Inquisition going on and would love it if he would just keep his mouth shut. The authority at the synagogue would say, "Just...Cmon Spinoza...keep it down a bit alright. Just don't say anything." But he wasn't going to keep it down anymore. Spinoza was a man of his convictions. They wanted him to be quiet so badly that...in his twenties...they offered him 1000 florens a month to just NOT make his opinions known about stuff. Just for some perspective, most people were surviving back then on about 2500 florens a YEAR, so 1000 florens a month is similar to being paid a six-figure salary in today's world just to keep your mouth shut. Spinoza turned it down. No instead, what he decided to do is send the Jewish authorities a comprehensive mathematical structured outline of all of his views, what they were and how they are in his opinion irrefutable because they are as self-evident as the mathematical truth that a triangle has three angles that equal 180 degrees. He left them no choice. In July of 1656 they did this ridiculous ritual where they blow the "great horn"...they all are holding candles that they put out one by one and then they literally tried to curse him. They read this really cryptically worded scary sounding passage that hereby banished Spinoza from . Nobody is allowed to help him. Nobody is allowed to talk to him. He is a marked person who is not part of their group anymore. What followed for Spinoza was a life of a lot of solitude. Some people say that there were stretches where you wouldn't see him leave his house for three months at a time. He tells stories about how he would sit alone and collect spiders and watch them fight each other. Or that he would collect flies and put one in a spiders web and just laugh maniacally as it struggled to get away. If he lived today he could just watch animal planet like a normal person...but it is interesting to think about how lonely it must have felt to be so intelligent surrounded by people that mostly can't relate to you. But he tried his hardest...and he did write a lot of letters throughout his life. One of the most famous and one of the most illuminating of Spinoza and the way that he thought about things is one with an old friend of his named Albert Burgh. Before he was banished from Israel he was really good friends with Albert, but eventually they went their separate ways, Spinoza to a life of solitude and Albert became a Christian. Well, eventually Albert gets word through the grapevine of how godless and terrible Spinoza's

views on existence were and he decides to send him a letter, claiming to be doing the Lord's work and trying to get him to become a Christian. Albert spends a lot of his letter attacking Spinoza's views and giving the best argument he can for why Christianity is the best choice and why Spinoza should abandon this rootless, selfish existence and join the church of Rome. Now, I'm going to read an excerpt from the letter and just put yourself in Spinoza's shoes as he is reading this. Just listen to the arrogance. Just imagine getting a letter from what used to be your best friend and they are condemning you and making you feel as though you are inferior to them. Here's what Albert closes his letter with: "I have written this letter to you with intentions truly Christian; first, in order to show the love I bear to you, though you are a heathen; secondly, in order to beg you not to persist in converting others. I therefore will thus conclude: God is willing to snatch your soul from eternal damnation, if you will allow Him. Do not doubt that the Master, who has called you so often through others, is now calling you for the last time through me, who having obtained grace from the ineffable mercy of God Himself, beg the same for you with my whole heart. Do not deny me. For if you do not now give ear to God who calls you, the wrath of the Lord will be kindled against you, and there is a danger of your being abandoned by His infinite mercy, and becoming a wretched victim of the Divine Justice which consumes all things in wrath. Such a fate may Almighty God avert for the greater glory of His name, and for the salvation of your soul, also for a salutary example for the imitation of your most unfortunate and idolatrous followers, through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Who with the Eternal Father liveth and reigneth in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, God for all Eternity. Amen." So like I said before, we can all imagine how insulted Spinoza must have felt. Especially if we consider that he sees all of these religions as ultimately the same thing and even the one that was crammed into his head throughout his youth wasn't good enough for him. Listening to this old friend tell him how lucky he is that God is giving him one last chance to accept the narrative..listening to him end his letter like he's ending a Sunday Mass...you know God for all eternity..Amen. This must have made him pull his hair out of his head. Spinoza replies and both categorically destroys all of the arguments Albert lays out in his letter and does it while

mixing in sarcasm that is still funny 400 years later. He says: "That, which I could scarcely believe when told me by others, I learn at last from your own letter; not only have you been made a member of the Romish Church, but you are become a very keen champion of the same, and have already learned wantonly to insult and rail against your opponents." "Yet you seem to wish to employ reason, and ask me, "How I know that my philosophy is the best among all that have ever been taught in the world, or are being taught, or ever will be taught?" a question which I might with much greater right ask you; for I do not presume that I have found the best philosophy, I know that I understand the true philosophy. If you ask in what way I know it, I answer: In the same way as you know that the three angles of a triangle are equal to two right angles: that this is sufficient, will be denied by no one whose brain is sound, and who does not go dreaming of evil spirits inspiring us with false ideas like the true. For the truth is the index of itself and of what is false. But you; who presume that you have at last found the best religion, or rather the best men, on whom you have pinned your credulity, you, "who know that they are the best among all who have taught, do now teach, or shall in future teach other religions. Have you examined all religions, ancient as well as modern, taught here and in India and everywhere throughout the world? And, if you have duly examined them, how do you know that you have chosen the best" since you can give no reason for the faith that is in you? But you will say, that you acquiesce in the inward testimony of the Spirit of God, while the rest of mankind are ensnared and deceived by the prince of evil spirits. But all those outside the pale of the Romish Church can with equal right proclaim of their own creed what you proclaim of yours." Reading this letter from a guy written in the 1600's is just incredible to me. Spinoza was just an unquestionable genius. You can read this letters in their entirety on the website this week. I will post links to them on the episode page. But just so that we can get a little more insight into the human that was Baruch De Spinoza, lets take a look at one of the arguments that Albert gives him citing the legitimacy of Christianity over the other religions. He says that the reason it has merit is that it spread faster than any other religion and it was spread by a bunch of uneducated Hebrews at that. Now, the point that Albert is making is that the success of something

like that can't be just sophistry or word play...it's not some charismatic priest a little smarter than everyone standing up there and outwitting them. There must be some divine backing to this one. That is Albert's point. Spinoza responds to this here: If, therefore, you had rightly judged, you would have seen that only your third point tells in favour of the Christians, namely, that unlearned and common men should have been able to convert nearly the whole world to a belief in Christ. But this reason militates not only for the Romish Church, but for all those who profess the name of Christ. But assume that all the reasons you bring forward tell in favour solely of the Romish Church. Do you think that you can thereby prove mathematically the authority of that Church? As the case is far otherwise, why do you wish me to believe that my demonstrations are inspired by the prince of evil spirits, while your own are inspired by God, especially as I see, and as your letter clearly shows, that you have been led to become a devotee of this Church not by your love of God, but by your fear of hell, the single cause of superstition? Is this your humility, that you trust nothing to yourself, but everything to others, who are condemned by many of their fellow men? Do you set it down to pride and arrogance, that I employ reason and acquiesce in this true Word of God, which is in the mind and can never be depraved or corrupted? Cast away this deadly superstition, acknowledge the reason which God has given you, and follow that, unless you would be numbered with the brutes." So if there is something we can take from this episode, aside from diving into the intellect and person that was Spinoza, what we should take from this is that the world Spinoza was living in was both a welcoming place to new ideas and potentially a very dangerous place for new ideas. The fact that holding different opinions could have you ripped limb from limb or cut into pieces and sold around town, that dynamic is ultimately what forced Spinoza to never release his principle work called Ethics. He died in 1677 and that very same year it was released by his friends without his name as the author. Now, you may be wondering, why do I care about some guy from the 1600's and his interpretation of what God is? Well let me leave you today with a question...if a belief in the Christian or Jewish God justifies a certain set of behaviors...what set of behaviors would Spinoza's God justify? If we as humans are not all individual unique snowflakes

with a God that knows our first name...what are we? And what does that mean about how we should act on this mortal coil? Thank you for listening, I will talk to you next time.

Spinoza pt. 2

Episode #034

This is a transcript of episode #034 Spinoza pt. 2. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So I'd like to start off the program today by reading you a poem. No, I haven't turned into a guy that sits around playing bongos reading poetry. This is a good one. This is a poem written about Baruch de Spinoza, let's hear what this person has to say about him: "How much do I love this noble man More than I could say with words I fear though he'll remain alone With a holy halo of his own... You think his example would show us What this teaching can give humankind Trust not the comforting façade: One must be born sublime" That poem was written by a guy named Albert Einstein. He was a big fan of Spinoza if you couldn't tell, most notably he was a fan of Spinoza's concept of God. He seems to think in that poem that humankind has something substantial to gain from what Spinoza showed us and that we should "trust not the comforting facade". What is he talking about here? Well trust me, it ALL is going to come together by the end of the show today, but like all great things there is a bit of a back story we need to get through first and it starts with one word: substance. So, as we've been going through the history of philosophy we've heard a lot of things. One thing that has come up pretty commonly among thinkers from all kinds of different backgrounds and time periods is the idea of God being an infinite being. Whatever God is to them, there is one thing that must be true and that is that he is an infinite being. Sometimes as I read that statement I like to just sit and nod while I say it so that I'm more likely to agree with it. But is that statement as infallible as it seems? And if it is true, what else needs to be true? I mean, if God is truly an infinite being, then can anything ever be OUTSIDE of God? As many of you know I have an English Bulldog named Charlie who snores and slobbers everywhere and smells terrible. Is my dog Charlie outside of God? Yes? Well if God is infinite how can he be? The fact that he exists and he is NOT God shows that at least in some small capacity god is limited and is therefore NOT infinite. If you say that God's love exists in

everything, how do you account for the physical matter or any other attribute of Charlie that is separate. If God is infinite, then my dog charlie needs to be part of him. But on that same note, if God is infinite, don't we all need to be a part of him? This was a thought that Spinoza might have wished he could go back and prevent himself from ever having it in the first place...it made his life vastly more complicated than it would be had he never thought of it. Let's talk about where it came from. Spinoza was a continental rationalist. One of the big three: Descartes Spinoza Leibniz. In many ways Spinoza was commenting on and continuing thoughts that Descartes brought up during his lifetime. And as we talked about on the Descartes episodes... Descartes brought A LOT of new ideas to the region in his lifetime. One idea that Descartes talks about quite a bit in his quest to find a universal mathematical order to the universe is substance. For the record this is something that Aristotle talked about a bit as well and Descartes can really be seen as re purposing and rethinking through the idea of substance that he laid out centuries before. Descartes defined substance: and this is important! That whose existence is not dependent on any other thing. This is a very nicely packaged way of saying it. You have Descartes sounding a lot like Aristotle at certain points of his writing where he talks about wax by a fire. When you melt the wax, everything changes about it. The consistency turns to liquid, the shape changes to the shape of the bowl, the color changes: but no one would argue with you if you said that it was the same wax as before. What exactly are we talking about when we say wax if so much can change about it but we still see it as the same thing? Now this is the point of the episode where this could easily devolve down into me talking about attributes of things, modes of things, but let's talk about substance right now. We have to understand that Descartes spent his life trying to refute radical skeptics and find a way to show that what we see in the world is not just a giant illusion. Remember his evil demon that at least COULD be constantly deceiving you? Descartes set out in his philosophy to deliberately prove that what we are experiencing is accurate if we study it hard enough. Spinoza on the other hand said that there was a whole lot more to reality that we couldn't see directly. Substance to Descartes is that whose existence is not dependent on any other thing. Spinoza largely accepts this

in his work but he rephrases it a little and says that substance is that in which its existence explains itself. Now let's think about that for a second...let's think of an example. When I pick up an iPhone, does that phone's existence explain itself? The answer is no. Far from it. You can do a lot of fun things with a smart phone...you can access satellites with it and call your friends....you can surf the internet...you can spend twenty bucks on some bizarre rainbow fruit game. You can do a lot of stuff, but what all these things have in common is that they can't be understood by themselves, they need to be understood in RELATION to some other concept. In fact, just as a little experiment, could we describe what an iPhone is to someone without using anything but the nature of the phone? Spinoza thinks the answer is no. After all, how can you describe what a phone is without referencing something else? You'd say something like, oh you use it to talk to your friends! Well, what is talk? What is the concept of communication that you're talking about? Can't we break it down into smaller pieces and understand it by itself, not in relation to something else? Alright, uh, it processes data! What is processing? What is data? The phone is not self-explanatory. Spinoza says: A definition, if it is to be called perfect, must explain the inmost essence of a thing, and must take care not to substitute for this any of its properties. In order to illustrate my meaning, without taking an example which would seem to show a desire to expose other people's errors, I will choose the case of something abstract, the definition of which is of little moment. Such is a circle. If a circle be defined as a figure, such that all straight lines drawn from the center to the circumference are equal, every one can see that such a definition does not in the least explain the essence of a circle, but solely one of its properties. This is similar to what we talked about with some of the Medieval philosophers like Avicenna who talked about the difference between necessary and contingent existents. Contingent existents rely on something else to exist...like I rely on my mom and dad to be born in the first place. 99.9% of things are contingent on something else to exist. Well this is one of those classic questions from philosophy: is there anything out there that exists necessarily. Let's just think about that for a second. Now if you're a Christian or a believer in some God the answer of this question is going to be easy for you, but if you're not just try to think of

something for a second, see if you come up with what Spinoza comes up with. That for existence to be a possibility it must exist. Spinoza is what is known as a substance monist. If you remember back to the pre-socratics...Thales was a monist because he believed that everything in the cosmos was made of one substance: in his case water in it's varying forms. So Spinoza, as a substance monist believes that there is only one true substance. Spinoza sat down one day and started thinking about Descartes definition of substance: something that's existence is self-explanatory. And after thinking about it for a long time what he realized is that if that is the definition of substance then there is really only one thing that falls into that category, and that is EVERYTHING. Not every, single thing...EVERYTHING as a whole! The Entirety of it all. The Totality of all existence. Don't think about you, or your city, or the earth, or the milky way galaxy or even the universe...EVERYTHING as one whole. See all of those smaller pieces are explainable only in relation to something else, but the entire thing, this entire, glowing giant mass of existence, WHEREEVER it ends, if it even does, it is in it's nature to exist. Now we come back to what we were touching on before: If God is truly infinite, then how can anything not be a part of him? I mean really, if you are taking up space, and God is infinite, how can you not be a very very small fraction of God? Spinoza says that that totality of existence, everything that is, he calls that God. The really important part is that he ALSO calls that totality nature. Now that's not something I think a lot of people would disagree with now is it? I mean, it's tough doing this show sometimes because when I say that Spinoza calls the totality of all existence "God" I get resistance from both popular ways that people think in this time period. Religious people think he is an idiot because he doesn't see God as this man that sees you when your sleeping and knows when your awake...and then on the other end ...needlessly hostile atheist people just hear the word God and are just like scoff Good old Aesop Spinoza...weaving his fairy tales again. So let's not even use the word God...let's use the other word that Spinoza thought was synonymous with the totality of everything: Nature. Now, we're talking right? I mean, think about it: for our whole lives we've been told that science is great at identifying patterns of nature...we can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that gravity exists, but we

can't ever know WHY gravity exists. We can prove beyond a reasonable doubt how and when life began, but we can never objectively prove WHY life exists at all...or why there is some software programmed into life to evolve and adapt in very calculated ways to the environment. You know...if a devoutly religious person and a militant atheist went on a walk through the woods together talking...they would both look around them and marvel at nature. They might disagree on what brought those forces of nature into existence, but they wouldn't disagree that there is this self-sufficient framework to the universe that is seemingly-ordered. But although in modern times we think of "nature" as what we see when we go camping...does nature really end where the trees end? No, the forces of nature are ubiquitous. They're everywhere! You grow a plant on your windowsill...does it grow based on a different set of laws than if it grew in the woods? We've worked really hard to create these cities that make us feel exterior to nature, but Spinoza has news for you. You're still part of it. Our Solar System is part of it...the Milky Way and Andromeda Galaxies are part of it. To Spinoza, each and every thing...including each and every one of us listening to this podcast right now are part of one giant totality. We are all a very small piece of that totality. We are all aspects of God, or Nature. Now if this is true...if we are all individual facets of God...and God is the totality of all existence...what are the implications of that? Well, one major one is that if God is nature, then God cannot by definition be super-natural. Anything that he does, although it seems like magic to us, is just a part of the natural way of things. Spinoza said: As regards miracles, I am of opinion that the revelation of God can only be established by the wisdom of the doctrine, not by miracles, or in other words by ignorance. Another one is that if God IS nature, and we and everything around us are just a part of God, then God cannot be this transcendent being that sits on a throne and judges who won the ethical obstacle course. He is not a transcendent being...he is an eminent being. He is around us all the time. We are part of him. Keep in mind the only reason I am saying "him" is because it is familiar to people to refer to God this way, but this being is far from having male genitalia or an affinity for sports. Spinoza talks about how humans have learned to project their characteristics on God, and how it really is only natural. He says that if a triangle could talk...he thinks it

would say that God is obviously a triangle. He said: When you say that if I deny, that the operations of seeing, hearing, attending, wishing, &c.;, can be ascribed to God, or that they exist in him in any eminent fashion, you do not know what sort of God mine is ; I suspect that you believe there is no greater perfection than such as can be explained by the aforesaid attributes. I am not astonished ; for I believe that, if a triangle could speak, it would say, in like manner, that God is eminently triangular, while a circle would say that the divine nature is eminently circular. Thus each would ascribe to God its own attributes, would assume itself to be like God, and look on everything else as ill-shaped. Now it's important to think about this as we consider God to be the totality of all existence. This is important to consider when we think about the fact that Spinoza considers God to be the cause of everything. Now when I say this, im not just talking about God creating everything...at this point, when philosophy refers to the "cause" of something, they're usually referring to Aristotle's four causes. The cause of something is more than just the final cause of something. To Spinoza, this totality of existence, or nature causes everything: It provides the material that it is made out of, it provides through some intricate software that we don't understand it's shape and size, it has a purpose for the thing within it's framework, although we may not understand ours. You know, I was watching a video months ago with Joe Rogan and he said that we, as a species, may need to be willing to accept that the Earth is an orange and that humans are like mold and our job is to eat the orange. Now there is a lot to disagree with there, but one thing is effectively talking about is an overarching purpose of the human species, or of life as a whole. You know, if the world is not an ethical proving ground where a supernatural God assesses how nice you are to other humans, what are we exactly? And if you think that humans and the ability to be self-aware is an evolutionary accident, what is the purpose of life as a whole? Well, one of Aristotle's four causes asks what is the purpose of the thing? And in Spinoza's philosophical system, Nature explains ours. The most important part of all this is that God causes everything to Spinoza. Now if all the things that happen in the world are just one stepping stone in a giant causal chain set in motion by Nature, or God...that changes a lot about the way we have to view the world.

One of the most interesting and relevant to us is how it affects the idea of free will. See, to Spinoza, our actions are caused by nature. Free-will, to Spinoza is a complete illusion. When someone chooses to go down to the store and buy some Doritos...When someone thinks they are making a spontaneous action completely free of any outside influence, they really are just ignorant of the true causes of their actions. Like, have you ever been driving down the road or just doing anything in your life and had the same reaction in the same place two days in a row? A reaction that was almost sub-conscious? It's hard to think of a good example of this...I guess the one that comes to mind is up here in Seattle there is a radio station called "the rock of seattle" and I drove past a billboard that said "I love the Rock!" and the picture was someone smiling and holding a picture of some pitcher of beer or some alcoholic drink because that's part of what their demographic is apparently...and I saw this billboard and I just started singing "I love rock and roll" like I was a severely drunk Joan Jett singing her hit song. Look you guys think I like this example? How do you think it feels to be me trapped in this body? Well the important part of this wonderful story is that I drove past that billboard 2 weeks later...I didn't even think about it and I saw the same billboard and sung the exact same song...the exact same way. After I did it, I realized wow, my brain is like a really terrible computer program. I get a certain input, the billboard. I filter that input through all of the experiences I've had in my life: all of the times I've heard drunk people singing, all of the things that relate to the words I Love Rock, and after filtering it through all that stuff I react with the drunken rendition of Joan Jett's hit song. This is what Spinoza is talking about. Do we truly have free-will simply because we feel like we could have made a different decision? Or, are we just ignorant. Like, based on all of our conditioning, all of our life experiences, we really had no choice. We were always going to conclude that the one we chose was the most reasonable based on the software that being a part of Nature affords us. Now some of you may be saying...what if I decide to just pull my shirt over my head, spin around in a circle and sing stairway to heaven backwards? Surely, THAT is free will because nature could never know that I would make that random decision...well what if all of your life experiences insured that you would be the type of person to

contemplate free-will and therefore be the type of person who is more likely to do some super random act like that to prove that you have autonomy. There is no escaping it, to Spinoza. If we truly had free-will, we would be causes of ourselves and therefore substances. But there is only one substance. That thing that we are all individual ripples of, God. He says: In the Mind there is no absolute, or free, will, but the Mind is determined to will this or that by a cause which is also determined by another, and this again by another, and so to infinity. Just as we, as physical beings are aspects of this whole of existence and we can be understood by this GIANT causal chain. You know...your mom and dad created you, their mom and dad created them and so on...Just like our physical bodies can be understood based on what caused them, our emotions are the exact same way. The way we feel or are inclined to act is based on some thought that was caused by some other thought and so on and so forth. Again, we can understand things best by understanding the causes of it, and God causes everything. Spinoza talks about navigating the world and how our actions are either caused by passive or active emotions. Passive emotions are things like anger or frustration. You can see how he may have seen these things as passive...they are very reactionary. If we get cut off in traffic and get angry at the person, we are passively going throughout life and being enslaved by these other things that we allow to affect us. On the other hand there are active emotions. What defines an active emotion is not that it is a good feeling...on the contrary...anger could be an active emotion as well. What separates something from being a passive or active emotion comes down to whether we understand the true cause of the emotion or not. He says: "An emotion which is a passion, ceases to be a passion, as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it." He says: "I say that we are active when something takes place within us or out of us, of which we are the adequate cause, ie when from our nature something follows either within us or out of us, which can be clearly understood by that nature alone. On the other hand I say that we are passive when something takes place in us or follows from our nature, of which we are only the partial cause." He talks a lot about how we feel like we are at the mercy of this hurricane of complex emotions and decision making, but really, all of these emotions that we think are driving us can be distilled

down to a tendency to increase power. That's what we seem to be programmed to do...that's what we are all searching for. When we feel joy or good feelings, that's just the feeling of an increase of power. When we feel sadness, that is merely a decrease of power. When we love something or hate something, we think that we are making some free decision based on our personal tastes...to Spinoza, in reality, it comes down to this striving for power. There's more to talk about with Spinoza and his ethics but maybe the most powerful notion that we can extract from it this week is this: If we are all aspects of God, then we are parts of one being. Just like it would be ludicrous for your left foot to try to hurt or go to war with your right foot, because their existence depends on each other and really they are both parts of the same being, All humans should see themselves this way too. Because of this there is no reason to ever hurt or cause suffering, because by doing so, you are simultaneously causing damage to yourself as well. Thank you for listening, Talk to you next time.

John Locke pt. 1

Episode #035

This is a transcript of episode #035 on John Locke pt. 1 - From Sea to Shining Sea. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). I want to begin the show today by asking you all a question that you probably have never asked yourselves before. Are you ready? Here it goes. Who owns your body? I mean, you as a spiritual being, or as a mind that operates this bag of chemicals that you walk around in...who owns that bag of chemicals? Do you think you own it? Why? You just live in it...why does that necessarily mean that you own it? When I was little we got evicted from the apartment complex I was living in and we just continued to live in the apartment. That apartment wasn't OURS simply because we were still living in it, and this was underscored when a few weeks later the police came in and kicked us out. But no one can really kick you out of your body can they? So who do you pay rent to as a spirit or mind occupying this body? Do you set up some sort of rent to own program? This question is pretty ridiculous..and as interesting as it is to think about it really is just trying to get you to say that your body is a part of who you are. When you are born, your body and you for that matter, are self-owned. Figuratively speaking, there is a deed to your body that is signed over to you and you exist in this role of self-ownership. You are entitled to your body at birth, but is it the ONLY thing you are entitled to? What else are you entitled to simply by virtue of being born? Now that is a question that is interesting to think about for a while. By the way, as these thought experiments get more and more relevant and the questions become increasingly modern and relatable, maybe the best way to listen to this show is when I ask a question, to pause and think about it a little bit. But all that said...even if you own your body...do you have control over it? After all, there are things that we own that we don't have COMPLETE control over...an 80 year old lady with a sticky gas pedal isn't entitled to the right to drive her car through a 7-11. And now that we've asked all these questions, let me tell you something...listeners of the Philosophize This! program...you are NOT entitled to

complete control over your body! I mean, we all know...its common knowledge that 6000 years ago when the lord in his eternal grace put the very first human on planet earth, Adam, he gave him dominion over all of the fish and fowl! God said: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth." God gave this guy Adam a pretty daunting task...he essentially gave him dominion over every living thing that moves on the earth. Well part of all of those living things is... you. Part of all those living things were Adam's kids. And let's not forget the 5th commandment: Honor thy father and mother! We are not born free, we are born as subjects of our father, who we are beholden to. The first and most natural form of government if you are a human being living under the God of the Old Testament in this natural world...is a monarchy. This is the most natural form of government...it is the system of government that God initially laid out...it is the one that we are used to. We are born unfree and we should stay that way. This was the basic position of a 17th century political theorist named Sir Robert Filmer...if you couldn't tell he was a huge supporter of a monarchy: "The first government in the world was monarchical in the father of all flesh, Adam being commanded to people and multiply the earth, and to subdue it, and having dominion given him over all creatures, was thereby the monarch of the whole world: none of his posterity had any right to possess any thing, but by his grant or permission, or by succession from him: The earth, saith the Psalmist, hath he given to the children of men, which shew the title comes from fatherhood." This position was known as Patriarchalism. The King or Monarch of a particular government serves the role of the father, and we as people should be subservient to him like his children. Well as we've talked about, this time period was filled with all sorts of intellectual battles. The one that was probably the most important in retrospect was this battle of what political system is the most appropriate. One of the guys that was putting his life on the line, constantly running and fighting against monarch rule was John Locke. Now if you live in the United States, or most modern nations for that matter, you are very familiar with the political philosophy of John Locke; it was what the founding fathers used as a framework when building the

constitution, along with Montesquieu. The important part is that each and every day you wake up and go to your job in the 21st century...you are still feeling the effects of this battle we're about to talk about fought all the way back in the 1600's. We think of a battlefield...we have all seen huge explosions before and they are incredibly dramatic and scary, but are few bombs in history that still affect people centuries after they were initially dropped. And this bomb of political theory set off by John Locke who spent most of his life on the run and scared just to be able to...we are living in the shockwave of this bomb. So the ideas themselves we are going to be familiar with...and it is easy to just write them off and say "Oh, I've already heard about that, so I already know about it...i can just tune out" But context is everything...and if we understand how John Locke arrived at these ideas and where shone his lantern of reason to develop this system, it can give us some very nice insights into the modern world we're living in. When John Locke wrote his two treatises on government, his second one being the huge influence on the founding fathers, he was responding to Sir Robert Filmer and his defense of Patriarchalism. His second treatise on government was a direct counter-attack in this intellectual war zone. To put it lightly, Locke thought that the idea that we were born unfree children under the dominion of a father figure was complete trash. He attacks the argument of Filmer on two different fronts...one: Filmer's interpretation of God pronouncing Adam the monarch steward over every living thing on planet earth...was a pathetic distortion of reality. Locke says when God said to fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth...if you read the Bible it is glaringly obvious he wasn't talking to Adam in particular...he was talking to all of mankind! God pronounced the HUMAN SPECIES as stewards over the land, not a single guy named Adam who we are perpetually in service of. Locke argues that after all, the commandment goes "Honor thy father AND mother" There is no Patriarch. And "honoring" your parents is much different than being born a piece of their property. Well what about the fact that we are born helpless? We need our parents to take care of us or we die...are we really born free if that is the case? Locke says yes, we are. We just aren't able to exercise it yet. Similar to

our ability to reason. As humans we possess an innate faculty of an ability to reason, but as infants we have no way of exercising it yet. Would you say that we are born irrational creatures by nature? Or would you say we are rational creatures without the ability to express it yet? He uses this example to make the case for why we obviously are not born unfree: "Thus we are born free, as we are born rational; not that we have actually the exercise of either: age, that brings one, brings with it the other too. And thus we see how natural freedom and subjection to parents may consist together, and are both founded on the same principle." The implications of this are huge. So if we are not born into a world instantly under the control of some other person, then we are in a sense, created equal. We are self-owned machines. So on one end Locke destroys Filmer's argument by claiming that he drastically misinterpreted the Bible... You were completely wrong in the way that you interpreted this passage but EVEN IF YOU DIDN'T misinterpret the Bible so badly, you were in the wrong from the start because... we shouldn't look to things like the Bible to determine what system of government we have. The Bible is great for some things, but not for this. Reason, used correctly, is a much better way to arrive at a good system of government. Locke talks about how so many of these things from the Bible that theologians claim is divine revelation that reason could never arrive at... he doesn't think that's true. Uh, he has this really great section where he uses the example we were talking about earlier... that God made a declaration that we, as the human species are hereby kings over all of the animals of the earth and that we should eat them.... John Locke goes, why do you even need God to say that to arrive at that conclusion? I mean, if you believe that God created us, then you believe he created all of the processes in our body, and the fact that we have such a strong desire to live, the fact that we get hungry and want to eat those other creatures of the earth, that alone should show you that eating those animals is a behavior that God endorses. And the significance of this is that you can use reason and our place in the natural world to determine what is correct behavior and you don't need to worry about misinterpreting some obscure tweet that God sent out thousands of years ago. He is very clear about this he talks about the different ways God COULD have created the world, but didn't. This world is a deliberate construct of this creator. So, if

people like Descartes can measure things in the natural world and find these mathematical constants and try to arrive at a universal system...If we can study substances in the natural world and how they react to each other and arrive at a system of chemistry...if we can study events in the natural world and come up with a system of meteorology...Is it really THAT CRAZY to think that we could study our place within the natural world and come up with a system of ethics? or a political system for that matter? You know, people are typically given a system of ethics in modern times. All kinds of examples of this...They're told that God chose this system of behaviors for them to follow and they better do it, or else. They watch TV and watch how other people treat each other and try to emulate it in their life, so that maybe their life becomes more like this guy on TV and his life. But for a long time thinkers wondered, what do we base our system of ethics on? Just imagine TV and the Bible didn't exist for a second...where would you start if you were forced to try to build an ethical system? What behaviors would matter to you? Certain things we know we feel...like we hate it when someone steals from us, but what would you use as a basis for making the claim that "stealing is wrong". Well lucky for us, we've already talked about SEVERAL examples of this. The Epicureans in the Hellenistic age looked at the default human behavior. If you remember they said that from the very moment we are born we seem to avoid pain and seek out pleasure. I mean, if you pinch the skin of the new born baby it pulls it's hand away out of instinct. From that, they decided that pleasure is the ultimate good and from there it's just a matter of truly knowing what brings you pleasure in the long term as opposed to what you just THINK brings you pleasure. Again, they asked what does it mean to be a human living in this natural world, an aversion to pain, let's develop an ethical system around it. But this is just one example of MANY. Back in the seventeenth century, there were several thinkers including Thomas Hobbes who we've already talked about and John Locke who thought that by using reason to analyze human nature and our place in the natural world, certain universal truths can be deduced from it. This system is what is known as Natural Law. Now, the rest of the episode will focus on what this natural law is, but let's put this umbrella of justification over all of the rest of this: Just like a law can

exist on the books in today's world, and it doesn't matter in the slightest if the police aren't enforcing it...this system of natural law can exist and it means absolutely nothing if there is no one there to enforce it."POLITICAL POWER, then, I take to be a RIGHT of making laws with penalties of death, and consequently all less penalties, for the regulating and preserving of property, and of employing the force of the community, in the execution of such laws, and in the defence of the common-wealth from foreign injury; and all this only for the public good."When put the most broadly...this is the role of government to John Locke: to preserve the rights afforded to us by natural law...all of them. This is much different than the other political theorist we talked about: Thomas Hobbes. Remember Hobbes thought the role of government was to maintain stability...to prevent chaos...and as individuals we didn't have any unalienable rights, just a will to survive. Many of the rights that we DID have in a state of nature were handed over to the Leviathan in the interest of self-preservation. The government's job to John Locke is to protect our natural rights. Now, the important part for us is...what are those rights? Put the most broadly, Life, Liberty and Property. You ever wonder why those rights are touted as being so unalienable? It's because the foundation of them is based on what is seen as a universal truth derived from nature. So we started out the show today by asking who owns your body. Who owns you? Now I'm going to go out on a limb and say that most of us said that we feel as though we are self-owned. We own ourselves and with it a sense of Autonomy. Autonomy is referring to our ability to make decisions for ourselves, not coerced by some other individual or group. So we have the life we were given, the liberty to control that life...but John Locke thinks we are entitled to one more thing. Property. Now, he isn't saying that you are entitled to a house when you are born, or to a yacht when you're 16 years old. When you use your life to exercise your liberty to provide for yourself, and you labor hard and create something that improves your lot in life, John Locke thinks you are entitled to the fruits of your labor. Now this is an interesting point, one that has caused a lot of backlash over the years. Living in a modern, capitalistic society modeled after the philosophy of John Locke, we might not THINK about it...but why are you necessarily entitled to what you create? Why is that YOURS now? Maybe the

best way to understand why John Locke feels this way is to consider the alternatives. I mean, look around you...everything you own...everything you consider to be the fruits of your labor was at one point a natural resource harvested from the earth in some way. Books are made out of paper which comes from trees...your cellphone is made from the tears of some factory worker in a third world country. We live in a world where using that natural right of liberty when trying to provide for ourselves forces us to use the natural resources of the world. We have no choice...if we don't want to starve to death, we need to use what is around us to survive. Just because you look around you and none of this stuff LOOKS like it came from nature...none of this stuff just magically appeared. It is some natural resource doctored and processed down to provide some purpose. So if we're FORCED to use the resources of the world...it begs the question.. who owns those resources? I mean, what good is your life and liberty if you were born into a world where there are no resources to use. The more relevant question is not who OWNS these resources, but who controls them. Well there are actually a lot of possible answers to this question...and it is fun to brainstorm and try to think of a method that we could use that would be fair to everyone and allows some level of control over them. But for the sake of this show, let's just talk about a few of the common ideas. So one possibility is that we assign a group of people to be the overseers of the resources. As difficult or impractical as it sounds, they would essentially catalog all of the resources that people could provide for themselves with...all of the trees, the rocks, the sand, the dirt, coal-mines, gold mines EVERYTHING. and then they would be assigned the task to perfectly and equally distribute one part to each and every person. That way, nobody goes without the tools they need to be able to exercise their liberty to provide for themselves. The common argument against this one is that it is horrendously ineffective in practice. You could find 100 reasons...but how bout that all men are created equal...but not all natural resources are created equal. There's going to be some people that just get a field full of dirt and trash and other people that get a mine full of gold and silver. Even if it COULD be implemented in real life, let's not forget about the idea that in this model we are handing over complete control over the resources of the world to a small handful of people. We've

seen how that pans out. Another common recommendation of dealing with this resource problem is: why does there even need to be a controller at all? Why can't we all just take whatever we want, whenever we want when we need it? Well, aside from the environmental catastrophes that could occur if we allowed for the unrestricted extraction of whatever resource you want whenever you want it, the biggest attack on this method of managing it is that it just isn't consistent with human nature and reality. People that think this way usually are really compassionate, farsighted people that are content with what they have. The problem is, Hitler didn't invade Czechoslovakia because of scarcity. He didn't continue into Poland and France because his people were incapable of surviving on what resources they had. His goal was conquest and glory. Let's not project how WE would act in a given situation onto the totality of the human race. There are selfish, greedy, bad people in the world. I mean, even with an over-crowded prison population there are enough people willing to infringe upon your property that you have a car alarm. You have locks on your doors. People willing to do terrible things in the name of their own self interests exist, whether we like that reality or not. Making every resource on earth uncontrolled doesn't force people to go along with the system. And it also doesn't give your neighbor much of an incentive to remain productive if he can just come over and use your pots and pans whenever he wants because technically they aren't yours. This issue of productivity is a big one to people of Locke's time...we need to keep these resources productive. We don't want somebody hoarding a bunch of resources and doing nothing with them...saving them for a rainy day. This is the basis for a lot of modern advocates of taxing private property. This is usually aligned with the democratic party nowadays where if you own a piece of land, you pay tax on that piece of land on a regular basis and the thinking is that by having to pay that amount you will be forced to try to use that piece of land to make money and pay those taxes, as opposed to you being able to just own it and do whatever you want with it, if you want to have your land be a vacant lot, that's your right! Tough issue with tons of debate and it stems from this question. Anyway, Locke proposes a different solution to the problem. His idea is that we have the natural right to our life and liberty to move around as we please and work to

provide for ourselves...his idea was that you have a natural right to the fruits of your labor. The thinking was that this motivates people to work hard if they want a lot of stuff and allows for people that just want to get by, to just get by. It doesn't put complete control over how productive the resources are being in the hands of a small group of people...in fact if somebody wants to put the resources to use, they can. The only thing stopping them is their will, to get up and do the work. A later political theorist named Claude Frederic Bastiat summed the next part of this up really well he said: "Life, liberty, and property do not exist because men have made laws. On the contrary, it was the fact that life, liberty, and property existed beforehand that caused men to make laws in the first place." So here's what Locke and Bastiat are getting at. We now have a basis for why... just by virtue of being born, to John Locke, we are entitled to three things: Life, Liberty and the fruits of our labor... however hard we choose to work, that's what we get. But if these are natural rights afforded to use by using reason to look at our place within nature, then like we talked about before, that natural law is pointless if there isn't a police officer to enforce the law. There are bad people out there...people that would take the fruits of your labor in a heartbeat if there was nothing protecting you. And you can say, well I got somthin fer those boys. I got me some fire arms. Dem boys be plum stupider than a jackrabbit they come takin my fruits of labor. Well what if these bad people start a gang and group together. You can handle a few of them with your defensive advantage...but can you take a 30-40 person gang by yourself? What if they're highly trained because this is how they get everything. Could you single handedly defeat ISIS? Really, the only solution to this problem is to be protected by a more highly-trained, well-equipped gang of people to protect your natural rights: your life, your liberty to not be handcuffed to a drain pipe somewhere and your property. The fruits of your labor and the manifestation of your liberty to provide for yourself. This is why government exists to John Locke. To protect your natural rights of Life, Liberty and Property. You know early in his life, John Locke was actually an advocate of a Monarchy, but you read his works as his life progresses and he gets more and more radical in this direction that we've been talking about. And make no mistake, these were radical ideas at the time. We're going to

talk a lot about his life on the run from these people next episode, but rest assured in knowing that he was running for a reason. This gradual movement throughout his entire life came to a head near the end of his life when he advocated a position that at his time what downright revolutionary. See, Thomas Hobbes said that we are in a state of nature where we don't have any restrictions, but we don't have "unalienable rights" so to speak. Someone can kill you in the state of nature and it can't really be considered "wrong" because there is no system of laws in place that deems it bad. The ultimate goal is survival...you can do anything you want if it means you are going to survive. Like we talked about you can steal all your neighbors stuff and this isn't wrong in the state of nature. Hobbes says that we forfeit most of the rights that we have in the state of nature to the Sovereign whose sole just is to maintain order. John Locke on the other hand says that the role of government is to protect the natural rights of it's citizens...so this makes him conclude that if the government is NOT serving the people as it should, that the citizens underneath it have every right to change it to something else..or even overthrow it completely. Find out what happens on the next episode of Philosophize This! I'll talk to you soon. On this episode of the podcast, we begin learning about John Locke. First, we ask ourselves whether or not we own our bodies and what other things we are entitled to simply by virtue of being born. Next, we consider whether its possible to develop a system of ethics by studying the world around us, just as we develop systems of science and mathematics. Finally, we discuss the three unalienable rights Locke believes humans have (they'll sound a bit familiar!), and why he thinks its the government's job to uphold those rights. All this and more on the latest episode of Philosophize This!

John Locke pt. 2 - The Blank Slate

Episode #036

This is a transcript of episode #036 on John Locke pt. 2. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). When most people think back to the most revolutionary moments in history, when they think about the moments when things changed the most...they're usually thinking of pictures of war and destruction, you know...images of soldiers goose stepping down the streets of a town they just conquered. When most people think about conquering entire populations of people or overthrowing kingdoms, they see images of Ghengis Khan siening Baghdad, they think about great Caliphates from over the centuries. But just think about the power of ideas. How many kingdoms over the years were brought to their knees simply because of ideas? Ideas that were planted in the heads of their population and made into a reality? It's very easy to think of the most critical shifts in history as being connected to one of these bloody conflicts...but Ghengis Khan could never dream of overthrowing as many kingdoms as the ideas of John Locke. But this is far from a secret. In fact, the Monarchies KNEW how powerful these radical ideas could be. And just like any organism that is built for survival, these monarchies were fighting for their lives. John Locke was born in 1632 and went to school at the Westminster School in London before he went on to attend Oxford. One of the most interesting things about John Locke is just how much his thoughts transformed over the course of his life. I mean, you read some of his writing from when he was younger, like when he went to Oxford and it is almost indistinguishable from stuff that you could read from late in his life. Like I said last time, when John Locke is in his early twenties, he is actually a huge proponent of a Monarchy...and it's not until AFTER his formal education when he continues talking to influential people about the role of government that he arrives at his ideas that would change the world. What's impressive to me is that he didn't need to do any of this. I feel like something happens with most people right around the time they graduate high school or college where, there's this feeling that they've already

gone through their education and now they got the world pretty much figured out. Like, as babies, we come into the world with nothing. I mean, you just look into the eyes of a baby and you can see that it is soaking everything up around it. You know...the common thing that people say is that the brain of a baby is like sponge. They're CONSTANTLY learning about the world around them. And then they have their first day of school and they go to first grade and then second grade and then learn more about being a human. Then they graduate high school and if they're lucky they get to go to college and learn some more and then something happens with most people. Learning, isn't as much of a priority to them. They've gleaned this lens that they view the world through, their life is going well and they feel like they pretty much have it all figured out. Life becomes about using what you've already learned as opposed to remaining a student of the game. And it's funny because if you asked 99% of these people, do you think you know everything do you think you got it all figured out? They would say, of course not. They realize it should be a priority to learn...but there's a difference between common knowledge and common practice. And John Locke was someone that never stopped learning and adapting. But just imagine if he did! Just imagine if John Locke grew complacent with his political thoughts...imagine if he still thought the same politically as he did in college. Where would the world be today? It's kind of inspiring...one of you people out there listening to this that love to think and remain a student of the world...one of you guys or gals might come up with an idea like John Locke's. Maybe another interesting element of John Locke is that his decisions to continue learning really complicated his life a lot. These monarchies were like giant octopi with slimy tentacles, they were these organisms feeling around for anything trying to threaten their existence...and when they located one, they just SLURP wrapped around it and held on and wouldn't let it go until it stopped moving. To understand the feat John Locke must have felt we kinda gotta put ourselves in his shoes, so let's talk about what he would've expected to be done to him if he was caught daring to oppose the monarchy. In the 1680's there was a conspiracy and attempt by a couple different groups to overthrow King James II who was the monarch of England at the time...this whole situation came to a climax at what is now known as the Battle of

Sedgemoor when the rebellion got absolutely demolished by James II's army and after words they imprisoned over 1000 of these rebels to stand trial for questioning the crown. This is how serious it was...just the RETALIATION from the monarchy has a name in the annals of history. The methods they used to show people what would happen if you dare cross the monarchy are remembered by their own title. The trials of these rebels would eventually become known as the Bloody Assizes. They sentenced an elderly woman to be burned at the stake...but don't worry...they downgraded her sentence to a mere public beheading. Several hundred of them were forcefully taken to the West Indies and enslaved but most of them died of Typhus along the way. But the most powerful message that was sent during this particular fiasco was when they took around 150 of these lucky rebels...they were hung, drawn and quartered...and then pieces of their bodies were hung around the entire kingdom to serve as a constant, bloody reminder to anyone thinking of causing trouble of what happens when you act out against the king. I mean, just put yourself in the shoes of the average person...how terrifying would it have been to have these bodies hung around everywhere? You definitely wouldn't want to question the people in charge, no matter how unjust things may seem. There are accounts from people living at the time that even the great-grandchildren of these people who witnessed it...even 150 years later people still wouldn't go around where they hung these bodies. Whats the importance of all this when understanding John Locke? There is something to be said for the sort of hardship he had to endure throughout his life just to hold these radical opinions. I mean...in today's world you can hold radical opinions and it doesn't really need to affect your life that much. There are tons of people that hold radical positions...you know they'll say that reptilian shape shifters are the puppet masters of our planet and that they've infiltrated all the top governments of the world and they are directing our species the way they want it to be...That's some pretty radical stuff, but all they gotta do is start a YouTube channel. John Locke put everything on the line. Imagine holding a position that forced you into exile. Imagine being forced to move away from your home. John Locke not only had to move to Amsterdam, but he had to live and work under a false name so that no one could find him. Once the English

government knew about how dangerous his thoughts were...the kept him under constant surveillance...spies following him around asking people about him trying to catch him doing something wrong. There are letters you can read from John Locke where it looks like he is writing a letter that is completely benign about childcare, but in reality he was writing in code plotting strategy for a revolution. You know, the kid represents the revolution and the bad nanny that he refers to represents the King of England...the whole thing was in code. Now if I caught you on the street, if I asked you the question who were the three continental rationalists...how many of you would know? I hope everybody: Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz...well the thinkers they were competing against were Locke, Berkeley and Hume, the first one of those three being John Locke. Locke is known as a British empiricist. So, if we have these two groups that are in competition with each other and the differences in their views are what separates them from each other, then that kind of implies that at least some of the time there are issues that these two groups hold opposite opinions on. And that's true, though it should be said that the true relationship between the two groups isn't as cut and dry as it might initially seem, but historians of philosophy like separating them into these two groups cause it keeps things nice and organized. That said, if we were looking for one of these issues that the two groups fundamentally disagreed on, one pretty good place to start would be the question of: What is the contents of our brain the moment we are born? Are we born with a personality and certain curiosities and interests? Are we born with certain innate pieces of knowledge? And when you think about this question enough it eventually turns into the common modern day discussion of Nature vs Nurture. So it might help before we begin talking about this for us each to think about what our views on the subject are. The two ways that people typically think about this question in modern times are: well there is one type of person that thinks that we are born...empty. Our cells communicate with each other to make things happen at a biological level, but our brains are computers that are sitting on the DOS screen...with that blinking white line just waiting for us to put stuff in. There's nothing on the hard drive, just drivers in place poised ready to help the brain process the information coming in into something that is useful to it. The thinking

behind this is that we are evolutionary beings that needed to be able to survive in DRASTICALLY different climates throughout history. I mean just think about it. There are tribes of humans that have survived and lived in the Amazon Jungle with all sorts of threats to their survival with Jaguars and Snakes all around them...and at the exact same time that that was happening, there are humans living in Siberia where they have to adapt to a -30 temperature everyday. Now consider the fact that while both of THOSE things are going on...humans are ALSO having to adapt to living in New York City. The software that was programmed into our heads has one goal: survival. That software doesn't know what sort of climate or living conditions or culture we're going to be born into, so one group of people today think that we are born with almost nothing in the nurture department, and that from the very moment we are born we start soaking in all of this information and learning how to survive in THIS PARTICULAR environment. By the way, this idea also is present in the womb. There are studies of babies who were in their mother's belly during WW2 during the siege of Leningrad. Leningrad is this Russian city that was surrounded and the people inside had no way of getting food or supplies, so they essentially just sat around starving for months. There are studies on the kids that were in the womb during that period of time and they have all sorts of different features that they picked up from that conditioning...Some of them metabolize calories ultra-efficiently, some of them have serious health defects. So this represents ONE side of the modern day argument, the other side has a little more variance to it. On one hand we have people like Descartes who just say that humans are born with little bits of innate knowledge...for example he said we are born with an innate understanding of God as being an infinite being and he went on to use this as part of his proof of Gods existence. But then there are people that go even further. The person who probably went the furthest in this field is someone we've already talked about: Plato. If any of you guys remember the Plato episode, well you are probably a genius. It was a long time ago. Go out and buy yourselves some fro-yo as a reward. But I'd imagine most of you have a faint recollection of what we talked about: Plato believed in the idea of innate knowledge. More specifically, that total knowledge of everything in the universe is inside of us, but

because we die and our souls enter new bodies, we forget all of it when we are born. Plato thought the process of learning, wasn't the process of building connections in someone's head...connecting one schema to another...learning was the process of remembering this total knowledge bit by bit. And if you remember he tells that great story with Socrates in it teaching the slave boy how to do geometry. Slavery, reincarnation...everybody was having a great time back then. But the important part to take from this is that rationalists throughout the years since Plato and during the time of John Locke, said that we ARE born with certain innate ideas that allow us to arrive at further knowledge through the use of reason alone. Just as an artist paints a painting and leaves a little signature at the bottom...you know...makes his mark in his work...rationalists believed that we, being created by something that they called God, had a little mark on each of us...and that mark came in the form of innate knowledge at birth. These innate ideas, coupled with our ability to reason can at least in theory lead us to certain knowledge about the world around us. Locke, and the British Empiricists...didn't exactly agree with that. When John Locke was at Oxford he met a guy named Robert Boyle. Robert Boyle we would know today as one of the godfathers of modern chemistry, but to John Locke he was just an interesting dude. What Boyle told Locke about the makeup of the world around us would shape the way Locke viewed how we gather knowledge for the rest of his life. Boyle told him that the world is made up of tiny, little subatomic things known as corpuscles. Now this worldview shaped the way that he viewed the world in MANY areas, but the important thing is that John Locke doesn't know why there is any intelligible reason to even entertain the idea that we are born with any sort of knowledge at birth. Where is the evidence for this? But that's not all...he attacks the notion and wonders how anyone can actually believe this. He says that these people say we have innate ideas at birth, but in order for something to be an idea...it has to be present in someone's mind. That's kind of the DEFINITION of an idea. But if that's true, and these ideas are ACUTALLY innate and not just something that SEEMS innate...how is it possible that these ideas are present before the infants are even born? There is a big difference between something feeling intuitive and us just not knowing or remembering where we received that intuition...and

something magically being present in something before that thing even exists. He says: "it seems to me near a contradiction to say, that there are truths imprinted on the soul which it perceives or understands not; imprinting, if it signify anything, being nothing else but the making certain truths to be perceived. For to imprint anything on the mind without the mind's perceiving it, seems to me hardly intelligible. If therefore children and idiots have souls, have minds, with those impressions upon them, they must unavoidably perceive them, and necessarily know and assent to these truths; Which, since they do not, it is evident that there are no such impressions." John Locke goes on to use critical thinking. He wonders...if human beings truly have ideas that are innate...concepts already loaded into the hard drive at birth...what sort of effects would that have on the world? He makes the argument...look, if we really had a collection of ideas that were innate to all human beings, regardless of where they were born or who their parents were, then it stands to reason that we would see at least SOME similarities across ALL cultures in the world throughout all of history, right? John Locke points out that we DONT see those similarities, especially when it comes to the notion of God who, if the rationalist position was true, would be the guy leaving his signature at the bottom of the painting. So in the argument of Nature vs Nurture...it is safe to say that John Locke falls strongly on the side of Nurture. He writes here one of his most famous passages: "Let us then suppose the Mind to be, as we say, white Paper, void of all Characters, without any Ideas; How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store, which the busy and boundless Fancy of Man has painted on it, with an almost endless variety? Whence has it all the materials of Reason and Knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, From Experience: In that, all our Knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives it self." John Locke believes that the human mind at birth is a Tabula Rasa. or blank tablet...or blank slate. whatever you want to call it. We're born with no knowledge of the outside world, or of the self, or of God or anything for that matter. The processes of reason and abstraction are innate...the method the mind uses to PROCESS input is innate...but the IDEAS that that mind is processing comes from the outside world. Back to our computer analogy. The hardware and drivers are innate, but they are useless

without a hard drive and information for them to process. John Locke says that that information comes from experience...sense perceptions from the outside world. You know...if there was a contest where someone asked me to think of a way to bore thousands of people and get them to shut off a podcast, I would probably start explaining a 17th century version of how the brain processes information. And as interesting as it is to me, it's understandable. I mean, who cares? Oh that's cute he thought your brain was made out of cheese. But just real quick, I want to describe a small piece of the process because it has huge implications. So Locke thinks that there are multiple different types of ideas and multiple different steps to get to them, respectively. The critical first step to arriving any sort of idea is stimulation of our sense organs...either through seeing something...hearing something...etc. We take this very raw perception and the mind processes it and produces what Locke calls simple ideas. An example of a simple idea is that that lawnmower outside is very loud and is ruining the podcast. Then those simple ideas become the ingredients that we have...and the brain processes them and reasons and makes connections between them, arriving at complex ideas. Now the awesome part about this is that Locke concedes to the point that reason is a very important part of arriving at ideas, but his OVERALL point is that ALL of it would be IMPOSSIBLE, the mind would have nothing to use it's reason to process if it wasn't for that first crucial step...the senses perceiving something. So John Locke thinks that the mind is a blank slate at birth and that who we are and the ideas that we possess come from the sum total of all the experiences we've had since birth. Now, if you believe something like that, then you also must believe that really annoying person at work is just the sum total of a set of experiences that might not be as reasonable as yours. And if you believe that, then how about considering how this should affect this giant institution that we've constructed as a society that you pay lots of tax dollars into that cultivates experiences for people. I'm talking about the public school system. John Locke, being someone who believes we are shaped by our experiences, its no surprise he had a LOT of thoughts about education and how crucial it is for people. He said: "i think I may say that of all the men we meet with, nine parts of ten are what they are, good or evil, useful or not, by their education..." He

thinks that 9 parts out of 10 of what makes someone who they are is derived from the nature of their education. He has all sorts of really interesting ideas that were incredible revolutionary for his time period....they're still weird for OUR time period...ideas to improve the education of the people we are creating. So if John Locke was the Superintendent of your school when you were a kid, he has all sorts of seemingly bizarre things to add to the everyday curriculum...but he has a good reason for all of them. One of the first things he thinks we should teach people as soon as they are able to walk? Dancing. This isn't about channeling your inner spirit ...this may seem a little crazy at first but his reasoning is far from it. He says that when you dance...you have to stand up straight, keep good posture, and move in a directed manner, accurately and with purpose. Locke thought that if you teach kids to move and stand and act in this manner, that they would naturally be able to bring those skills over to their personal life. They would stand up straight and do things with purpose. Now maybe you disagree with him on this one point, but one great point he is raising is endorsing activities that build skills that aren't necessarily on the surface of the lesson. I mean, I've heard TONS of people talk about how the biggest lessons they learned from high school they learned in organized sports. The teamwork, the discipline, the comradery, the long-term gratification, the feeling of doing something small that sets the stage for someone else to step in and make something huge happen...these are all lessons that kids take from these sports programs when on the surface, they just appear to be playing basketball. Locke talks about several of these different skills to teach that have benefits beyond the obvious...he advocates teaching French to young people because it will allow them to have more opportunities in business later on in life and allow them to understand French politics which would turn them into better voters for England. But my favorite insight that Locke gives into his vision of proper education is this: "great care is to be taken, that it be never made as a business to him, nor he look on it as a task. We naturally, as I said, even from our cradles, love liberty, and have therefore an aversion to many things for no other reason but because they are enjoin'd us. I have always had a fancy that learning might be made a play and recreation to children: and that they might be brought to desire to be taught, if

it were proposed to them as a thing of honour, credit, delight, and recreation, or as a reward for doing something else; and if they were never chid or corrected for the neglect of it. "What he's saying is that the task of education is incredibly important when it comes to creating the type of people we want to. Yet, more often than not education is crammed down these kids' throats. They are FORCED to learn about stuff they don't care about. Locke says, look its not that they don't WANT to learn. We have a natural predisposition to learn stuff from birth...the difference is we learn about stuff we are interested in. Let's not make education boring...a much more effective way of doing it is to make it entertaining or fun or honorable. When we force feed people stuff they aren't interested in, they don't learn very well...funny how that works. Thank you for listening...ill talk to you guys soon.

Leibniz pt. 1 - A Million Points of Light

Episode #037

This is a transcript of episode #037 on Gottfried Leibniz pt. 1 - A Million Points of Light. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). The central theme...the pivot point from which the three continental rationalists began their philosophy...was the question of substance. We've talked about it a couple times before. Descartes defined substance as that which its existence explains itself and from this he arrives at the conclusion that the universe has three substances: Mind, Matter and God. Spinoza then picks up where Descartes left off and disagrees with him he says no, there is only ONE true substance, and that is EVERYTHING THAT IS. God, nature, this totality that we are all a part of...that is the only that that's existence explains itself. Leibniz takes a different approach though he can be seen as similar to them in some ways...Leibniz says that there is only one true substance, but that one substance was something called a Monad which everything is made up of. Now just for a second think of how different he is from Spinoza. I mean, Spinoza thinks that there is one substance...and that one substance is EVERYTHING IN THE UNIVERSE. Leibniz goes the other direction...one substance that is so small it can't even be said to exist in physical form. Let me explain that for a second by talking about the problem that these people were trying to solve. Let's take the iPhone example from a little earlier. Let's say you have an iPhone and you want to dissect it and know everything there is to know about it. Where would you start? Can you know everything about it by just looking at it? By just rubbing your fingers all over it? Do you understand the essence of that iPhone by just playing Angry Birds on it? Of course not. You break it open and see all this green stuff and all these transistors...do you understand all there is to understand about that iPhone simply by looking inside of it? No, but you are getting closer...right? I mean, you're taking something incredibly complex and you're starting to break it down into smaller pieces and understand the function of each one of those pieces. Maybe through enough observation you find out that this little green chip controls the camera

and that this little green chip over here controls the headphone jack. But we still don't understand the nature of the iPhone do we? I mean, where did all this green stuff come from? Don't we need to understand all that stuff before we can truly say we know what an iPhone is? I mean, isn't the fact that these materials were mined out of a cave somewhere or coalesced together out of dirt...isn't that an important element of what an iPhone is? Well, just how we are taking this incredibly complex thing and breaking it down into simpler and simpler parts to try to understand it better, this is the same tactic philosophers used when trying to glean an understanding of our place in the natural world. I mean, if you think an iPhone is difficult to break down and understand...these guys had to do it with the universe. And look, we do this ALL THE TIME in modern times and don't even realize it because we've been doing it every day of our lives. We look at the sky and we see what...what is the sky...air, clouds and sunshine...right? But what sort of grasp do we have on the sky? Now if you said that and someone asked you to explain it better, you might say...well it's made up of oxygen molecules and nitrogen molecules and hydrogen and carbon and not many people would argue with the fact that you are doing a better job of describing the sky than just saying it's a bunch of clouds, air and exhaust from pick up trucks. When something is complex, to understand it fully, one really promising method is to break it down into the simplest parts possible because typically this gives us some insight into how the more complex things work. This is why substance is so important to this philosophers. What is some thing that we can look at as a starting point. What material or what thing is so simple that it can be understood on its own without having to refer to something else. Well people have been talking about this since the ancient Greeks! Some of you will remember Zeno's famous paradox of Achilles running the race and how he can never actually reach the finish line because before he gets there he will have to have run halfway there first. So even when he gets to the very end of the race...he will just stand by the finish line, in theory, having to go halfway to the end and halfway to the end and so on into infinity! The important question here is...can things be infinitely divisible? Can you cut a piece of paper in half a billion times, if you had the proper microscope, tools and the steady hand of Hawkeye Pierce? Could you cut

it in half into infinity? Now in philosophy we would say that as long as something possesses the quality of extension, or it takes up space in the physical world, Descartes defined it a little further, but for the sake of right now, if something takes up space in any regard, no matter HOW SMALL IT IS, it has some sort of length, breadth and depth. Now if something has length, breadth and depth, that length can be bisected. The depth can be bisected. And to Leibniz, if something can be cut down into increasingly smaller and therefore simpler pieces, then that original thing you are cutting in half CANNOT BE THE MOST SIMPLE THING THERE IS. It cannot be substance, a thing that's existence explains itself, because the fact that you can cut it in half proves that it has AT LEAST two parts that interact with each other and need each other for the original thing to exist. This is why the Monad of Leibniz is nothing like the atom of the ancient Greeks or the atom of today's world. The atom is a particle...it takes up space in the physical world...it possesses the quality of extension. The Monad is a spiritual entity. Some translations call each Monad a soul. But each Monad is not what you think a soul is if you get your idea of a soul from the movies. When George Bush accepted his parties nomination for president...H.W...president senior...back in 1988 he referred to the people and vision of America as a thousand points of light. Well I kind of plagiarize him and when I picture the vision of Leibniz I think of a million points of light. Sometimes I say ten-thousand if I am a little less sanctimonious that day...but in reality we are talking about a vision of the universe of a near infinite number of these souls...these non-physical, metaphysical points of light that all seem to work together but none actually interact with each other. Maybe I am sacrificing too much to give that visual of the points of light that are all interconnected...because in reality these Monads are nothing like light at all. They are entirely non-physical so think of one Monad as one unit that makes up everything. One unit of existence...or one unit of reality. Now for anyone that knows the whole story...there are a lot of holes to fill in here for us to completely understand what a Monad is and how it explains phenomena in the natural world. We're going to spend the rest of our time here today filling in those gaps...but first I want to talk about something that I know at least a few of you are thinking right now...who cares

about this stuff at all? What does any of this have to do with anything? I mean this is similar to last week when you talked about John Locke and his 17th century theory of how the senses perceive knowledge...that ended up completely wrong and is essentially filibustering my life...forcing me to spend my time listening to a failed hypothesis. Why do you do this to me Stephen West. Well, you're right and you're wrong in different ways. Yes, ultimately Leibniz and his theory of Monads is widely denounced by science today...although it should be said that they haven't really refuted it..in the same way they haven't refuted that the Easter bunny exists. I mean really they could discover than under the fabric of reality that we think exists right now there is a non-physical realm like this that dictates the physical world, but let's go out on a limb and say that his theory is complete garbage...that doesn't mean that every detail I tell you about these Monads is completely useless. Make no mistake...there ARE a lot of things I could tell you about his theory of monads that would be a waste of your time...I could talk about it for three hours all the ins and outs of his vision. But certain things about these Monads, when viewed in the full context of his metaphysical system, have deep implications in philosophy. So let's not wax on about the minutiae...let's talk about these little Monads and what they are exactly. Maybe the best place to start is that all Monads are not created equal. In fact, they vary considerably from one Monad to another. He talks about just how there are no two beings that are perfectly alike...there are no two Monads that are perfectly alike...after all that's how we perceive things at all, by spotting differences between things. Leibniz points out that because of these differences these Monads can be arranged in terms of a hierarchy. There is a hierarchy of Monads. Some are more important than others, some Monads have more abilities than other Monads...and this hierarchy can be broken down into a simple three tiered system: created monads, monads with perception or memory and monads resembling what we would know as a rational soul. The human mind is a Monad that has a body that corresponds with it. But as complex beings that can be broken down into simpler parts, like the iPhone we were talking about before, we are the sum total of the endless number of monads that make us up and the script that is programmed inside of them. Now this can be kind of difficult to

get a hold of...but the vision that he describes of the true nature of the universe...it begins to sound very fractal..much like what SEEMS to be the case in modern physics.He says:"each portion of matter can be conceived as like a garden full of plants, or like a pond full of fish. But each branch of a plant, each organ of an animal, each drop of its bodily fluids is also a similar garden or a similar pond"Leibniz famously talks about these Monads as not having any windows...meaning that nothing can come in or go out of these monads. This may be the most important part: These Monads already contain everything that they are using...There is no direct interaction between these monads. There is no, what philosophers would call secondary causation where a monad runs into another monad and something happens or it senses something around it and adapts to it. Just think of how beautiful this concept is:Each and every thing in the universe has a certain distinctness about it...as an aspect of the universe...it has a certain completely unique concept that it is...and inside of itself...it contains everything that it ever has been, is now or will be at any point in the future. These monads have in them, programmed by God, to Leibniz, a Broadway script. Every beat that they're going to hit for the duration of the universe. Tomorrow you're going to be at stage right, dancing around singing Oklahoma! The next day you're going to be dressed up in a Flamingo costume. But think of this sort of rudimentary script applied to the most fundamental of substances and the sort of assignments they would get.Now bear with me and think of the implications of this. Let's say you were one of these spiritual monads...if you are given a Broadway script...part of knowing where on stage you need to be and what lines you need to read and everything like that is knowing where you are going to be in relation to everything else that is going to be onstage. The last thing you want to do in your Flamingo costume is trip over somebody else and face plant off the stage. So even though these monads don't directly interact with each other, they don't need to. By knowing their place in this giant cosmic Broadway script, they know exactly where all the other monads are going to be. Each and every monad at each and every point in time understands it's relationship to everything else in the universe.The point of all this is that God, to Leibniz, by writing into these monads a complete script of the past, present and future of the universe

created the universe in a state of pre-established harmony."if we could understand the order of the universe well enough, we would find that it surpasses all the wishes of the wisest people, and that it is impossible to make it better than it is — not merely in respect of the whole in general, but also in respect of ourselves in particular" We've probably all heard the famous quote attributed to Leibniz where he says that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. There's another quote I forget who it's by but it goes that Optimists believe we are living in the best of all possible worlds...Pessimists believe it may be true. Now God's pre-established harmony, the best of all possible worlds...what this means about free-will and determinism and the problem of evil...this is all going to be ironed out on next week's episode, and if the concept of these Monads is still a little confusing, don't worry about it...these abstract systems can be kind of hard to fully understand when there aren't any examples of things that happen in the real world as a result of them. Next week, we're going to have plenty of them. But right now I want to talk about what this interconnectedness of the universe and this pre-programmed script of the past, present and future has to do with the way we arrive at knowledge as humans. Because the human mind is a monad...and because every monad has in it a complete explanation of itself and how that relates to everything else in the universe...Leibniz believes that at least, in theory, we can use reason to analyze the relationships between all of these aspects of the universe and arrive at a complete and total web of knowledge. To use a very crude example, because when it comes to the universe we are talking about many more moving parts...but if you could understand exactly how you related to the concept of cancer...and you could understand how it was connected to every other monad in existence...then you would have a lot of information about it...you would be able to determine it's cause and ultimately how to destroy it. But practically speaking, even to Leibniz, this is virtually impossible. I mean just think of the number of calculations you would have to do just to make the most simple of connections. There is a varitable infinity of monads just making up your body, how could you ever be able to do the calculations necessary to fully understand how each one interacts with all the others in the universe in the past present and future? For us

existing in the world that we live in, it is much more efficient to just run experiments using our senses and through pattern recognition try to arrive at a conclusion about what causes or heals cancer based on way less trials. But the theoretical concept that it is possible is a powerful one. See when we arrive at truth, as humans, Leibniz thinks it is important that we make the distinction between what he calls the kinds of truth. This is one of the most important parts of his philosophy and it is going to have very real implications on next week's show. Leibniz says that whenever something is true it is either a truth of reasoning or a truth of fact. You may feel familiar with what we were talking about here if you think back to the episode on Avicenna when we talked about necessary existents vs contingent existents...well truths of reasoning are necessary truths and truths of fact are contingent truths. Let me explain: A necessary truth is a truth that NEEDS to be true. There is no way it CANT be true because to suggest anything otherwise would be a contradiction based on the definition of the thing. For example, If I say pentagons have five sides...that is a necessary truth. there are no four or six sided pentagons, because if they DID have four or six sides they wouldn't be a pentagon anymore. Pentagons by definition have 5 sides. My favorite one that I've heard is that all bachelors are unmarried. This is a really good one because it illustrates how this can apply in the real world. You can't be a bachelor and be married...if you were married...you would lose your membership to the bachelor club...there is no reason for us to run all around the world and make sure that all bachelors are definitely married because if they were married...they wouldn't be a bachelor anymore. This is an example of a truth of reason. Truth can be arrived at through rational reflection alone. A contingent truth is one that may be true right now, but stating the opposite of it would not be a contradiction. The opposite could ALSO be true. For example, the light is on in the other room. Sure, I could get up, walk into the other room and see that the light is on...and it certainly is a true statement. But it could NOT be true some other time. Now if you were going to try to arrive at knowledge about our place in the natural world, which kind of truth would you want in an ideal scenario. I mean, just imagine living in a single room in a giant sprawling mansion on the countryside...one of these homes with over a

hundred bedrooms. And you've only lived in that room your entire life and one day you decide you are going to move outside your room and try to understand more about this mansion that you live in. Now imagine that in every room surrounding you, some really inconsiderate person that stayed there before left the lights on but in every other room the lights were off. You might do your scientific experiments and conclude that you exist in a mansion where every single room in the mansion has the lights on. Now what if a janitor comes around and turns the lights off one day. How confused will you be? How much time have you wasted in the process? But is the time truly wasted? Thank you for sticking with me today, I look forward to continuing this conversation with you about Leibniz on next weeks episode. Talk to you soon.

Leibniz pt. 2 - The Best of All Possible Worlds

Episode #038

This is a transcript of episode #038 on Gottfried Leibniz pt. 2 - The Best of All Possible Worlds. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Gottfried Leibniz vs Sir Isaac Newton. It really is one of the biggest Twitter feuds from human history. Sure, you got the whole who invented calculus first thing...and that was a big deal. That would be what people wrote about in the tabloids back then, if they had tabloids. It was a high profile, but it was far from the extent of their disagreements with each other. On many issues they are seen as two profoundly genius intellectuals who hold very different opinions that often contradict each other. And this disagreement runs deep...even all the way down to the foundation of reality itself. We're all very familiar with the Newtonian view of the universe...it's shaped scientific thought since the day he laid it out. This mechanistic, Atomism where the physical world is made up of real physical objects...Well the fact that Leibniz and his theory of this infinity of spiritual points he calls monads, the fact that it eventually doesn't hold up to scientific scrutiny and the fact that the Newtonian view prevails, it may have been due to a fatal flaw present in his experiments directly from the start. But it's interesting to consider for a second, how different science and the world might look if for some reason, i don't know what it would be, if Leibniz's monadology achieved the same level of notoriety that Newton's system did. Just imagine how different we would look at our place in the world. This is the beginning of me delivering on my promise of making sure we understand why Leibniz was so compelled to create this system of monads. His motivation...the bottom line was...he was scared. He saw the writing on the wall. He was worried these new theories presenting the universe to be mechanistic were going to make the concept of God unnecessary, or even worse...incompatible. Leibniz was born in 1646 and when he was only six years old...his father died. This left him in the care of his mother who was deeply religious and she made sure she passed as much of that as she could onto the young Gottfried Leibniz. One

of the principle tasks of Leibniz's life...one that he spent countless hours arguing about and working on...is this relationship between theology and this new emerging body of thought. The result of this is that in the context of this larger war that is going on between these two competing interests, Leibniz as a major thinker on one side that was trying to make peace between these two sides...he ends up having a lot of the same argument over and over and over again. That's just how it goes though...during the short period he was a thinker on this planet certain really pivotal issues were being discussed and they just happen to be what he used his brain on. So when you look at his Monadology, understand that this is why he needs this God centered foundation in the first place...and understand that when he talks about all these special little attributes of the Monads that seem pretty arbitrary...I mean come on...monads don't have windows? Understand that these attributes AREN'T arbitrary and that he deduces that these attributes MUST exist based on the results of these arguments that he is having in the REAL world about the relationship between God, the nature of reality and how humans interact with it. But if you asked Leibniz for the one issue that many of these conversations centered around...the issue that is CENTRAL to our episode today and one that Leibniz was probably beyond tired of talking about by the end of his life is the problem of evil. How do you explain the fact that there is supposedly a magic being up in the sky who is both all knowing AND all powerful and without limitations, how do you reconcile that with the fact that evil exists in the world...that horrible things happen to completely innocent people. And when someone asks this question they aren't just talking about drive by shootings or serial killers raping and murdering dozens of people...they're not just talking about human behavior or things that can be explained away traditionally with the idea that this opposing force called "the devil" is somehow influencing them...these people are talking about other instances of evil..they're talking about large scale natural disasters. You know, look at videos of the tsunami that happened a couple years ago...just this giant, horrifying wave helplessly engulfing giant groups of children and their parents and friends...is God just sitting back and watching as these innocent kids suffocate and breath in salt water and get crushed and torn apart by houses and cars...does god just sit

around and watch the Bubonic plague...does he just sit back and watch people drown in their own bodily fluids? how does one reconcile that reality with the existence of an all-powerful infinitely good God? When somebody brought this up around Leibniz...he must have wanted to just beat his head into the wall until they went away. This question plagued him his entire life...and although he has one of the most famous and brilliant responses to this question it hardly went away. It's commonly been referred to as the biggest and most important theological question in societies that are predominantly Christian and one that still hasn't been answered definitively. You know we see this all the time in today's world...some terrible tragedy happens on the news...there is some school shooting or terrorist attack and in the coming weeks people are soul searching and they're confused and it gets really hard to accept that despite all your best efforts and despite the fact that you and everyone around you behaves so ethically, how can one person or a small group of people do this? Why would God allow this to happen? And then all the big name Christian bloggers come out with some post attempting to console people and give their reasons for why they think this stuff happens. Now this type of blog post has a name, but the name was given to it long before it was ever written down in blog form...it is called a Theodicy. The word theodicy is a combination of two Greek words one meaning God the other meaning just so in short it is a thing that somebody writes about God in order to justify his actions or in-actions. This is God's defense attorney, so to speak. Well these modern day Christians aren't the only ones who ever wrote a Theodicy, like I said before Leibniz has one of the most famous Theodicies ever written. Now if you have a good memory then you already remember when we talked about this problem before this: Plotinus. But let me make something clear, the problem that Plotinus had to solve was different the beast that Leibniz had to take on and the one that modern Christians need to explain the actions of. Let me explain. someone strolls up to a modern day Christian and says, "You believe in an all powerful, all knowing loving god that put you on this planet to glorify him and be happy, yet millions of people die of horribly painful preventable diseases each year, I hereby call the existence of your God into question, because if he did exist as you say he does, he would never allow that to

happen."Well, Plotinus was a neo-platonist and from his perspective and through the perspective of most thinkers in the middle ages, talking about some evil that's going on in the world didn't cause them to question whether they were wrong about God existing, it made them question whether they understood how it was possible. They looked around them at all of these perfectly ordered unexplainable phenomena and they were pretty darn certain god existed. They saw evil in the world and they didn't question WHETHER god existed because of that...they were just legitimately confused about why it happens and they looked to explain it. Plotinus does it from the perspective of metaphysics...that evil is not something god creates or allows, it is the absence of good. Good things being the creation of this infinitely good source known as "the one" or "god". Let's say a single piece of wood represents all of creation, and it was created by this infinitely good being. Now if there is a hole in that piece of wood, it's not that God created that hole...that hole is the absence of his creation. There's more to his theory and if you're interested you can go back and listen to that episode. The point is, there is a big difference between reasoning to a conclusion that allows for evil to be POSSIBLE in a world created by God just in theory...there's a big difference between that and thinking that God can intervene and change the course of history, and does all the time, yet still allows for terrible things to happen to innocent people. This is commonly referred to as "the underachiever argument", claiming that god could work harder but doesn't for whatever reason. Two very different problems that we're trying to solve there. We can relate to this. We've all heard someone talk about God in this way during our life. You know someone will say...my baby was acting weird so I was rushing it to the hospital and on the way to the hospital my car blew a head gasket and was stranded on the side of the road and I looked at my baby and it couldn't breathe and it was turning blue and convulsing and I frantically waved at all the passing cars and this really compassionate middle-aged guy pulled over and rushed my baby to the hospital and saved his life. God is so incredible! Jesus influenced that man's behavior. The man would've otherwise driven past that person on the side of the road, if it weren't for God intervening and saved that person's baby. Whats even more incredible is that God did all this completely outside of the man's

conscious awareness..I mean he wasn't driving along in his car singing journey and then ...BING...some force possess him to stop on the side of the road and he says "I AM HERE TO TAKE YOU TO THE HOSPITAL"....NO he thought he was just helping a fellow human being.Well the problem with attributing this "miracle" to a supernatural God intervening in the world to make your life better than it otherwise would have been...the problem that Leibniz needs to address...is that we also have to give him credit for the 99 times out of 100 that the baby dies in that scenario. We also have to give him credit for the person that tries to hitchhike and get help and then gets picked up by some Steve Buschemi looking guy who augers a hole into the side of her head and makes it a decoration on his mantle.The response that Leibniz gives is that it's not that God is an underachiever...we just perceive him to be an underachiever when in fact we are living in "the best of all possible worlds". So to clarify a part of last week's episode...when he calls this existence the best of all possible worlds he is referencing this notion that God COULD do more but chooses not to. He obviously disagrees with it. But that puts him in an interesting place. He is committed now. To Leibniz the world is NOT arbitrary. Every act of creation was driven by a specific purpose...or a sufficient reason. (his principle sufficient reason is something he is famous for) God didn't just make the world KIND of good...he made it the best he possibly could and for good reason. This leaves him with the task of proving how that is possible when that Steve Buschemi guy exists in it. This would have been a common argument leveraged against him...we live in the best of all possible worlds? Imagine the world without the holocaust...how isn't it a better world if millions of people weren't slaughtered?Leibniz argues against this in a couple ways. First, he says, to give a modern example ... let's not pretend like we know for a fact that if 9/11 never happened, the world would be a better place. For example, maybe that attack prompted a response from the US that prevented some future attack where half a million people die. God could be allowing certain things to happen as damage control.The second way he refutes it and the one I think is far more compelling, is that he would say...we live in the best of all possible worlds...how arrogant and short sighted is it for us to assume that HUMAN HAPPINESS is the metric that God uses to determine how

GOOD the world is. This universe is BIGGER THAN YOU...human species. He talks about how it could be just as likely that God has us set up in the best of all possible worlds...but it is the best of all possible worlds for all sentient creatures. All the polar bears...all the dogs, cats...and maybe a few thousand humans dying is worth it if it makes the lives of these animals better. This is a really interesting argument...and it should be said that Leibniz gives several examples of how god measures "goodness" of the world...and it isn't entirely clear which one Leibniz subscribes to. The problem with this defense if you're a modern day Christian is obvious. We are supposedly the exalted species...we aren't on the same level as all these other animals...we are special. This universe was created so that humans could have an ethical obstacle course...not so that Polar Bears can keep making coke commercials. So "goodness" must have something to do with humans and that makes the wanton killing of humans difficult to justify. The whole point of Leibniz pointing out that we don't know what gauge God uses to determine what "good" is...is to point out that we cannot definitively say that we are NOT living in the best of all possible worlds. So now, the burden of proof is on them. For someone to refute that we aren't living in the best of all possible worlds...they have to prove that's the case. Or more importantly, for them to refute that it IS the best of all possible worlds...they have to prove that it isn't. Leibniz looks at Plotinus' argument about evil just being the absence of good...or the hole in the piece of wood...and he thinks it is ridiculous. He thinks...if god is responsible for all of creation...then he is also responsible for the holes he leaves in it. He says that everything that happens in the world, good or evil CAN ultimately be tied back to God's will. But that doesn't mean he does it all with a smile on his face. This is the big difference to Leibniz: When god wills for good things to happen...he does so Leibniz says, "by decree" and when he wills evil things to happen, he's just kind of letting them happen. But why does god do this? Because he is doing his duty as god. "Just doing my job ma'am" and that job is to create the best possible world. See, originally, god contemplated all the possible ways the universe COULD have played out and he chose the best one. We humans may not understand all the ins and outs of WHY it is the best one....after all WHY its the best may

have very little to do with us at all. So evil, to Leibniz, is a necessary evil. He makes it very clear that we should make the distinction between the "best of all possible worlds" and a "perfect" world as we would perceive it. He has a whole section of his theodicy where he talks about how it is impossible for God to have created a "perfect" world...and that the presence of evil isn't indicative of God not existing...it is a catalyst for some larger good. So this is a huge point....evil is not just the absence of good like Plotinus would hold...evil is a necessary state of affairs to allow for some greater good. There is an example that Bertrand Russell gives in the history of western philosophy to illustrate this concept...he talks about how, as humans, we would perceive being thirsty or dehydrated as something bad or evil towards us. So when we arrive at a babbling brook up in the hills and drink some cold, clean water...the goodness of that water is greater than if we weren't thirsty at all and drank some water out of an airport urinal. By the way...he didn't say it in such glowing terms...I'm insulting the great Bertrand Russell by saying it this way..but you get my point. Our thirst represents something we'd perceive to be an evil...maybe you could think that in a "perfect" world god wouldn't ever allow you to get thirsty. But this world actually IS the best possible world because when you drink the water, you derive more GOODNESS from that drinking experience than you would if something like thirst never existed in the first place. So it's not that god doesn't SEE this evil happening, maybe, Leibniz says, statistically speaking if you could play out every possible universe as god can...he realized that by allowing thirst to exist and therefore the augmented experience of drinking when you're thirsty, the universe is overall a better universe. Not that it guarantees that no single human will ever die of thirst...but over the long run...it is a better universe. Here's where it comes together. This is why the monads have a pre-programmed Broadway script inside of them and are "windowless" meaning nothing can go in or out. Leibniz thinks that God created the best of all possible worlds...and to insure that it stays that way...he created these monads in a state of pre-established harmony. The monads are arranged in a hierarchy, with some monads serving other monads and these monads are intricately related to each other to insure that this best of all possible worlds remains. But this isn't where the conversation ends

right? This walks us into another huge area of philosophy that is going to become more and more important and commented on as the years go on and philosophy becomes more and more atheistic. I'm talking about the age old question of free will vs determinism. By the way...we see how this conversation takes us there right? This is one of the most commented on aspects of Leibniz. Here is this religious guy that wants to reconcile the impending differences between theology and this new scientific mechanistic view of the universe...and he chooses to reconcile it by saying that God created this universe in a state of pre-established harmony. Well, if God pre-determined things to happen in a certain way...then how does that allow for the notion of free will? Remember...Spinoza...one of the other great continental rationalists didn't allow for the concept of free will he thought it was an illusion. Well, Leibniz did think free will was possible. The question arises not only of how individual humans have free will...but also whether God himself can be said to have free will if he created the universe in a state of pre determined order and then insures that it has to stay that way. Can that be said to be a limit of his power? He can't intervene and Change the universe, because to do so would be going against the best of all possible worlds? Well, for the record I don't think this is necessarily a contradiction...I mean if we're going to say that this God exists that created everything...isn't it possible that he, like Leibniz says, contemplated all the possibilities...decided on a path and just never changes his mind? The idea of individual free will being compatible with Leibniz is still up for grabs. He claims it is but his arguments are far from compelling if looked at through the lens of today. There are a couple that are interesting though...one of the main ones is that another reason Leibniz has these monads as "windowless" is that they are entirely self containing...and therefore are not influenced by any sort of conditioning that would support determinism...the only thing these monads have to be able to make decisions is what is inside of them already...so every decision they make comes completely from inside of themselves...therefore they HAVE to be free acting entities. Most of the other arguments have to do with some variant of compatibilism. Now we've talked about compatibilism before when we talked about the Stoics. This whole conversation can get lost in the

minutiae real quick if you let it...there are just so many different individual shades of determinism, compatibilism...etc. Maybe the most useful thing to say at this point in philosophy...one that is going to keep your interest is that Leibniz ran into a brick wall here. God has this pre-established harmony that at least in some capacity is dependent on human action...but human action is completely free. Here's what I will say: compatibilists think that the idea of determinism and free will are compatible with each other. Determinism is always some variant of the idea that free-will is an illusion. We think we are making choices in the world...weighing pros and cons and deciding on the best course of action...you know whether to get the regular cheese or the 2% milk cheese...but though it seems like we're making those decisions, they really could have been perfectly predicted. You know, imagine some REALLY advanced computer program that knew everything there was to know about your genetics and the biological processes operating in your brain...and then based on ALL of the experiences you've ever had in your life...from the second you are born...you know all the experiences you've had with cheese in the past...all of the experiences with higher calorie foods with higher fat levels...all of the experience you've had getting made fun of for putting on weight...even down to every experience you've had with red packages vs blue packages...thousands if not millions of variables all spinning around being calculated in your mind that lead to a decision. Can this advanced computer program also calculate and determine EXACTLY what you would have done before you did it? After all what is your brain other than just something making calculations based on the experiences you've had in your life? And if that computer CAN perfectly predict every decision you make, can you really be said to have free will? Or do you just think you have free will? Well, the biggest argument against compatibilism by proponents of determinism is that they really aren't PROVING that free-will is compatible with determinism...they are just switching the definition of what freedom is. Compatibilism is usually some variant of the idea that we are making free choices, but there are certain events or external things that we have no control over occurring. Let's say you're driving down the freeway...you're on a road. You can choose to speed up or slow down or change lanes or put a coexist bumper sticker on your car...but

you are still going to end up at the same place...the same off ramp the same junctions simply by virtue of being on that road. But is that still free will in the sense most people think about it? And by the way...as we'll find out in future episodes...determinism doesn't have to leave us as emotionless robots living out our lives. In fact, as I briefly touched on in the John Locke episode, if we believe we are byproducts of our conditioning, then it becomes much more difficult to feel hostility towards that annoying person at work, or even people like Steve Buschemi. Thank you for listening. I will talk to you next time.

Before Our Very Eyes - The Limits of Empiricism

Episode #039

This is a transcript of episode #039 on Empiricism. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Maybe the best place to start the show today is to talk about this confusing, moment in time that we have been talking about for about the last 7 or 8 episodes. All of these thinkers that are living around the same time as each other, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Leibniz...these philosophers and all the humans that were in the know at the time were living in a very weird place. At this time, there was a giant change in the way that these thinkers viewed themselves as humans in the natural world that created a level of weirdness that was unprecedented. Now this weirdness was largely driven by a couple of different inventions that hadn't existed before. One was the telescope. With the telescope, for the first time in history we were looking out deep into the vast expanses of space. The more that we looked out there and the more sophisticated these telescopes got, the more information we got and that information categorically reinforced that fact that Earth was very, very small. A speck of dust. And it was far from the center of the universe. As we used these telescopes to gaze deeper and deeper into space, slowly realizing the absolute enormity of it all, we started realizing that this tiny little blue speck that we call Earth might not be as significant as we initially thought. Now on the other hand we had the microscope looking at things. This planet may be a tiny little speck in the grand scheme of things, but let's magnify what we have and see if we can get some insight into what reality is made out of. What these thinkers were finding as they put this stuff under a microscope is that entire worlds existed underneath what we could see with the naked eye. The deeper and deeper that they went and the more of these micro worlds that they found, the more they started to realize just how strange this reality was that that we had no idea existed before our very eyes. But as we'll find out over the course of this episode...that really is the problem isn't it. Our eyes. I kind of have mixed feeling about eyes. By the way, I'm not going on a rampage against eyes here. I feel like I need to say a

few good things about eyes to balance out the rest of the episode. I want to give equal time. On one hand, eyes are pretty amazing things...they are these completely unique, jelly filled spheres that absorb the light around you and send signals to your brain that creates a map of the world around you so that you can walk around in it safely. Absolutely incredible. I mean, why do we have eyes if not for this reason. And they do that thankless job pretty darn well. You can see perfectly well enough to do anything that you need to do to survive on this planet. You can see well enough to know whether this is a poisonous mushroom or a harmless one, you can see well enough to not get trampled by a buffalo, you can see well enough to determine whether member of your species are attractive or not. This is what eyes were designed for and they do it well. On the other hand, that's not the only thing we use eyes for now is it. For example, if we wanted to, say, understand the nature of matter itself or gain certainty about the fabric of reality, now the eyes aren't so incredible anymore. In fact, if you think about it, they are absolute garbage. These very real limitations of our senses plagued these 17th century philosophers tremendously. Before we go deeper into that I want to ask a question that will set the stage. This is a big question. What is reality? When you ask people this question they usually look at you like they're confused pretty fast. One common theory would be...Well, reality is what is real. It's what's right in front of me! It's what I can see and smell and touch...after all when I think of something that is not reality, or some fantasy world that is less REAL than what I call reality I think of things I think of someone day dreaming, or I think of video games or movies...maybe someone that took a hallucinogenic drug of some sort, to these people these experiences are not reality. Reality is what they interact with consistently. For example, my arm. My arm is not fleeting, coming and going out of my awareness. I see it right there, I can touch it. Therefore, my arm is real. But you see the glaring problem here, right? You are perceiving reality through your eyes. Eyes that were designed to create a map of the world accurate enough for you to eat, sleep, reproduce and survive as long as possible. These eyes weren't designed to see what reality truly is. This is something we're all familiar with. We know that the world is made up of trillions of tiny little particles called atoms that are

constantly moving...but when you look at a table or a tree or even your arm...you don't see those atoms moving. Why should you? What is going on at an atomic level is just not that important to you. Being able to see those atoms moving is not going to make you more capable of eating, sleeping, reproducing or surviving, so why would your eyes be designed to see that? But then again, in reality they ARE moving. Just to illustrate how extreme this can get, each of those atoms that are constantly moving around are made up of 99.9% empty space. Just consider for a second that the world you are walking around in that your eyes are telling you is made of stationary, completely solid objects is actually made up at a micro level of 99.9% empty space and that .1% is constantly moving. Again the point is: human eyes create a map of the world that is accurate enough, but far from actual reality. We use special tools and instruments, like a microscope and a telescope to augment our sense experiences to be able to get a more accurate view of that actual reality. But what is actual reality? Do our flawed senses prevent us from ever truly experiencing it? This is the weird place that these thinkers like Descartes, Locke and Leibniz found themselves in. Just think about the task these guys had ahead of them. Before their time period we used something very different to arrive at certainty about what caused things to happen in the natural world. We thought we had it all figured out. We grew complacent. Turns out Aristotle may not have known everything. Turns out some dude in a sand dune channeling God wasn't the best way to arrive at absolute certainty. So when these thinkers were faced with the task of finding a science that could arrive at understanding about causes in the natural world, they really took the task seriously. They didn't want to end up where we were before. They didn't know if it was possible, but they wanted to try to find some system that we could use to arrive at ABSOLUTE certainty about things. One of the biggest problems they were running into is that no matter how flawless the system was, it still was ultimately going to be implemented by humans. Humans that are biased and make mistakes, but more importantly humans that are looking at the results of the experiments through flawed senses from the get go. Its funny, if you think about the modern religion vs science debate as a play then one commonly recurring character is the person that says where's the

evidence? There are a lot of people in modern times that highly value empirical data. When someone gives one of these transcendent religious experiences...you know someone says that they were sitting in their front room and Jesus came down through the ceiling and told them he is the son of God and that he needs to stop being so mean to his neighbors and that he needs to start going to church. They hook this guy up to an MRI machine and see that he truly believes what he is saying...There's a certain type of evidence based thinker in modern times that would say...no I don't think that happened. His eyes were messing up...he drank some pine sol right before that happened his senses were playing tricks on him. And that same person you could ask them why they don't believe in God and they would say...well, where is he? I've never seen the guy with my eyes! I've never heard the guy speak to me! If only I could have that experience then I would know for sure that he exists. Let's have some respect for the task that these thinkers put themselves through. These people weren't satisfied with the way that science was being done and in many ways they wouldn't be satisfied with the way science is done today. After all, science isn't perfect right? Don't get me wrong, I'm not railing against science, it may be better than blindly believing something that seems to be reasonable to you, but science is far from perfect if you are trying to be absolutely certain. Now we're going to talk about some of the inherent flaws with what we call science, but I want to be sure we understand the fact that these thinkers didn't know whether it was possible, didn't know whether they would ever arrive at certainty, but they were trying to access TRUE reality, whatever matter or physical reality is on the other side of this crude map of the world that our eyes create. It obviously was very different in reality than how we perceive it and they wanted to access it. This problem is commonly referred to in philosophy as the veil of perception. Now we're going to come back to that, but let's talk about some of the inherent problems that these thinkers were addressing when trying to use science to arrive at certainty. Think back to the earliest of humans. They found themselves existing within this natural world. They looked around them and they saw stuff happening. Lightning comes down from the clouds, your female counterpart spontaneously has a baby, you eat old meat and you feel terrible for a few weeks...stuff is

happening all the time and understanding what causes those things to happen can give you a real edge when it comes to survival. Go back far enough and humans were almost entirely ignorant to what caused things to happen in the natural world, and they wanted to find some way to organize this stuff with some level of confidence that they were correct. When we do science, this is what we're trying to do, we're just much further along than earlier humans were. We're ultimately trying to arrive at certain truth to make sense of this natural world. Let's talk about two different ways of trying to arrive at the truth, or at least to convince some entity that something is true or not. Let's talk about induction vs deduction. Deduction is the process of starting with something that you think is true, then you apply that truth to some specific individual case. That individual case reinforces it and something is deemed to be true. For example, a police officer shows up at a traffic accident and sees certain things. He sees glass on the ground over here, he sees the positioning of the cars, he sees skid marks leading to this section of the road, etc. From this scene of the accident and certain "truths" that he holds after his long career of seeing accident scenes...he deduces what happened. This may be an effective way of finding out what happened at an intersection but it runs into problems when trying to arrive at certainty. The other way of doing this is Induction. Induction is the way that we use in modern science. Induction is inferring a general truth based on individual experiments or cases or previously established general truths. For example, if you wanted to arrive at the truth about the moisture present in dogs noses, Do all dogs have wet noses? how would we go about finding that out? Well, I could start with one experiment...I turn and look at my dog Charlie and touch his nose and see that it is wet. So far, all dogs have wet noses. I could spend years of my life going door to door, conducting thousands of experiments checking to see if every dog in the city of Seattle has a wet nose. Let's say they all do, can we conclude for certain that all dogs have wet noses? Now, no one has the time or the patience to go around and check every single dog in the world to see if it has a wet nose, but even if we did could we use induction and say now that all dogs have wet noses? In modern science, we would. I mean, for all intents and purposes we're pretty sure all dogs have wet noses, but are we certain of that? How

do we know the same laws of nature apply on mars or Jupiter or some other distant planet where dogs don't have wet noses, how can we be sure the next dog that is born on this planet won't be the exception to the rule and throw a monkey wrench in everything? To us this may not be a big deal. There is a lot of useful stuff you can do with the conclusion that all dogs have wet noses and barring that super unlikely chance it is proven wrong one day, we can. But to someone trying to develop a system to arrive at certainty, this is a huge problem. The way we do science now can never be trusted to arrive at certainty, because we are limited to the things we have on this planet to experiment on. These thinkers weren't doubting whether this way of doing things might eventually lead us to things that were true, they didn't doubt whether this way is better than any other way we've done it in the past, but it is far from certainty about things and that was what they were aiming for. The way that I like to think about this age of empiricism is that no matter how good a system is we are ultimately limited to it being executed by a human existing on planet earth. Those are huge handicaps when it comes to arriving at truth, again the eyes and ears and nose are great at doing what they were designed to do, but they're absolutely terrible tools if you're trying to understand the nature of reality with certainty. They just aren't the right tools for the job. If you are given a wrench and someone wants you to tighten up some bolts, it is going to work perfectly, but if they ask you to use the wrench to saw through a piece of wood, it's gonna get ugly real fast. You might still be able to do it eventually, but it is going to be a longer, less clean process than if you had a saw. The limitations caused by our senses when it comes to arriving at certainty was something that deeply concerned these thinkers in the 17th century. This is why Leibniz and his ideas about Truths of necessity vs Truths of fact were so awesome. Science helps us arrive at truths of fact, but they are far from certain. Is certainty possible when we talk about truths of necessity? where the terms themselves make specific qualities certain? Remember, all bachelors are unmarried...can that be said to be something we know for certain? These thinkers were all really interested in these problems and they all came up with different approaches to try to address them. One of these approaches that became very important in philosophy was by Mr. John Locke. He

was an absolute genius if you haven't already thought that yourself...laid the foundations for the constitution, his whole Tabula Rasa or Blank Slate theory, but also something we touched on very briefly before was his idea of Primary vs Secondary qualities of things. What he is trying to address here is what lies beyond the veil of perception. Whenever we use these flawed senses to look out into the world and see something or smell something or hear something, whatever that thing is that we're looking at, Locke says that it has primary and secondary qualities. Let me give an example. I am sitting here at a desk and I see my wife's phone sitting on the desk right in front of me. It has a green phone case on it. When I look at that iPhone sitting on the table there are certain things I can think I know about it based on what my senses are telling me. There seems to be one iPhone...not two or three...uh it seems to be sitting still...it seems to be smooth...not rough like concrete or something...it seems to be about the thickness and size of a checkbook...it seems to be rectangular. Now, all of these things to John Locke can be considered Primary qualities of the iPhone. Me looking at the iPhone and saying that it is green, or me picking it up and smelling it or me hearing it ring or, hopefully not, me eating the phone and describing to you guys what it tastes like, these can be seen as secondary qualities. This is a really good question to ask yourself. When you see something like a green iPhone, what is that green-ness? Does that green-ness exist inside of the matter that makes up the iPhone is there something in it that is green? or is it the way your eye draws the world when you perceive some interaction between light and some specific arrangement of what that matter is underneath the veil of perception? As we talked about before, Locke was a huge proponent of Boyle and his idea that the real fabric of reality are these tiny colorless, tasteless, soundless, odorless corpuscles of matter. The arrangement of these explain the primary qualities of something. I see the iPhone as rectangular because there is some rectangular arrangement of these corpuscles. On the other hand, when I experience it being green, this isn't because the corpuscles themselves are green, its because of some arrangement of them interacting with light and my eyes. Because all of these secondary qualities that Locke talks about are explainable only by referring to primary qualities, secondary qualities cant be said to be

part of that reality behind the veil of perception. He gives an example where he talks about a knife made out of steel. If someone comes up to you and stabs you with a knife and you feel pain, you wouldn't say that it was "pain" that was cooped up inside of the knife that caused you pain. No, it was the steel that the knife is made out of interacting with your senses. Well, this all brings us to question Berkeley famously offered a solution to. Berkeley was very similar to Leibniz in that he was a religious guy...in fact he was made into a bishop so he is sometimes referred to as bishop Berkeley...and he is faced with the problem of reconciling the new mechanistic way of viewing the universe with the notion of god. This whole situation really is like a large corporation hired a team of corporate downsizers that come in and look at how everything operates and how everyone does their job and they check to see who is important and look for people to eliminate to cut costs. and it's like Berkeley and Leibniz are people that are trying to convince these people that God really is important around the office. Berkeley really wants god to be required in his view of the universe. So he starts from this premise and he arrives at an idea that would spark a chain of ideas that would change the philosophical world. This idea may not seem revolutionary at first, but trust me it really shook things up and since we've spent the entire show today talking about empiricism and the problems that come up when trying to arrive at certainty, you guys more than most people that study philosophy are going to understand why Berkeley suggests what he does. The extended explanation of this is going to have to wait until next episode, but let me give you the basic idea so that you have something awesome to think about this week. If we have this pesky veil of perception that we have to deal with...if there is this "world as it truly is" underneath this flawed map of reality...this idea in our minds of what reality is created by our senses, then we never directly experience that true reality underneath. All we ever experience is that IDEA of reality. So instead of trying to explain and get a hold of what lies beneath those ideas, why do we even assume that something exists underneath the ideas we perceive. Isn't it more reasonable to conclude that only the ideas themselves exist? Or that to be...is to be perceived. Look forward to getting deep into this next time on Philosophize This!

Superstition

Episode #040

This is a transcript of episode #040 on Superstition. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). The theme of today's episode is superstition. What is superstition? You know, when we think of superstitious people in modern times what do we think about...we usually think about really extreme, silly forms of superstition. People say and think stuff like...this terrible thing happened to me today...today is Friday the thirteenth...the reason this bad thing happened is because Friday the thirteenth is an unlucky day. Unlucky things just happen on Friday the 13th. People will say things like, an apple a day keeps the doctor away. The reason why I haven't had to go to the doctor for a while is because I have been eating my daily apple every single day. That's the reason why. But lets dissect that thinking a little bit, because superstition doesn't need to be this ridiculous. Let's just think about what superstition is. The dictionary defines superstition as: falsely attributing some cause to some effect. For example, it's the APPLE that is preventing me from ever having to go to the doctor. But when you start to think about superstition in these terms, and you think about it for a while, you start to realize that being superstitious is not something reserved just for pirates from the 1800's--most people, wake up every morning and live their lives with an incredibly superstitious outlook on the world that they're trying to navigate. This isn't because they are bad people or stupid people, they are just mistaken about the causes of things. Now what am I talking about here? Well, I could point out the avid sports fan that watches the game every Sunday and has a very deliberate ritual that he executes completely convinced that at some level, the type of beer that he drinks is going to affect the outcome of the game. But obviously that is just a much more modern and accepted version of how the Atlantic Pirates were thinking in the 1800's...but what about the superstitions we hold when it comes to something like happiness? If superstition is the act of someone mistaking a cause with an effect, then don't many of us walk around with incredibly superstitious beliefs all the

time? Well just to illustrate what I am talking about...let's talk about happiness for a second. Most people come into the world and they realize pretty quickly that they want to be happy. So what do they do? They look around them and try to find people that seem happy and then try to emulate them. Unfortunately, they usually start at the wrong places. They find some rich people living on the water with a house...a white picket fence...two cars and a big screen TV and they superstitiously conclude that the cause of their happiness has to be all of these material things that they have. After all, what is the most obvious difference between them and me? Has to be the jet skis. So this person goes on a while thinking this way and if they don't just throw their hands in the air and resign themselves from the pursuit of understanding things, their thoughts on happiness evolve because they eventually realize that there are plenty of rich people, or people that have lots of stuff that are absolutely miserable. There must be something else, it must not be the material stuff that is making these people happy. Maybe this person reads a little Socrates..they hear happy is he who is content with the least....and he concludes that happiness REALLY lies in low expectations. After all, it seems clear that I get mad when I have some expectation that is not being met, so if I make an effort to only expect the bare minimum...enough food to get through the day, clothes on my back and a roof over my head, then anything else that comes my way is going to be a pleasant surprise. So this person goes on for a while and they superstitiously conclude that happiness must lie in low expectations. One day, maybe they are thinking about stuff and they ask the question, well, what if even my most basic needs weren't met. would I NEED to be unhappy? no, even if you don't collect enough food to feed yourself for the day, you can still choose to be accepting of that and therefore be content. So, this person would conclude perhaps superstitiously that happiness lies in acceptance. But then what is acceptance? I mean, if you think about it, isn't acceptance a two part thing? On one hand it is accepting everything that's happened in your past...including everything that you have, both the contents of your mind and the contents of your storage unit with all your stuff in it. But on the other hand its about accepting everything that will happen in your future...any future adversity or trials that you could possibly go through. So if acceptance is just

accepting the past and the future, is happiness really just being fully present in this moment? Is this the reason why we try to make money in the first place? To get to a place where we don't need to worry about any future adversity because we have a surplus? Or is this yet another superstitious conclusion? The point of this is that superstition is something that we're all guilty of on an every day basis, and I'm not just talking about happiness. This is a really effective exercise...try asking yourself what things you might be superstitiously concluding...mistaking a particular cause for a particular effect? But then again, this is kind of paradoxical...if you knew what things you were being superstitious about, you wouldn't be mistaking them in the first place. Well the two thinkers we're going to talk about today both attacked this monster named superstition in different ways. Superstition was a huge enemy during this period we're heading into known as the enlightenment. Now in the context of history the enlightenment is a very short period of time...the vast majority of it is made up by three generations of people that all have revolutionary ideas on the backs of each other. To me this is absolutely incredible...and it just goes to show you the rate of progress that was going on during this time period. I mean a period that we call "THE enlightenment"? and it took place over the course of this short period of time? Pretty incredible. There's many different ways people try to describe the enlightenment, but let's not get too crazy...there is far from a consensus on the matter. Let's talk about a few of them though. Some historians think the enlightenment can be seen as the ultimate awakening of mankind...the moment when science and these new political institutions finally allowed for dogma and tradition and faith based thinking to get completely tossed out of the way of progress. They think this is the time period when the snowball of reason finally started rolling downhill. But then there are other people who think that this snowball of reason had been rolling since the beginning of the middle ages. They say that once religion and Aristotle established their monopoly on human thought, reason started chipping away and slowly but surely they eventually brought it down. The enlightenment is just the culmination of over a thousand years of effort by brilliant thinkers. There are other people that think the enlightenment was fueled by the counter-reformation in the church...there are people

that think the enlightenment was a myth and that these thinkers were just being propped up to add legitimacy to the new ways of thinking. Regardless of what the truth is about the enlightenment, it was a massively transformative period of time that is distinguished from others by the attempt by great thinkers to abolish superstition in all areas of thought. Now one person that was attempting to abolish a very specific type of superstition was the guy we ended the show with last week...his name was Bishop Berkeley. Now Berkeley can be seen as someone who is aiming to abolish superstition when it comes to us perceiving things with our senses in the natural world. After all, isn't the veil of perception a possible superstition? As we talked extensively about last time, philosophers from the dawn of empiricism have realized that what we perceive with our senses is not reality as it truly is...there is some deeper reality underneath and what we perceive is the crude outline of that reality that our sense organs create. Perfectly useful to us when it comes to survival, but far from actual reality. This is known as the veil of perception. The only thing we really have access to is an IDEA of reality created inside our minds. Well Berkeley asked the question, why do we even need to assume that there is some fundamental reality underneath that is causing these ideas. After all, the only thing we truly interact with is this idea of reality...how can we be sure that our ideas of reality are not the only things that exist? In other words, let's end this potential superstition that the cause of our senses perceiving the world in the way they do is some different, more real reality underneath. Berkeley was what is known as an immaterialist idealist. Contrary to people like Descartes and other people that lived around this time who believed the universe was comprised of mind and matter, he was a monist and he believed that that one substance that the universe is made of is mind. He didn't believe in material substances as philosophers typically accepted were there. After all, Berkeley was an empiricist...all knowledge is derived from sense experience...but we never actually experience this supposed more real world out there. Have you ever had someone ask you the really generic question...if a tree falls in the woods and no one is around to watch it fall to the ground, does it actually fall? Berkeley would say that in theory if there was nobody no thing around to perceive it, it wouldn't exist, but that doesn't really matter

because he believed that there is one entity that is perpetually aware of everything in the universe and that entity is known as, you guessed it...capital G o d. God.Shazam. Drops the mic. No further questions your honor. Now look, we could spend a lot of time fleshing out his full system, true reality is comprised of spirits, both God and many little finite spirits, but I thought about it and ultimately I think the real contribution that Berkeley made to philosophy is by being the FIRST in what would become a very important line of thinking. Most of the meat of his view of the universe is trying to preserve the idea of God...trying to make God not only the creator of the universe but the all powerful entity that endlessly provides us with our perceptions and is intimately involved with everything in the universe. In other words...don't even THINK about saying that God isn't necessary. In this way, he may have run into the same mistake Leibniz made with his Monadology. I don't think it is worth your time talking about his individual system, I think we need to see him as having a really unique insight about the assumptions we make when we perceive the world, and that really unique insight gave rise to a tradition known as Idealism. Trust me on this, there are far more fascinating people that we can use to delve deep into the area of thought known as Idealism...and I'm just going to be honest...it's going to be Immanuel Kant. Let's wait to understand all of the ins and outs of Idealism in relation to Kant. But one other really noteworthy thing about Berkeley is for us to understand why he arrived at this line of reasoning in the first place. I mean, why question the physical world that supposedly exists underneath this outline of the world that our senses draw? This is really interesting...he may have arrived at a place where he WANTED that underlying reality to exist because he was trying to preserve the idea of God. Remember, Descartes and Locke and others believed that the universe was made up of multiple substances...one of those substances was matter. The really interesting thing to consider is what Berkeley was worried was going to happen. What are the implications of saying that matter is a substance? Well what he was worried about happening is that once you declare that matter is a substance, and it's existence explains itself...what is to stop the scientific community and the world for that matter from removing God from the equation? I mean...who is to say if matter is a substance

that God didn't just create the world and leave it to work itself out on its own? What Berkeley wanted to make sure of was that whatever worldview he presented it was not only going to have God at the center of it, but God was going to be central to maintaining it. Then once he started thinking about it he said..hmm why do we need to assume this physical stuff exists at all?So, ironically, Berkeley fought on this battle front to end superstition when it comes to the way we perceive the world...and fighting on a completely separate battle-front...one that was attempting to cut the legs out from underneath the religion that Berkeley subscribed to...was a guy who went by the name of Voltaire. To sum up his views mildly, Voltaire wasn't a big fan of the religion of his day.In one of Voltaire's books called Philosophical Dictionary, he is having a conversation with a spirit or ghost, its eluded to that it is Jesus, "Tell me if there have been peoples other than the Christians and the Jews in whom zeal and religion wretchedly transformed into fanaticism, have inspired so many horrible cruelties." The spirit replies "Yes, the Mohammedans were sullied with the same inhumanities, but rarely; and when one asked Amman, pity, of them, and offered them tribute, they pardoned. As for the other nations there has not been one right from the existence of the world which has ever made a purely religious war."Like many of the thinkers living during times when the church had considerable power, there is room for interpretation when it comes to Voltaire's precise religious views...but if you read all of his work it is pretty clear his thoughts changed throughout his life. At first he was a dieist...then he started considering himself a theist...and it is clear that he believed in a necessary, eternal, spiritual being...the god of the Cosmological argument...but he took his belief in God too seriously to relegate it to a single religious viewpoint...especially with all the nonsense that he thought was going on at an operational level. Some people that interpret Voltaire think that he wasn't that far away from being a christian himself and that he just needed to talk to the right people...some people point to passages like this one out of a letter he wrote to Frederick II and say uh no he made it quite clear:"[Christianity] is assuredly the most ridiculous, the most absurd and the most bloody religion which has ever infected this world. Your Majesty will do the human race an eternal service by extirpating this infamous

superstition, I do not say among the rabble, who are not worthy of being enlightened and who are apt for every yoke; I say among honest people, among men who think, among those who wish to think. ... My one regret in dying is that I cannot aid you in this noble enterprise, the finest and most respectable which the human mind can point out.."Now these soft caring words weren't reserved solely for Christianity...he said things about Islam that if I repeat them on this show will probably get someone killed in an Embassy somewhere in the world. Just to illustrate how deep he is entrenched in all this...it was very common during his time to be antisemitic. Voltaire was antisemitic, but for very different reasons than everyone else. Most people hated the Jews because they were the ones to kill Jesus. How dare they do something like that. Voltaire on the other hand hated the Jews because they made Christianity possible. That is like Inception. That is antisemitism inside of antisemitism. Why is Voltaire so resistant against the religion of his time? You gotta understand, the Christianity, Judaism and Islam of his day is much different than what they are in 2014. During his lifetime...they were the powerful, well-funded, enormously popular embodiment of his two biggest enemies: superstition and intolerance. He thought that God was much more than anything that these religions had ever laid out...he even goes so far sometimes as to refer to them as collections of fairy tales. Now, next episode we're going to be talking more about Voltaire, but I want to talk about one of his works in particular titled, Letters Concerning the English Nation. Let's talk for a second about why Voltaire was writing this book. Voltaire was French. France was sitting on the sidelines watching nation after nation get wind of this new political theory by people like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau...and then they would one by one fall into civil war and reform themselves into what was becoming known as a more modern structure of government...one where the individual has rights and the government's role is to serve them in various ways. France hadn't had a revolution yet. England had already...remember when we talked about Thomas Hobbes he was living smack dab in the middle of all the drama with the three English civil wars. Voltaire saw the writing on the wall. The people of France knew revolution was coming...the question was when. Voltaire saw the model that England had erected and loved several elements of it...after

all, with their new system, England was churning out polymath geniuses one right after another...John Locke, Francis Bacon, Sir Isaac Newton...etc. Why can't France have a couple of polymath geniuses? This is the question Voltaire must have been asking himself when he decided to write the book *Letters Concerning the English Nation*. He actually writes in the beginning of the book as sort of an advertisement to the reader that these letters about the English nation are far from a tourist manual. Don't expect to read this book and find me talking about Stonehenge or any of the other sightseeing excursions that you would visit if you went there. He wasn't there to go sightseeing. He was there to understand elements of their culture and how they differ from France. And although he would never say it explicitly, in fact he wrote this book as though he was someone else, he was finding and recording the great things about the English Nation to give the revolutionaries in France a sort of framework to work from when they were designing what the country would look like after revolution. Let's create a society that is going to produce more lockes, bacons, newtons, hobbes and others. Really, if you think about it, if you were going to read a book about travel...this is the best one you could get your hands on. This is the wisdom that comes with traveling! We've all heard people say that if you want to become more cultured or have an eye-opening, life-changing experience...you should travel the world and see other cultures. We've all seen someone come out the other side of a World Tour and look like a changed person. But in reality...it is just as easy for someone to travel from one tourist destination to the next...not appreciating anything, not paying attention to the other cultures...just trying to find the nearest gift shop so they can prove to their friends they went there...and that person could come out on the other side of World Travel having not learned a single thing. The sort of information Voltaire is traveling to England to record is the kind of stuff that makes you a less naive, more cultured person on the other side of the trip. One of the things that Voltaire notices right away...and it seems like we're running out of time so I will have to pick this up next time, but he notices how incredible their system of religious toleration is. There is a section of one of the letters where he talks about an experience he had in a marketplace where crowds of people that come from completely different

backgrounds and religious views are all peacefully shopping and doing business with each other. He marvels at how well everyone gets along when they are doing business with each other and then they all, at the end of the work day, go home to their respective beliefs and live their lives as they see best. And it's from here that Voltaire makes a very interesting point about religious toleration in government...he asks himself why these people get along so well. He attributes it to the fact that there are so many options. He says if there was only one religion allowed, the government would be arbitrary...why do we even need it at that point...it either becomes unnecessary or it becomes the system of government itself.If there were only two religions allowed...then he says they would cut each other's throats...which kind of reminds me of the always delightful stalemate between republicans vs democrats in our world...but Voltaire says that because there are so many religions coexisting... that everyone gets along and no one ever feels that threatened. Religious toleration may ultimately be a way to attain peace between them.Alright so this is the end of the episode proper, and if you want to turn it off now, I fully understand. But I need to announce the winner of the Amazon Gift card this week...lots of awesome entries and I am saving several of them as back ups for future weeks, in case if they are very relevant to some individual episode that we are doing. That said, I want to thank everyone who asked me questions this week and I would like to beg you to keep sending them. I read every single one and if I don't immediately respond I am considering it for the show. You know I don't want to give the answer online AND on the show. Anyway...please keep asking them...I implore you...Have your entries in for this week before Monday evening and I look forward to hearing from you.All that said...the winner this week is @JessicaMMore ... she asked over Twitter "iamstephewest could you assess bill oreillys proof of gods existence using the tides. My husb and I love your show!"Well of course I can! and thank you...you really love my show? I would be happy to talk about Bill o reillys tide goes in tide goes out theory...in fact I often times wish that I had a YouTube channel...I feel like if there is something that I am really good at is identifying fallacies and weaknesses in arguments and it would be awesome to do something where I could take people's videos and give some sort of ruthless commentary

on them...kind of like bill oreilly. so I would love to assess his "proof of gods existence" even though I'm pretty sure it is more of a defense of a belief in God...but for anyone who hasn't heard of it before...let me find the video and play it really quick...he says it in multiple different interviews, but there is one with Richard Dawkins that will do just fine. The reason bill oreilly's argument is so ridiculous is because it pretends to prove the existence of the CHRISTIAN god. He doesn't actually ever even come close to presenting a case for why it's reasonable to assume the existence of the CHRISTIAN GOD, he just gives some pathetic, fallacy ridden, hackneyed abortion of the cosmological argument proving the existence of a different God. And this is why if someone says to you that any of these modern day people...if someone tells you that bill oreilly is a philosopher...roll up a newspaper, smack them on the nose with it and say no! no! Philosophers in the 5th century BC were thinking clearer about these issues than he does, but as we'll find out...bill oreilly isn't paid to be a philosopher...he doesn't care if his argument actually holds water...hes paid to keep people's eyeballs on the television screen. you know I like bill oreilly. I think he is widely misunderstood because people see him take one or two ridiculous positions or stretch the truth to make his point and they disagree with him and therefore don't like him on a personal level...but I love what he does. When you watch him for longer than two weeks or so you start to realize that often times he plays devils advocate for the sake of starting a conversation. He will hold some really unpopular opinion and argue it against a supposed expert for the sake of getting the discussion started. And if you think of him as someone that is starting discourse, I really like what he is doing. After all, if he never made the horrendous arguments about the tides that he did, I wouldn't have anything to rail against and point out the flaws in. Now that I'm done saying what I like about him personally...lets completely take the personal element out of it and focus on his argument itself...after all I was asked by a listener to refute his tides go in tides go out proof of gods existence. I personally would consider myself an agnostic and I am not trying to be disrespectful here and I am not trying to attack the beliefs of Christians...especially ones intelligent enough to listen to this show...I am doing what I was asked to do...attacking the argument of Bill O reilly." I just

think we couldn't have lucked out to have the tides go in, tides go out, sun goes up, sun goes down. Don't think it could have happened!""It's a leap of faith that it just happened."So here if you wanted to identify the fallacies that he makes in this two sentence block they would be the appeal to probability...that because something seems like it probably would be the case...it therefore IS the case. And of course one of my favorite fallacies to talk about...the always delightful fallacy of false equivalence where he looks at two things that have a few qualities that are the same and pretends as though they are identical things. So, if you look on YouTube and you try to find these religion vs science debates...you know the four horsemen of the Atheist Apocalypse...this distorted argument is one of the most common things you are going to hear. What Bill O reilly is doing here is creating one of the most obvious false dichotomies I've ever seen by an functioning adult. Bill oreilly as a self-proclaimed catholic believes in the Christian God...and what he's saying to Richard Dawkins is that as a self-proclaimed Atheist, the only thing that he can claim to believe in is the alternative viewpoint...that something came from nothing. He looks at things in nature that seem to be perfectly ordered for humans to live in...things like tide goes in tide goes out...and he says I just don't think we could've gotten that lucky! Why does this why does this seemingly ordered framework exist? Now in this case the words nature and the universe are completely interchangeable. For bill oreilly to ask why an ordered nature exists, which is what DOES exist, he is asking why does the universe exist? He points out that it takes a much LARGER leap of faith to believe that it just happened...that it just erupted out of nothingness one day than to believe that SOMETHING created it. Something created it. now I'm going to come back to that, but id like to point out right now, that the real warped part about the way that he is arguing here is that he's using this I think SOMETHING created the universe to justify EVERY SINGLE OTHER thing he says throughout the remainder of the video. This is supposed to add legitimacy to the God that Bill oreilly defends and speaks on behalf of for the rest of the conversation. Well let's talk about this very intelligent and interesting question about the beginning of the universe...was it created or did it arise spontaneously...When we ask the question why is

the universe here? Or what caused the universe come into existence in the first place... You can believe in many things and there is far from a consensus on this in philosophy or science, but there are two positions that are extremely popular in today's world that will leave you intellectually respectable...One of those positions, as David Hume and others would point out is to ask the question...why does the universe need a cause in the first place? Yes, that is a counter-intuitive notion, but if we completely discount that as a possibility...aren't we projecting our humanity onto the universe if we claim that something NEEDS a cause to come into existence? After all we are half a chromosome away from the chimpanzee..can we really expect that we come with the hardware to fathom the origins of the universe? Let's suspend judgement on that.The other way of thinking is that there was some creative force that brought the universe into existence. The thinking behind this one has to do with causality. I needed a cause to come into existence...my parents had me a long time ago...you needed a cause...that rock needed a cause and we can go all the way back to the beginning and think that it stands to reason that because everything inside of the universe needs a cause in order to be brought into existence, why should the universe as a totality be any different? There must be some creative force behind the why the universe began.Now as humans, that makes total sense to us. This seems to be the point bill oreilly is arguing for...that SOMETHING created the universe....But this is far from proving the existence of the God Bill O reilly has in mind isn't it? There is a massive distinction between making a case for some creative force behind the origin of the universe...some metaphysical, faceless blob that brought all of this into existence...there is a big difference between proving that SOMETHING created the universe, and calling that thing God as Plato and many other philosophers did...and proving that that SOMETHING is also a monotheistic god, that knows you by your first name...that has a plan for you...that intervenes and changes the course of history...that has a set of behaviors that he wants you to follow...that has hands and a voice like a homo sapien...that created this entire universe as some sort of elaborate moral proving ground and depending on how well you navigate the adversity and temptations he throws your way, that determines whether you get into the VIP Box in the sky or whether you

perpetually burn in hell like a Ham and Cheese hot pocket. So what Bill O'Reilly is doing here is camouflaging himself. He is pretending that the argument he's having with Richard Dawkins is the old, intellectually respectable argument of well I believe the universe was created and YOU believe it just appeared out of nowhere...and I am the crazy one huh? Well, no Bill. You aren't crazy, but you are misleading...and by the way you just used the appeal to probability fallacy to try to prove your point. You aren't proving the existence of the CHRISTIAN GOD which is the one you spend the rest of the interview defending and speaking on behalf of...he's pretending that by making a case for why it's plausible that the universe was created...he therefore PROVES the existence of all the rest of that stuff. This is the fallacy of false equivalence and there is obviously much more for Bill O'Reilly to prove on his side than what he is pretending there is. And make no mistake...Bill O'Reilly is COUNTING on you to not catch this fallacy. He needs you to not catch it. Let's move on." Jesus! see Jesus was a real guy, I could see him. I know what he did. I'm not positive Jesus is God but I'm throwing in with Jesus, rather than throwing in with you guys...because you guys can't tell me how it all got here. You guys don't know!" Now, if I was on the debate team and my job was to identify EXACTLY which fallacy is in this statement...it's very easy. It is a very common fallacy that you see in arguments, especially by people with double digit IQs and the exact type of logical fallacy is called the argument from ignorance. The idea that because something hasn't yet been proven false that it somehow in some twisted way adds legitimacy to your beliefs no matter what they are. To take a page out of Dawkins's book, you haven't proven to me that the Easter Bunny doesn't exist, that doesn't mean that a giant rabbit hops around from house to house in April. But if you just look at what Bill is saying here: Bill O'Reilly is absolutely right...scientists do not know why the universe is here. but here's the kicker...neither does Bill. The ridiculous notion that because you don't know something that thereby gives you carte blanche to fabricate some grandiose story to explain it, and then hold it over everyone's heads to try to get them to act a certain way is absolutely absurd. By the way, this is such a bizarre way of looking at the world..."Knowing" is just so important to him...not just having enough of a working knowledge to navigate the

world...but TOTAL KNOWLEDGE. Otherwise he feels REALLY insecure. He's so terrified of NOT knowing something...that he is willing to just pick something and choose to believe it. The sad thing is, this is exactly what people do with their political beliefs and really their beliefs about most things. They really want to feel like they know everything about something, but that is a long hard road of reading and thinking and admitting that you're wrong about stuff...so instead they find some oversimplified take on things and believe that it is the truth. Believing that you know everything is much easier and fun than actually knowing everything."My problem is that science doesn't advance the human condition in any moralistic way." So as long as something aims to advance the human condition in a moralistic way you believe it to be true? I think he is mistaken about what his criterion of truth is. I can't believe that...Pythagoreanism aimed to advance the human condition in a moralistic way and I don't see you dressing in a table cloth and looking for numbers in the world. The early Greek Orphic system of gods aimed to do the same thing and I don't see you following them. I can't believe that considering Islam claims to do the same thing...I think what he meant to say is that I believe that this is true because I want it to be true and when I follow the set of behaviors it tells me to, good things happen to me. But here is the problem with that...I don't want to live in a world where children go to sleep starving every night in third world countries. I don't want to live in a world where cans of Dinty Moore stew don't magically exist when they're going to bed hungry...so does that mean they do magically appear? simply because i don't want to live in a world where they don't?What I want the world to be has absolutely nothing to do with what it actually is.High school debate team tactics...make a completely unfounded statement and then proceed to argue about something quasi-related that has more merit...then pray people didn't get much sleep the night before and they don't realize the shell game you're playing. BUT I GOT PLENTY OF SLEEP MR. O'Reilly and so did you guys. Talk to you next time.

Belief

Episode #041

This is a transcript of episode #041 on Belief. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). The best episodes of this show, for me at least, are the ones that correspond with events that go on in my everyday life. Part of my research for the show goes beyond just reading through dry philosophy...I usually read what I need to...mull it over for a while...go on a few walks thinking about it...and then arrive at a few core questions that I want to address in the show that week and what I usually do, because I am a tremendously annoying person, is I subject everyone around me that seems remotely interested to those questions... my wife and closest friends absolutely love me for this quality of myself...and The main question for this week that cause some distress was how do you justify what you believe? Now you can imagine the kind of reception I get asking people this stuff...why do people get so uncomfortable when you ask them to explain what they believe...and for a long time I didn't know why...its not like I'm aggressive in these conversations...I go out of my way to coddle people in these conversations. I don't want to make anyone feel bad...my goal in every conversation that I have is to have the person leave a little bit more joyful than they came into it...but then I realized...I'm fighting a losing battle. When it comes to what people believe about stuff...in today's modern American society...we're not supposed to ask those kind of questions. We're not supposed to press people about WHY they believe certain things they believe...there is a HUGE double standard...we're supposed to ridicule some types of beliefs but have unquestionable reverence for others that are very similar. This is why people feel uncomfortable when they're asked to justify their beliefs...social conventions keep them in this protective cocoon! Well just for this episode of the show...let's break out of that cocoon and try to understand our beliefs better...and then you can go back inside. Now earlier in the week I was having a perfect conversation for this very topic...I was talking to some guy that believes in ghosts. Now I want to come back to this guy, but first lets do a little digging on the concept of belief, because what I

think we'll all realize soon, something that Voltaire would've DEFINITELY agreed with...is that this strange condition that we're born into...this crazy carnival ride that we're on that we call life, when it comes to belief...it all begins to look like a really sick joke that someone is playing on us. Let me explain why. When we are born into the world...we are born into a very strange condition. When it comes to arriving at beliefs about stuff...there are two GIANT things about this condition that we find ourselves in that make believing in anything very complicated. The first thing...a very important thing...is that certainty...for all intents and purposes is impossible. In fact, we can't even be certain about the fact that certainty is impossible...but if certainty IS possible...finding it through all the the various handicaps that humans have seems to be a wild goose chase. Voltaire had a famous quote that said, "Doubt is an unpleasant condition, but certainty is absurd" Now what Voltaire and many of the enlightenment thinkers are getting at here is that you don't KNOW anything for CERTAIN. You can have very strong beliefs...backed by very strong evidence that is constantly reinforced by your experience and still not know something for CERTAIN. Take one of the most seemingly obviously existing I can think of...the physical world. I look around me everywhere and it SEEMS like other people exist...it seems like trees and cars and everything else exists...it seems like there is a physical matter underneath this map of the world that I see that is creating this reality...but do I know for certain that it exists? I could just be talking to myself into empty space hallucinating all of this. In fact, can I even be certain that I exist at all? Can I be certain that I am a thinking thing as Descartes famously said? Well many people would argue...no. People cite the Cartesian circle...His so called clear and distinct ideas are based on thoughts which could have been deceptive from the very beginning. He isn't certain of anything. So what does all of this mean? What are the implications of this? Here it is: To believe in anything, to claim to know anything no matter the amount of empirical evidence or reasoning...is a leap of faith. Even something that is imminently in front of us at all times like the physical world with an endless amount of evidence...if you claim to KNOW that it exists...sit down and have a Starbucks with an idealist philosopher for 10 minutes and they will show you how many assumptions you are

making. To believe in ANYTHING is a leap of faith...but hold on....one of the biggest mistakes in thinking that people make here...that that therefore makes all leaps of faith and all beliefs the exact same thing. We may all be making leaps of faith all the time, but all leaps of faith are not created equal. And this brings me to the next very strange thing about this condition that we're born into as human beings...We can believe, literally...ANYTHING that we want to believe. What I mean by that is that what you believe has absolutely NOTHING to do with how true it is. And if you doubt this at any level...just consider the fact that there are millions of examples of beliefs that people hold that are mutually exclusive. Consider the fact that some people believe in ghosts...that's what this guy was talking about earlier this week...he was telling me about the most recent installment into the horror genre...Annabelle...that movie about the doll that is possessed by a demon. And for future listeners I'm sorry if this dates the show or if the reference doesn't mean anything to you, but it is the same generic story about an attractive young couple getting some new material possession that becomes unfortunately claimed by Satan's henchmen. I'm sure there is some future movie that is still appealing to these fears that people have so just replace Annabelle with whatever is prevalent during your time. But what this guy was doing was he was reading me a story about how the doll of the movie Annabelle is based on actual events...that there was a couple that got a doll and they would come home from the supermarket and the doll had changed places and changed positions and one night their door creaked open and the doll was standing there and it came into the room and tried to strangle the husband. Well in fairness to me I thought he was joking...and I started poking fun at holes in the story or just generally talking about the whole situation...just that there exists an underworld where demons are holding human souls captive...and one of the lords of the underworld decides to take a liking to these people's baby...he wants her soul...so his best plan is to take control of a creepy looking doll and mess with them for weeks...you know...flicking lights on and off...moving the curtains...putting the doll in random places...opening doors when no ones around...this is what the demon spends his time doing. And really I'm completely open to the idea of all this stuff existing...I'm an agnostic when it comes to

ghosts, demons and evil spirits at this point in my life...it certainly would make the world an interesting place...but I try to make people laugh and when I pointed this stuff out the guy that was reading me the story goes, "Wait...you don't believe this happened?" Now although I am an agnostic on the issue...I have met people throughout the course of my life who feel the exact opposite of this guy...they say that ghosts do not exist. They'll say...Why haven't we captured them on video if everyone has a smart phone? This is nothing more than superstitious people with a confirmation bias. They are told that they have a soul or a spirit their whole life by different people...maybe their mother tells them a story about seeing her mom at the foot of her bed when she was younger...so when they are told about demons existing or ghosts haunting a designated property line...it isn't THAT outside what they've been told is acceptable to believe so they believe it. If you told these people there were goblins in the trees that were always watching you...they wouldn't believe it because it isn't similar to what they were told was reasonable when they were growing up...but in reality these people say...goblins and ghosts are equally as unfounded and ridiculous. Some people vehemently believe in ghosts some people vehemently believe ghosts do not exist. But who is right? They can't both be right. The two viewpoints directly contradict each other...one of them or neither of them has to be right. Yet both sides are devout believers of their side of the equation. The point of this, aside from setting up this extended example of ghosts is to illustrate that someone believing in something has nothing to do with how true it is. We can believe in ANYTHING we want. And it's funny because if you asked 100 people why they hold the beliefs they do...99 of that hundred would say that they believe things because it is the truth. Maybe complete certainty about things is impossible, but what I believe is the closest facsimile of truth possible. We all believe the things we believe because we think they are the closest thing to truth we have come across. Well, like most things in philosophy...I wish it was this simple. Press those 99 out of 100 people hard enough on explaining WHY they believe what they believe and what you will find is that they believe things for a lot of reasons...not many of them having anything to do with truth necessarily in the slightest bit. I'm not just making this up...the dozens of different

justifications for a belief in something is an entire field of study in philosophy today.

There are so many ways people distort reality to convince themselves that something is true that you could truly spend the rest of your life reading about the work that has been done in this small segment. People believe things because they are convenient to believe in, they believe things because it useful to them on a personal level, they believe in things out of laziness...it is very difficult to accept reality on reality's terms...so leave it to us to come up with tons of creative ways to believe in something and create the reality that we want to exist. Now it should be said that false beliefs that are useful are not necessarily bad things. The longer I live on this planet the more I realize how powerful of a tool belief is. There are tons of examples...simply believing that you can't do something can make you incapable of accomplishing it. Just Believing that you live in a world where people are keeping you down can cause you to believe that any bad thing that happens to you is the byproduct of these people that are oppressing you. So we shouldn't look down on false beliefs because they can be extremely useful. Certainty is impossible and there are no limits to what you can believe. This is one of the biggest messages of the podcast right here and it is one that was very dear to Voltaire and the rest of the enlightenment thinkers. If you're a person who claims that the basis for why you believe the things you do is because you think they are true and not because they serve some useful purpose to you then you are instantly assuming a life long responsibility. A life long responsibility of putting your beliefs under a microscope. A life long responsibility of looking at them through an extremely critical lens. Of taking every piece of new information you get and weighing your beliefs against it. If you are TRULY concerned with your beliefs being true, you should never arrive at a belief and say that it doesn't matter what anyone says to me, it doesn't matter which new facts are presented to me, I will never falter from this belief. You can't say that. No one said this was going to be easy. The easy way is deciding you are going to plug your ears and say "la la la" whenever someone tells you something that doesn't correspond with your worldview. You're not a bad person if you do this, but the enlightenment thinkers would at least want you to be honest that your beliefs are out of convenience, not out of a desire for truth. Not everybody is cut out for this kind of life.

Some people have a hard time committing to getting a puppy because...think of the responsibility! For the next 10 years or more I have to take care of this thing...Well this is a LIFE LONG commitment.And I have more news for you...this whole process is going to be an uphill battle because there are way more ways you can be wrong about what you believe than right. Plato talks at the end of the Theatetus about the idea of what knowledge is...it's something we've talked about on the show before I'm pretty sure...the idea that knowledge is only knowledge when it is a justified, true, belief in something. Now, it should be said that this isn't a knockdown explanation of what knowledge is...people have found exceptions to this rule, but it works really well when talking about any shaky beliefs that we might be holding on to.Picture a Venn Diagram where one circle is truth and the other circle is belief. In each of these circles is everything that is true and everything that you believe. Now, lets assume you have some beliefs that correspond with reality on realities terms...or truth...the two circles of your beliefs and truth would overlap in the middle...but Plato thinks that this overlapped area is not knowledge yet, because your true beliefs need to be properly justified.I HATE describing visuals on this show...let me give you an example of what I'm talking about and the point of this is to consider ALL THE wonderful DIFFERENT WAYS you could be wrong about something and how much scrutiny it takes to have a justified, true, belief. You could be a commoner living in the 1400's in Europe and listen to the stories of the sea faring gentlemen telling their tales about the ends of the earth. The point when you've sailed so far out into the ocean that you fall off the edge...you believe the earth is flat in other words. Well that would be an example of something that ONLY falls in the belief column. You believe the world is flat...that is a belief of yours, but when it comes to it being true or justified...in retrospect, now we know that that belief isn't true and it certainly isn't justified simply because you heard someone talk about it in the 1400's.Let's take another example...let's say you're still living in the 1400's and you believed that the earth was a sphere because you also believe that all the planets in the universe are just marbles in a massive celestial game of marbles. Well, that's a great example of a belief...that happens to be true, but it isn't properly justified so it wouldn't be considered knowledge to

Plato. This is when the tapestry of our beliefs starts to unravel. Consider all the different ways you could be wrong about any one thing you believe, or all the different justifications you could be covertly using as a basis for believing something out of convenience alone. Consider the fact that you live in a world where it is very unnatural to question people about these justifications. Now, Consider the very few ways you can be right. And if you're having a hard time taking a step back and looking at your beliefs through this objective lens...you know identifying the possible ways you could be inappropriately justifying your beliefs, take yourself out of this equation and try to think about the way you are critical of the beliefs of others that you don't agree with. Let's all think back to a time when we had a friend that we fundamentally disagreed with about something. Maybe you agreed with this person the majority of the time, but on this one issue...they were dead wrong. You were right. You could clearly see all the mistakes they were making...all the ways they were believing this thing that they believed in out of convenience to them... rather than because they thought it was the truth. You guys had to "agree to disagree". Well at this point...if somebody showed you a list of faulty justifications...you could easily point out which ones they were guilty of in that case, so make no mistake ... you are already good at holding beliefs under a microscope. Let's consider an example that we can all be familiar with and it was one that was very important to the enlightenment thinkers, especially when it comes to religious toleration. Let's say that I'm a Christian. There are a LOT of people that disagree with me throughout human history and across the world living today that I have to contend with. We'll talk about several of them...but let's start with the growing vocal minority...the Atheists. These people DON'T believe in the Christian God....I do believe in the Christian God. Well, like we talked about with ghosts before...one thing's for certain, we can't BOTH be right. The Christian god can't both exist AND not exist simultaneously. So if their belief that there is no God is not in the truth circle on our Venn Diagram...then we should be able to find some sort of faulty justification for believing what they believe. There are no shortage of these if you look for them...one of the most common ones leveraged is that Atheists are nothing more than rebellious teenagers. That they lack

humility. They're blaring emo music in their room and refusing to acknowledge the tremendous gift that the Christian God has given them because then they would have to follow his rules...these people are selfish and don't want to... and they will pay with eternal torment. Now on the other hand, Atheists commonly say the same thing about Christians. I'm sure we've all heard it...that it's in fact the Christians that lack humility. That it is difficult to think of something more arrogant or self-important than the idea that the ENTIRE UNIVERSE was put here so that you could talk to other humans nicely. Now let's look at this..right here, the Atheist is attacking the Christian's justification for believing what they do... and the Christian commonly says back that their justification has nothing to do with truth or convenience...they just chose to believe. They just...believe...based on faith. God has already said what he is going to say, Yes he sits behind the scenes working tirelessly to conceal himself from everyone all the time, but the good news is.. if you just have faith and believe in him...then his existence will become self-evident...you will look around you and it will be obvious that he exists. But there's a whole other side to this isn't there? The Christians have another enemy that they march into battle against every day...and their name is: the tens of billions of people who have lived throughout history and the billions of people that are currently living who believe in a different God than the Christian God. If you are a Christian...you disagree with the majority of humans that have ever lived. You think they have chosen to believe in the wrong God. Billions upon billions of people that devoutly believe in, claim to have personal relationships with, direct communication to, or more-so throughout history, obvious interaction with their God. Billions of people that have the same transcendent experiences that Christians have and strong connection to their God, are wrong. And they did it all from the exact same mental starting point as any Christian living beyond the first century AD when these miracles perpetrated by God could have been witnessed. Now these people, to the Christian...are NOT rebellious teenager...in fact many of them subject themselves to a more restrictive code of behaviors than the Christians do. So what is the justification for their beliefs? All of these people used the exact same justification for their beliefs that the Christian did, the difference between

them is that the Christian believes either that they happened to be born into the right home or had some sort of insight that gave them confidence they were right, and the vast majority of humans who have ever lived are burning in hell for picking incorrectly. Now, the two ways Christians typically respond to this in modern times, at least by my experience is by shaking their heads and saying "I don't know, I'm confused by that too, the lord works in mysterious ways." Or by saying that they just don't believe God would do that. That the majestic God presented in the Bible is Good and Just and they just can't believe that God would sentence all of these people to eternal torture for not believing in Christianity. The common thing I usually hear back from Islamic Scholars or Rabbis or just a general Agnostic is, well you're directly flying in the face of thousands of years of Christianity by saying that and how convenient for you to cherry pick scripture and ignore other scripture to create a new modern, more tolerant version of God that doesn't send anyone to hell for believing the wrong thing. The point of this is not to attack one set of beliefs...it is to illustrate the responsibility we have if we want our beliefs to be based on truth, rather than what we want truth to be. If you don't believe things based on convenience, you need to be subjecting your beliefs to this level of scrutiny constantly...every belief. And This scrutiny that we can hold things to on a personal level is what the thinkers in the enlightenment did hundreds of years ago when it comes to the collective knowledge of humanity. We can see this period known as the enlightenment as the human species going through this process for the first time. The only question is, will you have your own personal enlightenment? When I talked to this guy earlier this week about why he believes in ghosts...when he asked me why I didn't believe the story in the news about the doll that was possessed by a demon and tried to strangle the woman's husband, I tried to get to the bottom of where his personal line in the sand is. He must not believe EVERY story that he reads....I pointed out that there are tons of examples of stories that he doesn't believe are true...the stories about ships falling off of the earth because they reached the edge...the particularly far fetched stories of people getting abducted by aliens...etc. I asked him where he draws the line when it comes to believing in the testimony of others, because he MUST have one. Some people believe testimony

because, why would it benefit someone to openly come out with the information that they were kidnapped by lizard people and anally probed? What possible benefit could they get from telling the rest of society about that...they must be telling the truth! Well there ARE motivations in every example if you look hard enough, not the least of which might be mental illness, but my point is that motivations or lack of motivations don't necessarily make things true or untrue. Eventually where we got in the conversation is him saying that he believes in ghosts because it augments his living experience. When he goes to the movies and watches a story about a demon haunting a house, he doesn't just appreciate things like , whoa that was a nice special effect there, or wow what a great acting performance...he watches it thinking that it actually happened and that at any point it could happen to him. He also said that he really likes the idea of believing in a spirit world beyond this planet because he is terrified of the idea of dying and believing there is somewhere for him to go after living makes him feel comforted because now he will never have to actually fade into blackness. Well after listening to this episode, I don't have to tell any of YOU guys why that is a faulty justification for believing in something. But what I will tell you is how Voltaire, Newton Locke and many other thinkers agreed with and embraced the task presented to humanity that we talked about in this episode. Real quickly though, the point of this episode is that every belief you hold is a leap of faith...but not all leaps of faith are created equal. If I could give you one piece of advice: QUESTION YOUR FAITH CONSTANTLY. This may seem abrasive, but it's not...if I asked you to question your faith about whether heroine was a good idea...if I asked you to question your faith about whether eradicating minorities was a good idea...if I asked you to question your faith about whether the world is a dark dangerous place that isn't worth living in...you would be thanking me. Remember, if certainty is all but impossible and we can believe LITERALLY ANYTHING we want, if we truly want our beliefs to be as close to the truth as possible, we have a life long responsibility to look at our beliefs under a microscope. There was a really fun question being asked about human history during the lifetime of Voltaire...who is the greatest of ALL the human heroes? Was it Alexander the Great? For uniting Greece and spreading Hellenism? What it Julius Caesar? For bringing

Rome to unprecedented greatness? Voltaire had a very different answer to this question...he believed that the greatest human hero was Sir Isaac Newton...because while Caesar and Alexander and many others had brought change by way of the sword that lasted maybe a couple centuries, Sir Isaac Newton FOREVER revolutionized the way that humans look at the world they live in. Before Newton, people like Descartes talked about how knowledge should be arrived at through an almost mathematical process. That we begin with clear and distinct ideas...things that are either innate in our minds or self-evident...and from there we use reason to DEDUCE what the truth is. Well, Voltaire's views on the matter were derived from Locke...who strongly disagreed. Aristotle said that "humans by nature desire to know". One of the most depressing things you can ever hear is that you have reached your full potential at something. That, no matter how hard you work or try from here on out, you will never be ANY better than you are at this moment right now. In that same way, how sad is it to hear that we have found the absolute truth...that everything else you will ever say will be readdressing some earlier point or commentary on what we already know. Voltaire and Locke are not filled with the same kind of desperation as others who are willing to create vast metaphysical explanations of the universe that really have no basis other than flawed reasoning just so they can say that they KNOW things. Plato's Timaeus, Plotinus's theory of the One, Leibniz's Monadology, all rationalist metaphysical systems aimed at taking what they claim to be self evident knowledge and speculating the rest based on their own human brains. Voltaire and Locke are more interested in looking at how things seem to interact with each other in a measurable way than with creating some story to explain to holes that we haven't filled in yet. Now don't get them wrong...This kind of philosophical speculation is still an important tool, but it shouldn't be what we base truth upon. Philosophy will always be useful...because in this way, philosophy is the great engine of hypothesis...Think about science for a second...what makes a great scientist? a great scientist is someone who can take some falsifiable hypothesis and come up with an experiment where at the end of the experiment, the only possible outcome is that the hypothesis is proven correct, or incorrect...and they do this in as unbiased and humble of

a way as possible. But there's another half to that...where do we get the outside the box hypotheses that lead to progress? Both the philosopher and the scientist are brilliant, but in different ways...it takes a different kind of brilliance to come up with new theories or to recognize assumptions we might be making in science currently.

Plato...Plotinus..Leibniz...all of these metaphysical systems can be seen as hypotheses for scientists to test...and yes ultimately most of them wont hold up to scrutiny, but one of them might be another Newton. Philosophy is the great engine of hypothesis.Voltaire would've agreed that these systems are educated guesses...but their validity ends there. He thought that for whatever reason...if God existed...us knowing FOR CERTAIN that he exists isn't that important to him...so instead of speculating about the "nature" or "essence" of things or creating elaborate systems explaining scientific holes...we should study what we actually were given. The natural world. Ourselves...etc.Voltaire thought that maybe science will NEVER be able to answer these questions fully..but when he was in doubt he really liked a quote that was popular by Newton at the time, "When I don't know something...I will not feign a hypothesis." He was fine with the condition he was in: "Doubt is an unpleasant condition...but certainty is absurd."Alright so last time when I chose a winner for the \$20 Amazon gift card I ended up rambling for almost 25 minutes about it...got a few complaints...want to make sure I keep it short this time since the episode is already running late as is. Let me know what kinds of questions you guys like to hear...or better yet...submit your own...i keep all the questions so when you submit one you have a chance to win in perpetuity. That said, the one this week is from Chris Ruby he writes,"Just made another large order through your amazon banner and I thought you might do me a favor and suggest a book or two on tape for the 16hr drive I'm making to Colorado... Yea, downloaded audible through you a while back. Art of racing in the rain was my free download, and I recommend it highly."Well thank you Chris...I would love to weigh in on this...and thank you for participating and listening to the show. One book that I always recommend to people...it is one of my favorite books is called Socrates Meets Jesus...The premise of the book is that Socrates inexplicably is manifested in modern times and is taking a course on the history of Christianity. The other students in

the class represent some typical stereotypical viewpoints in today's world on certain issues...and the whole book has Socrates constantly doing what he did best...Socratic Dialogue..questioning and trying to get to the bottom of contemporary society and Christianity. Most people that hate on the book are hating on the ending because Socrates converts to Christianity and they see it as a cheap religiously fueled cop out...but I don't care. The book is full of awesome discussion...it's actually been made into a full length play that you can watch on YouTube.The other book I'd recommend is "Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance". Its cheap, relatively short and one of the greatest books ever. It is about a father and son that take a motorcycle road trip over the summer and their discussions lead to extremely powerful conclusions when it comes to tolerance and how to live life. Can't recommend this book enough.That does it for the show...send it your questions over Facebook, twitter, or email and enter for your chance to win a \$20 Amazon gift card...talk to you soon.

Optimism

Episode #042

This is a transcript of episode #042 on Optimism. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Let's all start the show today by asking ourselves a very revealing question: Am I an optimist? No...not me. I'm not asking you guys if I'm an optimist. Let's think about ourselves for a second. When you go about your life and things happen to you good or bad...do you think about the future optimistically or pessimistically? There's kind of a bizarre stigma attached to being a pessimist...do you guys know what I'm talking about? Like, being a pessimist...when you're running in certain circles you just are NOT supposed to be a pessimist...it's one of the worst things you could ever be. Heaven forbid someone puts a glass of water on the table in front of you..."What do you mean it's half empty! You have water! It's the miracle substance of life!" Maybe the best way to get to the bottom of pessimism is just to look at what most of the time causes people to be pessimists. And there's a surprising amount of work done on this subject. I mean, you'd think there is just some arbitrary thing that happens throughout our childhood...some conditioning that causes you to expect that everything is going to work out for the best, or to expect that these potential bad things will probably come to fruition...but people have dug a little deeper. There's a lot of different ways that people validate their pessimism....it seems very clear there is a strong contingency of people that claim that they are pessimistic because they just have way too much life experience and knowledge to ever expect things to work out for the best. These people don't even want to call themselves pessimists...they say I'm a REALIST. Look, it's not that I don't WANT things to work out for the best...it's that I've been around the block a couple times and I'm not going to fill my head with starry eyed fantasies about things working out for the best. Bad things happen, and if you don't expect them you are just setting yourself up for failure after failure after failure. Many of these people are cynics...they knock on optimists for being these naive children with delusions of grandeur...saying that through their blind

optimism they are setting themselves up for a lifetime of dealing with the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune...What's really interesting to consider is that many of the pessimists end up falling into this same trap...they become so cynical and so negative about how the world is going to treat them that they end up growing apathetic...they end up just throwing their hands up in the air...and whenever they hear about any sort of bad thing happening in the world they kind of scoff and say what else is new?But there isn't just one type of pessimist...lets not only focus on these people. There are many ways that people justify their pessimism. There's one type of pessimist...I'm sure we've all met one of these fine, absolutely toxic people really pessimistic attitude about the future for some underlying, self-congratulatory psychological game that their playing with themselves. You know they'll surround themselves with optimists and when good things happen to them...well they got lucky this time...and when bad things happen...you should've listened to me...I told ya so.One of the more interesting theories I've read about why people are pessimistic when it comes to their personal views of the world is that we may have all evolved to be pessimists. The idea behind this one is that if two hunter gatherers are walking through the Serengeti and they come across some high grass...one of them says "oh there's probably not a lion in there!" and the other one says "no. I'm staying out here. I think there will be one..." Well, the hunter-gatherers with a predisposition for pessimism didn't get disemboweled by a lion as frequently...so they lived on to reproduce and fill the gene pool that we come from.There's this really strange way of thinking that I find is pretty common among your average person that says that the longer you live on this planet...and the more you know about the world around you...the more pessimistic and miserable you have to be as a result of that knowledge. You know they hear the quote ignorance is bliss and in my opinion they mistakenly jump to the conclusion that the only path to bliss is through ignorance and that the more you know the more tortured you are by that knowledge.One thing I'd like to point out as we talk about optimism when it comes to our personal lives is that the only thing you are doing by being an optimist or a pessimist is choosing the lens that you are going to view the world through. What I mean by this is that being an optimist or pessimist doesn't necessarily change what happens to

you in the world. It changes how you perceive it...it might change the number of mental barriers you set up for yourself and that might in turn change how you react to what happens in your life...but being a pessimist doesn't change how much control you have over the adversity or fortune that is thrown your way living your everyday life. You have zero control over that stuff. As the stoics would say...all of these things are external to you...the only thing YOU have control over is how your mind reacts to these things. Let me give an example...when a company is doing well and hiring a bunch of people and selling tons of product and then the economy tanks...let's say to stay in business they need to lay off 100 people. Now that 100 people is not made up of one type of person...there are both optimists and pessimists in that group of people. The point is...the people who were pessimistic out of that hundred didn't prevent this bad thing from happening to them by dwelling on how unfair and volatile the world is for months ahead of time. Being an optimist or a pessimist doesn't control the future, it just controls how you see the future. Now you could say, well the pessimist in that case EXPECTED to get laid off and therefore probably has other jobs lined up when the optimist is blindsided....and that is true. But what about the hundred other cases where their pessimism could be destructive? What if the economy was terrible and they just COULDN'T get another job lined up. Their pessimism might ALSO lead them to collect unemployment and wallow in their own filth on the couch for 9 months watching Maury Povich saying, there's no way I'll EVER get a job...why even try. Winston Churchill said, "For myself I am an optimist - it does not seem to be much use to be anything else." Now we're all faced with the decision everyday to make the choice of whether to be an optimist or a pessimist in our personal lives. You may have been born or conditioned to have a predisposition in one direction or another, but you aren't sentenced to a lifetime of being either one of them. You can train your brain to perceive the world differently...and what Winston Churchill is alluding to here is that being an Optimist is a USEFUL thing. Not just a nice pipe dream for us to delude ourselves with...not just what stupid people do...no quite the opposite..being an optimist is the ONLY useful proposition to Winston Churchill. Now why do you think he said this? Well you could say...whether you think

good is going to come or bad is going to come...it doesn't change what is eventually going to happen, so why put yourself through all the needless duress of focusing on all the potentially negative outcomes? But I think the "usefulness" that Churchill is talking about here actually runs much deeper. There are all kinds of studies that unanimously talk about all of the various benefits there are to being an optimist as opposed to a pessimist. Optimists live longer...they have better immune systems than pessimists...they have lower levels of stress and anxiety. A study that took place over a long period of time found that optimists were 23% less likely to die from heart disease and 55% less likely to succumb to all forms of premature death. Optimists make more money across the board...\$30,000 more per year than their pessimistic equals. Optimists are significantly happier than pessimists, some studies say that optimists are luckier than pessimists...some say that they are significantly more likely to be in long term, fulfilling relationships. What I'm saying is...when it comes to which lens is more useful on a personal level...it seems pretty clear being an optimist has a lot of use outside of just deluding yourself in the short term. Another philosopher that talks about optimism a lot is Ralph Waldo Emerson...he said "Write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year." This is the opposite of a quote in the movie Office Space where someone goes hey how are you today? and the guy goes, "Every single day in my life has been worse than the day before it. So that means that every day you see me...you see me on the worst day of my life." Think about the opposite of that...if you write it on your heart that every day is the best day in the year...then every single day you live on this planet is the greatest day of your life. It is an upward staircase. You seek out every good thing that happens to you as reinforcement of that fact, rather than descending down this dark downward staircase. I mean just think about it...even when a long string of good things happens to a pessimist, they usually spend all their time not appreciating how good they currently have it, but thinking about how all of these good things in their life are just going to inevitably leave them or be destroyed. It's almost like they never had them in the first place. Marcus Aurelius said in his meditations to "Dwell on the beauty of life. Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them." Now this is coming from Marcus Aurelius!

He was a Stoic! The stoics are one of the most famous advocates of premeditated pessimism in the world...you know you should wake up and tell yourself I will be met with idiots and inconsiderate people...I will get cut off in traffic today...that guys WILL steal my parking spot at work...Even someone who strongly advises to hold low expectations about the world has a very clear focus on the beauty and positivity in the world rather than things that would be needlessly destructive. Well there was another philosopher that had a famous quote about optimism...his name was Voltaire and it went: Optimism is the madness of insisting all is well when we are miserable. What are you talking about Voltaire? The glass is half full! No...we shouldn't get down on Voltaire here...and we should all be very mindful not to disagree with something we don't fully understand yet. Because the optimism Voltaire is talking about...the optimism that he is railing against in this quote is in a very different context than what we've been talking about so far in this episode. By exploring the difference between these two uses of optimism...by exploring Voltaire's famous rebuttal to Leibniz called the Candide, I think by the end of the episode we are all going to look at the world a little differently. Let's consider something for a second...do you guys think there is one correct way for all humans to look at the world at all times? What I mean by that is you may think that being an optimist is the only useful, or logical way to go about things in your personal life living in the 21st century in modern America, but does that apply to every situation any entity might find itself in? For example, what if you're a company in an extremely competitive market where dozens of businesses are trying to steal your market share and out innovate you and drive you out of business...is thinking "everything works out for the best" the best attitude? The bigger question here is: When you look at the U.S. government...or the government of whatever country you come from...do you vote for the government to act based on the same set of behaviors that you live your personal life by? For example, in your personal life you may be a fiscal conservative...you don't take out a bunch of credit cards to make the down payment on a Ferrari that you can't afford the maintenance on...and have no idea how you're going to pay for it...but you may think it is INHUMAN for the government to not use taxpayer funded subsidies to promote a giant

unfunded future taxpayer liability that we have no way of paying for yet. Now I'm not making an argument for fiscal conservatism here, but what I want to point out is that often times the set of behaviors we live our personal lives by is very different than the set of behaviors we want the government to use when acting on our behalf. And what I'd like to ask all of you right now is: Do you want your government to be optimistic about the possibility of terrorist attacks? Do you want your government to be optimistic about the future of the economy...ah one of these days we'll find a way!" Do you want the human species to be optimistic about climate change? But it's funny...if we looked at those three things when it comes to our personal life...why shouldn't you be optimistic? What you want to run around in fear of being attacked by terrorists? The point here is to explore the idea that optimism may be excellent in certain contexts...IE our personal lives...and not the best way of doing things in other contexts. When Voltaire said the words that optimism is the madness of insisting that all is well when we are miserable...he was talking about philosophical optimism. He was talking about optimism on a species wide scale. He was responding to Leibniz. remember, Leibniz famously said that we exist in the best of all possible worlds. That god didn't sit up in the heavens and decide to create the second best of all possible worlds...or the third best...no he created the BEST of all possible worlds. So because of that, Leibniz argued, everything thing that happens is for the best. Terrorist attacks...economic collapses...the greenhouse effect...all of these things are God's will...and while we may not understand WHY they happen at the time with our feeble human intellects...we can rest assured that they are probably damage control or necessary for future evils to not occur. No matter how bad things may SEEM...relax guys...God maintains this as the best of all possible worlds. Voltaire was in a pretty dark place in the year 1755. The love of his life had just died. The people he detested the most were in their ascendancy. And to top it off one of the most catastrophic earthquakes in human history hit Lisbon in the kingdom of Portugal...to history it would become known as the great Lisbon earthquake. The death, horror and destruction witnessed by people on the ground and cataloged by Voltaire was beyond justification. This was long before any sort of earthquake construction code had been enacted and the

death and cleanup that came with a natural event like this would've been appalling to even the most seasoned of warriors back then. Voltaire writes a poem that aims to serve a few different purposes, but two of the major ones was to convey to people living far away the destruction that took place, but also to attack what he thought was the tremendously naive view that all is well! we are living in the best of all possible worlds! After all, how could anyone think that could be the case when things like this are happening? The world is better off when these horrific events occur? Here is an excerpt from the poem: Unlucky mortals! O deplorable earth! p.242 He says in another section: 'If it be true,' they said, 'that whatever is, is right, it follows that human nature is not fallen. If the order of things requires that everything should be as it is, then human nature has not been corrupted, and consequently as no need for a Redeemer. if the miseries of individuals are merely the by-product of this general and necessary order, then we are nothing more than cogs which serve to keep the great machine in motion; we are no more precious in the eyes of God than the animals by which we are devoured.' Well, Voltaire ruffles a lot of feathers with this poem and it gains him a considerable amount of notoriety. There are a lot of people that respond, but historians of philosophy all agree that the most notable of all of these was from a guy we will be covering in detail soon on the podcast, Jean Jacques Rousseau. His argument basically goes like this... The reason such horror can be inflicted by an earthquake that God allows to exist on the planet is because we aren't following God's intentions. God never intended for anyone to live in cities... crammed together like sardines! In fact, cities exemplify all the vice and excess that goes against God! God wanted people to live in the countryside! When there's an earthquake in the country, no one dies! He compares Voltaire to someone that built his home at the bottom of the ocean and then yells at God for allowing him to drown! We DO live in the best of all possible worlds. What may have otherwise been left to a stinging poem by Voltaire was magnified by this response. Rousseau set Voltaire into a frenzy. What he wrote in response was one of, if not his most influential work... the *Candide*. Voltaire decides to destroy this foolish optimism that was originally laid out by Leibniz... and there are so many different interpretations of what was happening... there are even people that think

Voltaire wasn't responding to Leibniz at all but really the authority of the church at the time...regardless it doesn't matter...this work known as the *Candide* was a ruthless rebuttal to the idea that we live in the best of all possible worlds. The title *Candide* comes from the main character. The book starts out with *Candide* being a student to a respected scholar named Pangloss...who believes that we live in the best of all possible worlds. He teaches him all about it and *Candide* obliges him. *Candide* starts getting some feelings...he is caught kissing the Baron's daughter and he is expelled. Along his travels he comes across terribly bloody battles and all kinds of other things that almost get him killed and eventually he arrives in Holland and he comes across this disheveled mangled beggar who he recognizes is Pangloss! What happened Pangloss? Well it turns out an army came...killed his family messed him up and now here he is...and beggar on the streets...but he still believes he is living in the best of all possible worlds! From here it doesn't get any better...*Candide*, Pangloss and several other of their miscreant friends that they meet along the way are tortured, put to death, enslaved, raped, beaten....the whole book catalogs a really depressing sequence of events that ironically ends with them all living on a farm together and despite everything that happens...Pangloss still believes he is living in the best of all possible worlds. The whole story is chaos with the central point of it to make certain observations about the human species...the key one is how ridiculous Pangloss's optimism is in the face of all these things that are wrong with the world. Are we truly living in the BEST of all possible worlds? Let me sum up Voltaire's main points in the *Candide*. When it comes to the human species looking at all of these bad things optimistically, we really are shooting ourselves in the foot. Sure, it may make us FEEL great to say that no matter what happens...no matter how bad things get...whatever happened is ultimately for the best, but is what makes us FEEL better necessarily the best thing for humanity? Voltaire says...if we live in the best of all possible worlds...and everything that happens is ultimately for the best...then anything that happens is the best thing that could ever happen! So if you believe that, why even try? Why should we try to prevent terrorist attacks, or enact policy that creates jobs, or try to understand what causes climate change if ultimately anything that happens is the best

thing that could ever happen and it is maintained by God? Why even try to limit human suffering...if any subsequent human suffering is God's will and therefore the best thing that could ever happen? See, Voltaire was a deist at this point in his life...he doesn't think that God created all of this so that he could grant wishes for this one species of humanoids. He uses an incredible metaphor to talk about how we should truly be viewing ourselves when we grow up and move away from these other superstitions. He compares the universe to a ship that was built for the King of Egypt. He says that God is like the King of Egypt...he built this ship...and we as humans are like rats in the lower deck of the ship drowning in puddles or starving to death. Yes, we are a part of God's creation, God may even be aware of our existence...but he didn't create the ship so that rats could scurry around and flourish in the lower decks. No he built the ship for some greater purpose...sailing him around the Mediterranean...a purpose the rats would never be able to fully comprehend. When these rats get stuck in a puddle underneath...Is the King of Egypt concerned about that? Is the King of Egypt bothering himself with running around SAVING every rat, or maintaining that the rats exist in the Best of all possible decks of the ship? No the rat shouldn't have fallen into the puddle...sorry. King of Egypt doesn't even think about it. What Voltaire is getting at here is that if we were giving advice to the rats...would we tell them that the King of Egypt is going to insure that everything works out for the best? No...the amount of rat suffering on his ship isn't even close to his number one priority...in the same way that fruit fly suffering or cow suffering isn't the main thing he is concerned with. If we were giving advice to the rats...we would tell them...look if you want to limit the amount of rat suffering...YOU GUYS have to do something about it. Build a bridge over that puddle so rats don't fall in...find a way to secure more food for yourselves so you don't starve! Just like the rats...if we want to limit the suffering of other humans...the WORST thing we can do is sit around and be complacent...being optimistic about the fact that anything that happens is for the best! Should we be complacent about terrorist attacks? Saying that if God allows them...then they are for the best? No! Voltaire would say we should do something about it. Should we be complacent about the effects of climate change? Saying that God will regulate the

temperature if things ever get too steamy? No! Voltaire would say we should learn as much as we can about it. To Voltaire, limiting human suffering is OUR responsibility. And sitting around saying that everything that happens is for the best breeds complacency. WE need to be taking action, not assuming that human suffering is the metric that God uses to determine what the best of all possible worlds is. So it's fascinating to me that when it comes to our personal lives, Optimism seems like the clear way to go, but when it comes to the government and the future of the human species, we want them to be as pessimistic and worrisome as possible. Maybe that's one of the benefits of being a part of an organized, governed society is that by outsourcing all of that pessimism and worry to the government to worry about, it allows for us to live healthier, richer, happier, less worry-filled lives. The question is...are you taking advantage of it fully?

Tolerance

Episode #043

This is a transcript of episode #043 on Tolerance. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). The episode today is kind of a weird one...I want to talk about really take a close look at why tolerance was so important to Voltaire and the enlightenment thinkers...and hopefully by the end of the show we can understand ourselves a little better and why we treat people the way that we do.> What comes to your mind when I say the word tolerance? What comes to your mind when you think about how tolerant you are towards the beliefs of other people...and what are you willing to do in the name of ending intolerance in the world around you? Keep these questions in mind.> Now I'm about to read you a story and the only thing I ask of you today is to make a mental note of how you feel about the actions of the woman in the story. Remember how you feel in your stomach about what she does because after looking at tolerance from several different angles I'm going to ask you to think about the story again. Try to identify any changes in the way you view the story after thinking about intolerance. If there are zero changes in the way you think about it...you're either a super genius or my show is terrible.>> bus driver story> Now let's break down this story a bit. For all of you listening at home, there's probably some point in this story where you agreed with the driver's actions. The problem is, there are different layers to the story...she keeps vamping up what she is willing to do in the name of her beliefs...and as we peel back these layers, fewer and fewer people agree with what she did to the point where only ...crazed fanatics would agree with what she did. Let's look at these layers.> She starts out at the beginning just overhearing a conversation that's going on. The girl says something she doesn't agree with and the bus driver is listening to it. There is a certain percentage of people listening to this show that would react this way...they would hear a belief that somebody else holds and they would not say anything. Why is it any of my business what this person believes? I'm going to stay out of this.> The second layer is when the lady pulls out her soapbox and begins proselytizing

her and the rest of the bus. Yes, the public flogging may have been going a little too far...this was an extreme variant of this layer of the intolerance onion so to speak, but there is a certain percentage of people listening to this that when they hear someone say a belief that they think could potentially hurt themselves or others they feel a sense of obligation to change that person's mind, if for no other reason then out of respect to future victims.> The third layer is when the lady decides to double back and invite her and her sister BACK up onto the bus and go to the... extent of her capacity to change their beliefs about gay marriage and abortion. There is a percentage of people listening to this right now that assigns themselves the obligation to do EVERYTHING IN THEIR POWER to CHANGE someones mind about something.> Now obviously the fourth layer is our directors cut ending that's a tactic that not many people listening to this show are going to use, but you don't have to look much further than the 5 o clock news each night to see that there are people willing to kill other people simply because they don't believe what they believe and they feel the best solution is to eradicate any opposing viewpoint from planet earth.> Now, we all agreed with the bus drivers decisions up until a certain point in the story...which point was it for you? When did she cross the line? The irony here, and the deeper question that is underneath this story is a famous question in philosophy: If you consider yourself to be a tolerant person, how intolerant should you be of the intolerant? I mean think about it...the reason this bus driver decided to do anything is because she heard the girl proudly supporting intolerant beliefs. So...her reaction to that is to call her names...threaten to eat her alive...silence her: her fought intolerance with intolerance.> If tolerance is a virtue that you strive to emulate, what, if any, obligations do you have when it comes to combating intolerance that you hear other people spewing? One thing I want to make clear right now, a mistake that a lot of people make when they think about intolerance is that if you're a tolerant person, that doesn't mean that you never disagree with anyone. Tolerance isn't saying that everyone is right and no one is wrong...Tolerance is accepting that other beliefs exist and not taking action to silence or condemn people that disagree with you. And that's a big difference from just disagreeing with someone.> Look, if you live in a first world country in today's

world...congratulations...you live in one of the most tolerant societies to ever exist. Just in my everyday life, I don't see many people taking to the streets...championing the cause of intolerance. I don't see many people walking around holding signs proud of how unaccepting they are of other beliefs that aren't their own...it's just not how we do things in today's day and age. I mean, the fact that people like the Westboro Baptist Church are wack-jobs worthy of putting on the news just goes to show you how rare that kind of behavior is. Maybe the best way to understand how important tolerance was to the enlightenment thinkers is to give a little bit of historical context.> In modern times, we all fancy ourselves extremely tolerant people. Especially the type of people that listen to this show...You know...I don't care what race, culture or creed you are...I don't have a problem with it...do whatever you want! This is widely held to be a very admirable and respectable way of viewing other people in the world. But unfortunately for the rest of human history it hasn't always been this way. Voltaire was living during a time period where being tolerant was seen as the opposite...it was seen as cowardice. Being ambivalent about the strongly held religious convictions of all the other people was seen as laziness.> And there was a long history of this...there was a long dialogue within the church about... just how much responsibility the average person had over the eternal fate of their neighbors or friends. St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas...a few other people contributed...but these people systematically made religious intolerance into a virtue...and if you're confused about how they could ever sell something like that to the public...i mean how could you ever convince the average person that they need to be unaccepting of the religious beliefs of their friends...let me explain where they're coming from...because it's not that crazy:> Their thinking was: could you ever see yourself passively sitting on the sidelines as your neighbors or friends burned to death in a house fire...no if you heard them screaming in there and there was something you could do to save them...wouldn't you at least try? So, if that's true..they argued...how could you ever justify sitting on the sidelines watching your neighbors and friends get condemned to the eternal house fire. The house fire to end all house fires...Satan's Cabana...Hell whatever you wanna call it.> During the time before Voltaire when people mostly lived under

monarch rule...you would never sit idly and watch your friend speak out or organize against the king. So, if that's true, why would you sit idly and watch them speak out against the king of all kings? You can see where they're coming from. I mean, if you truly believe that your friend is going to be sentenced to billions of years of torture for not having a few drops of water sprinkled on his head at birth...why would you just sit around doing nothing? By the way...that was a widely held belief back then and it's no different than the sorts of arbitrary rituals that religious leaders say condemn you to hell in today's world.> The point of this is to illustrate just how different the world was back during these times. We see the Westboro Baptist Church parading around in the streets today and we are disgusted...but just a few short centuries ago...what they were doing would've been seen as an incredibly selfless virtuous act...they are sacrificing all kinds of worldly pleasures in the name of showing their friends and neighbors the errors of their ways. Saving them from eternal damnation. Voltaire and the rest of the enlightenment thinkers had a HUGE task on their hands. I mean imagine if of western Europe was populated by members of the Westboro Baptist church. First off...if we were living in that world...good luck going down to the craft store and getting a neon colored poster board...poster board would be like getting a loaf of bread in WW2....you could make a lot of money investing in poster board. But what sort of magical intervention would it take to change the way that they viewed intolerance towards other beliefs? Intolerance is a self-sustaining thing...and tolerance really is the opposite.> What we're talking about here is a very important and very interesting paradox in philosophy known as the paradox of tolerance. Lots of commentary on it. It really reminds me of something we've already talked about on the show before...Protagoras in ancient Greece...the sophist...he has the famous beginning to his Refutations that man is the measure of all things...that there is no good or bad but man makes it so...there is no absolute good or bad or just or unjust...only what individual societies and people deem to be just or unjust. Now the obvious contradiction here is that if everyone is right regardless of what they say...then what about the guy that says that HE is right and everyone else is wrong? Either he is wrong...or Protagoras is wrong.> Now Protagoras's position is known as relativism...and

although it's not the same as tolerance...tolerance runs into a similar problem when taken to the extreme. There was a famous scientist and philosopher in the 20th century that we will certainly be talking about named Karl Popper that I think does a really good job at shining a lantern on the inherent problem that arises if we simplify things down to TOLERANCE IS GOOD...INTOLERANCE IS BAD...is it really that simple? He would say no:> "unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them."> So think about what Karl Popper is saying here...if all the governments of the world had a summit and decided from this day forward we're all going to be tolerant of any set of beliefs regardless of what they are...then that eventually destines tolerance to be destroyed....because if the tolerant are always tolerant towards people who are intolerant...then eventually the intolerant gain followers and are INTOLERANT towards the people who are tolerant...who will sit by and be accepting on the sidelines as the intolerant continue to gain power and eliminate the tolerant.> The important thing to consider here is even though you may strive to be as tolerant a person as possible...is absolute tolerance REALLY what you're going for as an individual? Is tolerance taken to an extreme...really what we should be striving for as a society? I would argue that every single person listening to this is actually much more intolerant than they realize. I would argue that whether you realize it or not...there are hundreds of sets of beliefs that you work towards eliminating every single day whenever you clock in at your job.> There are people out in the world...right now...that hold a strong belief that killing people is not a bad thing to do. That murder is OK. Are you tolerant of their beliefs?> There are people out there right now that believe that molesting children is perfectly OK. Are you tolerant of THEIR beliefs?> In fact, what are laws and rules other than just a collectively agreed upon set of intolerances? Don't we all actively pay into a system that is designed to prevent certain the beliefs of certain people? We do! This is a tyranny of the majority! There are so many people that agree that murderers, child molesters and stop sign runners should not be able to exercise their beliefs that we have created a society

where if they DO wantonly kill someone walking down the street ...we throw them in a cell for the rest of their life. THAT is intolerance...plain and simple. Now I'm not saying we should allow rapists and murderers to walk the streets...but let's call it what it is. For every law that you agree with, you are intolerant of a belief.> The point of this is that it's not as cut and dry as saying that TOLERANCE IS GOOD INTOLERANCE IS BAD. You shouldn't WANT to be tolerant sometimes...intolerance can be a GREAT thing sometimes. And PURE TOLERANCE inevitably leads to the downfall of tolerance as Karl Popper pointed out. So if we can't hover around these extremes...we're all presented with a very difficult choice: what criteria do you use to determine how tolerant you're going to be?> Have you guys ever known someone like this...or just imagine a person that walks around and assigns themselves the task of policing the beliefs of everyone that disagrees with them about anything. Imagine how miserable that life would be...someone with no filter...they NEVER pick their battles. Not just religious or cultural beliefs...but down to the basic beliefs. Like they're a fan of Hot Pockets...and they see someone in the break room eating Lean Pockets. You know...you really shouldn't eat Lean Pockets...they taste way worse than Hot Pockets and Hot pockets have more calories and they're the same price as Lean Pockets...you should really just eat half a hot pocket instead of a full lean pocket...> How maddening would that existence be? No one listening would advocate going around spending your entire life trying to change people's minds about stuff like that...so what criteria do we use to determine when to step in and try to enforce laws against opposing viewpoints?> There's something I said in the belief episode about every belief that we hold that is actually very relevant here. Every belief we hold is a leap of faith..but not all leaps of faith are created equal. I think one of the main things that we use to distinguish between all these leaps of faith are how much they hurt ourselves and other people around us.> Most people if they were to answer this would say that I don't have a problem with opposing beliefs until they start to hurt other people. You know...your right to swing your fist ends at the other guy's nose. Do whatever you want as long as your beliefs don't hurt me or anyone else.> You know...most Christians in today's world wouldn't want to outlaw Atheism...they don't think you should be killed or

locked in prison for not believing in God...after all if the Atheist is wrong about it...the only person they're really hurting is themselves.> In that same way...most Atheists don't have a problem with several modern denominations of Christianity...because they don't evangelize...they don't nail people to a wooden X if they disagree with them...in the long run they are ultimately only hurting themselves if they are wrong...why would we outlaw that?> Pure intolerance is a fascist dictatorship and pure tolerance is a lawless anarchy. Now what Voltaire is trying to do with the power of the pen is move away from the old ideas of intolerance being a virtue and usher in a world of religious tolerance on a government level. But although he's focusing on the benefits of tolerance when it comes to maintaining order in a state...the message is also very interesting to think about when it comes to how we treat people in our personal lives...especially considering that we our government is so connected to the opinion of the masses. I mean think about it...we live in a representative republic. Our lawmakers and laws...our collectively agreed upon set of intolerances are chosen by tyranny of the majority.> Like just imagine if 99% of the U.S. population thought that gay marriage was not only wrong...but should be outlawed. They would reflect that opinion when it comes to the people they vote for at the ballot box and the 1% of people that thought there was nothing wrong with it...would feel like the people that believe there is nothing wrong with murder. The fact is...the intolerances that people carry around on a personal level shape the society that we live in...over the years as people have become more and more comfortable with gay marriage and more people are thinking that it SHOULDN'T be outlawed...the resistance at the ballot box has died down. Eventually there are large enough pockets of people that aren't intolerant of it in certain states that they remove the law on a state level...and eventually the sentiment spreads to the majority of the country until it is passed at a federal level. The only difference between the old world where gay marriage was illegal and the new world where gay marriage is legal is a shifting of public opinion about what they're going to be intolerant towards. That shifting of public opinion is really just millions of people shifting their own personal intolerances.> Something interesting to think about is that this goes for anything...if enough people believed that murder was ok, we could truly live

in a world where people walked around on the street...two guys have a disagreement in Home Depot about the price of the shovel...one guy gets beaten to death with a shovel and nothing happens. This is both extremely worrying and extremely empowering at the same time.> The reason it's empowering is that the only thing stopping you from living in the exact country that you want to live in is a few million people being convinced one way or the other about their intolerances. Think about that...think about how possible that is. Have you ever known someone that was intolerant or naive about a particular group of people and after you had a few conversations with them they eventually started coming around? Isn't this all that Voltaire did on a massive scale with his writing during his lifetime? Think about how powerful that is. Think about the potential if everybody had those conversations. Now that's not to say that everyone is going to be receptive...trust me I know...there are TONS of people that just aren't willing to listen. They believe what they believe because it's what they've always believed and the last thing they're going to do is take an honest look in the mirror because then they would have to stop clinging on to this much EASIER way of looking at the world.> Now understanding the power of engaging people...understanding that changing the mind of someone that is holding beliefs that are actively hurting other people is potentially just a conversation away...let's consider the initial question again: How intolerant are you willing to be towards intolerance? Think about the bus driver again...she vehemently believed that the views of this high school girl were bigoted and intolerant towards gay people and women...she truly believed that the prejudices she held were actively causing people harm. Paradise is a conversation away. Knowing that you have that power given the structure of our government...how far are you willing to go to change the mind of someone who holds in tolerances that are hurting others?> The fact is...the bus driver didn't behead this girl behind a bale of hay...she declared a war of ideas. And while I severely question her judgment when it comes to declaring it on a 17 year old girl...it isn't that different than what Voltaire supports all throughout his philosophical letters. Voltaire was a general in this war of ideas that was going on. And lucky for us...Voltaire won the battle of tolerance.

Slavery

Episode #044

This is a transcript of episode #044 on Slavery. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So a couple weeks ago we had an episode on belief... and in many ways this episode is a continuation of that episode. I say that because many of the thought lines that were originally talked about in that episode are expanded upon here, so if you haven't listened to it yet, do yourself a favor and go back and listen to it...but let's be real...you guys have all heard that episode...probably multiple times...if you haven't I have nothing to say to you...except for this very short recap. the belief episode was basically like an awareness campaign, but instead of spreading awareness about a horrible disease like prostate cancer or Lou Gherig's disease...you know something that affects millions of people a year...the belief episode was an ice bucket challenge for a horrible disease that plagues 7 billion people a year because as long as you're a human being with senses, intuitions or an ability to reason that can deceive you...you are living with this condition every day of your life. The condition that I'm talking about is the problem that because of the very flawed human tools we have at our disposal for acquiring knowledge...for all intents and purposes, certainty is impossible...and that starts to become a dangerous recipe when its combined with the fact that that there are no limits to what we can allow ourselves to believe if we are gullible enough. We can literally believe ANYTHING that we want to believe. What you believe has absolutely nothing to do with how true it is. Now, every single one of us realizes this...we've all been children before...you don't gotta think very hard to remember a time when you held a belief for bad reasons. This is underscored by the fact that we've all at some point held beliefs for bad reasons...for reasons that have nothing to do with how true they are...whether it's because we WANT them to be true or because it would be very convenient if they were true, but that doesn't make them true. So if that bothers you...if you want your beliefs to be as close to the truth as possible and not just a collection of things that you like to tell yourself...you instantly assume a life long

responsibility...you need to constantly look at your beliefs through a critical lens...you need to constantly consider every new piece of information that becomes available to you. Because If you're really focused on the truth for the truth's sake...you can never get lazy...you can never say..I believe this thing...and no matter what anyone says and no matter what evidence I see to the contrary...I will always believe it.Now if you follow this thinking to its logical conclusion, the tagline that you eventually arrive at is that "every belief at some level is a leap of faith, but not all leaps of faith are created equal." But this isn't the end of the discussion is it? No, there's much more to talk about...much more conversation to be had. Today I want to address one of the most common follow-up questions to this...I've gotten several emails asking this very question...and I can't think of a better way to do it than by relating it to one of these critical issues that were being rethought in the enlightenment: the practice of slavery.And before I begin and tell you the question...I just want to make sure this is clarified: If the belief episode was supposed to spread awareness about this condition that we're all born into...then this episode is designed to tell you just how much is at stake because of this condition. Try to think about the cost. When you hold beliefs for lazy reasons...it quickly goes beyond just putting ourselves in chains...it can quite literally keep others in chains as well.The question that we're going to be talking about is a very common follow up to what we've been talking about the last few episodes and it goes like this: So, if certainty is impossible, then why would you ever CHOOSE to spend your entire life chasing a ghost? Why spend every second of your life chasing some elusive thing you'll never catch when the alternative, though it isn't true, feels so good to believe? Let's say I believe in an afterlife...even if my belief ends up not being true, it sure made me FEEL a lot happier all these years to believe that I wouldn't have to ever stop living...that I'd get to talk to people for trillions of years. the point that their making is that since truth is so slippery to get a hold of...Isn't it better to just believe things not based on how true they are but based on how helpful they are to me personally?This is a very good question...and let's explore both sides of it a little deeper. Because I think the person that argues this point although they have good intentions...they're arguing this point on crutches...they really

want to make doubt into a terrible mindset to have...they want to make the condition of not knowing things for certain as unpleasant as possible so that they can say: Well, you'd have to be a masochist to willingly subject yourself to that kind of torture, doubting things all the time... when on the other hand you can just believe one thing, wash your hands and never change it! On one hand we can all see where they're coming from. The whole process does seem a little neurotic on the surface, I mean, if you want your beliefs to be based on truth...and to accomplish that you keep honing your beliefs and trying to make them the closest facsimile of truth possible..even if at some point in your life you hold beliefs that happen to be true, you're never going to know that they're true...it will always be a leap of faith...Can you imagine what your life looks like if you take that to the extreme? Well do you remember when we talked about Pyrrho from Ancient Greece? Pyrrho was this incredibly radical skeptic. This guy was famous around town for being so skeptical about things in his life that he suspended judgement about everything to a ridiculous level. There's stories about him staggering around the streets like he was Mr. Magoo...there'd be a cart barreling down the road...he didn't care...he doubted things so much he'd just step out in front of it and his friends would have to save him. I don't know why they stayed friends with him...he was like a big toddler for them to take care of. But his skepticism ran so deep that there's even stories of him having surgery performed on him without even flinching because he was that committed...he refused to pretend he was certain about the idea that pain is a bad thing. The question is...why would you knowingly embark on a quest that you know you'll never finish, especially when the alternative can be so awesome. There is no question that we can be made happier by holding lazy beliefs that paint the world to be the way that we want it to be. I can believe that the holocaust never happened...I can believe that I am correct about every belief that I hold and that I am the smartest person in the world...I can believe that when I die I'm going to get to see my grandfather again and this time his arthritis is going to be healed and hes not gonna be cranky all the time! I don't think many people would doubt that holding these beliefs would make us at least in a very shallow and short term sense...happier people than believing that some terrible alternative was true. But there's

another side to this isn't there? If false beliefs can make us artificially happy...they can also make us artificially sad or angry. I don't think I gotta convince you guys much of this...just take any example. Someone can be rendered miserable because they believe that they are trapped in some dead end job with no possible way of escaping it...they can believe that one of their relatives died, bawl their eyes out, be in mourning for the next three months just to find out it was an elaborate April Fools Prank. The point is...any one of us can come up with countless examples on either side of how our false beliefs can make us artificially happy OR artificially sad. The fact is...and this is a very empowering and important point to think about...our beliefs don't just affect us....we live in a world where our own individual beliefs can positively or negatively affect ... animals, other humans and even the planet that we live on. That's huge. What are some examples of what I'm talking about. You know..when it comes to animals...if you believe that when you buy meat from the grocery store it's coming from a farm that looks like its run by old McDonald...you could be holding beliefs that allow for all the atrocities that are committed in the current factory farming culture. When it comes to the planet...If you believe that there is nothing wrong with dumping a little bit of toxic waste in the ocean, you could be holding beliefs that are doing long term damage that you may not even realize. When it comes to humans...if you believe that the human species is not just one species of primate that should be treated equally by society, but that different races or cultures that are more suited for manual labor were PUT HERE by nature to be our indentured servants...well you could be locking people in chains for centuries forcing them to serve you lemonade and never think twice about it. Now, I wanna set the stage here for our discussion coming up... we live in a great time...I'm going to go out on a limb and say that everybody listening to this does not agree that enslaving people is an OK thing to do. You'd probably think that if somebody DID think it was OK there were either A) severely disconnected from modern culture B) completely amoral or C) a little stupid But it hasn't always been that way and that point that we all should consider, especially as it applies to our own beliefs that we hold in 2014... is that throughout history...it hasn't always been amoral or stupid people that have been advocates of

slavery. Back during the good ol' days of slavery...you weren't seen as an evil person for owning slaves...just like people in today's world aren't seen as evil for buying meat from the grocery store. Slavery was the norm back then...and based on our simple understanding of where humans fit in the natural world...based on where science was at then...there were a lot of respected academics...undeniable geniuses...the intellectual pillars of their time period that thought they had some really solid arguments pro-slavery. Again these weren't evil or stupid people...They looked at the fact that there were these obvious differences between cultures and used their own intuition to arrive at lazy beliefs that led them to think that some creative power organized the world in a way where some of these cultures were designed to work for others. But let's not try to reduce a couple thousand years of thought into a single paragraph. I want to have a debate on the Philosophize This! podcast this week, I will be your moderator...and the motion today is "Slavery is not OK!"...arguing against the motion are a few philosophers you guys will all be familiar with...unquestionably the most brilliant thinkers of their day...debating out of a wide range of time...from antiquity and the middle ages...give it up for the supporters of slavery: Aristotle, St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas! And on the other side of the stage in the great slavery debate is one man that we haven't talked about yet, but his comments on slavery forever changed the way the world looked at the practice. He was seen as the biggest competition to Voltaire in the enlightenment period and his political thought deeply influenced the French Revolution...his name is Jean Jacques Rousseau. Now let's start by talking about the arguments FOR slavery that were so prevalent for thousands of years in Europe. Because it's understandable that a lot of people living in modern times must be a little confused by this...I mean sure you can understand the average Joe going along with slavery...but these guys were geniuses. How could any of these brilliant people look around them and not see this for what it actually was...purposeful exploitation by the powerful? Well that's something for us to really think about this week when we look at the beliefs we hold in 2014....consider the fact that even something as unanimously detestable as slavery was justified by brilliant people for thousands of years. Anyway, let's start with Aristotle. We mentioned his views on slavery

very briefly in Aristotle part 2. Aristotle says in his politics: "For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule..." So one day Aristotle's walking around in his toga...he looks around him and he reasons that there seems to be two kinds of people in this world. Slaves and non-slaves. The same way someone today might go outside look around them...draw a conclusion based on what makes the most sense to them and think this must be the way that it is...Aristotle, being a byproduct of a culture with a minimal understanding about the natural world...looked around him and thought it was obvious there were two types of humans. It seemed very clear to him that these slaves were born different than non-slaves like Aristotle. In particular, they were born with the majority of the rational part of their soul missing. They still had some small ability to reason, but only enough to get their manual labor done. He thought it was clear, based on what he saw that they were essentially domesticated animals...and slavery wasn't a bad thing for them at all. Just like a dog and his master both benefit from that arrangement...the slave, non-slave relationship was a mutually beneficial one too. Obviously the non-slaves get tons of work done for them, but the slaves, Aristotle thought needed the non-slaves to manage their lives for them. They could never do it alone with their limited ability to reason. But Aristotle thinks it is clear that these slaves were COMPLETELY animals..they still had some amount of virtue that made them a human and therefore, higher up on the hierarchy of nature than animals. Now, if we're going to look at our beliefs and try to understand where we may be mistaken...What do you think he saw that made him hold these beliefs that ended up being dead wrong? Well, knowing what we know now...he must have seen people that came from two very different educational backgrounds and made him think they were two different species. We can kind of see what made Aristotle draw this conclusion...take one person that has been forced to work their entire life and one person that was fortunate enough to have at least some semblance of an education...and to someone living back then...no matter how smart you were...it may have seemed totally obvious that these are two different types of human beings. Keep in mind...these beliefs didn't hurt Aristotle in any way. You

know...Aristotle wasn't caused any sort of unhappiness as he was being fanned by palm leaves...but here's a great example of how one person's beliefs that on one hand make them happier can lead to very real human suffering and injustice on the other. So the next person to give an argument on the pro-slavery end of the stage in our great slavery debate is St. Augustine. Now, Augustine never wrote formally or at length about slavery, so what we have are excerpts from multiple works where he discusses slavery and it starts to unravel into a pretty clear picture of how he feels. He said: "It is with justice, we believe, that the condition of slavery is the result of sin. And this is why we do not find the word 'slave' in any part of Scripture until righteous Noah branded the sin of his son with this name. It is a name, therefore, introduced by sin and not by nature." So St. Augustine is a christian and he makes it very clear that he doesn't think slavery was part of God's original plan at all...I mean he didn't create all these people so that millions of them could be pack mules...in fact, Augustine says that you don't even see the word slave in scripture at all until Noah started throwing the word around. What this means to him is that slavery is an advent of sinful man and not God. But Augustine thinks... that doesn't necessarily make it something we need to actively try to end. Look, Augustine's job when living on this planet is not to abolish sin completely. On the contrary, sin is a part of god's plan. To be against sin is to be against god in a certain way. We should give people enough rope to eternally hang themselves with...after all what other way are we going to be able to separate who gets into heaven and who gets tortured than by allowing them to sin? Nobodies perfect...slavery is inevitable in this world in the same way that sin is inevitable as part of god's plan. Now it should be said, Augustine is an advocate for slaves on a level that is unprecedented for his time period. He's one of the first thinkers to talk about how a master should be a loving father figure to his slaves and he urges the church to make freeing your slaves seen as a virtuous act. because they are the moral authority at this time. But he gives other pro-slavery arguments...even one that is very similar to a line of thinking in the pre-enlightenment period with people like John Locke...the argument was that slavery... really should be seen as a lesser of two evils. St. Augustine asks...lets think about how slaves are made in the first place? Some conquering

army marches into town...absorbs the women and children into the tribe and kills all the men. Well, isn't it a much less bloody and much better alternative to just enslave them, sell them or force them to work? Slavery was actually a benevolent act...at least you were allowing them to live! Now again, like we did with Aristotle...lets put ourselves in Augustine's shoes...we can see how he would think that slavery was something that we just have to live with. I mean, if you believe that this universe was created and is maintained by the Christian God...at least the way people were interpreting scripture during his brief lifetime...if you believe that sin is a necessary byproduct of the universe god created, its god's way for us to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to who is ethical, and that god has kind of a hands-off approach when it comes to these sorts of things...then the rest of it really isn't that crazy. Even during Augustine's lifetime he would've looked at people that believed in a different set of religious beliefs than his and he would've thought that they were sorely mistaken. It's very easy to see the parallels to the tensions between religions in the modern world. So the last debater on the pro-slavery side of the table was Thomas Aquinas and on one hand he was a sort of Aristotelian continuation of Augustine...he was filled with novelty and the slavery discussion was no exception. He pointed out that God probably doesn't endorse slavery...but just look at nature...it seems to be implying something: "for men of outstanding intelligence naturally take command, while those who are less intelligent but of more robust physique, seem intended by nature to act as servants;" He's pointing out that all you have to do is look around you and see that we are all born with different natural gifts...some people are smart...some people have a "robust physique"...it seems like these robust fellows were put here to do our gardening and serve us cracker. There's a part of God's order that implies that there is some sort of hierarchy. He even points to scripture...he points out that some angels were more powerful or more important than other angels...there's obviously a hierarchy among the animals...why is it crazy to think that humans can be subdivided too? It should be said that Aquinas's idea of a slave was different than many people's ideas. He compares them to sons. Just like a son belongs to his father and it is the father's job to regulate and restrict and even hit his son to keep

him in line...a slave is no different. But Aquinas is a really nice guy...he says we should be good masters of our slaves and not hit them unless it is absolutely necessary. So again, as we did with the last two thinkers...here's another great example of a categorical genius looking at the world around him, arriving at beliefs that seem to be obvious based on his own intuitions. Oh, I'm a human and I look around me and it seems intuitive that there is a hierarchy in nature, why wouldn't that extend to human beings! So what did Rousseau have to say in response to all of this? Rousseau is most famous for his political philosophy laid out in his famous work called the social contract, and when he writes his stuff about slavery he points out that, you know what? I see a lot of similarities between slaves and people just born into a tyrannical monarch society where they had no say in how they were governed in the first place. Now when it comes to a system of government...how do we impose laws upon a population in the first place? Well Rousseau thinks it happens in one of two ways...and it's not ironic at all, Rousseau says, that they are the exact same two ways people are made into slaves. The first way is by brute force ...the second way is by consent. Let's talk about Rousseau's reasons for why BOTH of these are trash. We've all seen brute force before. Army or bully takes over a geographic proximity...attaches a chain to your leg and calls you his property. He imposes a set of rules upon you and maintains it by force. What about when we are born into a society ruled by a tyrannical dictator? To make a case that EITHER of these two situations are justified...we have to make a case that during the enlightenment was better known as the right of the strongest. This basically is what a lot of people were arguing if you break it down far enough...the idea that slavery is OK simply because some group is strong enough to impose it upon another group. Rousseau would ask...do we have a moral obligation to play along with these people simply because they are stronger than us? Is something made right or wrong simply because the strongest group or being deemed it to be right? The way to clarify the point that Rousseau is making here is by looking at it from the other side...if someone is born and is captured and taken into slavery and they follow all the rules of their slave master and be a good slave...does that make them necessarily a MORAL person? Or more generally...does just submitting to

power make you a moral person? This probably reminds you of a typical argument against a follower of one of the monotheistic religions that is thrown their way by Atheists...you know they ask...if the only reason you aren't murdering your neighbor for stepping on your lawn is because God will punish you if you don't do it, does that really make you a moral person or just a slave to power? Rousseau would say that adhering to brute force is an act of prudence...not morality. Morality is something much different. As both sides of this modern argument would agree with. So, The point that Rousseau is making here is that something like slavery isn't justified when it is done by brute force because that would imply that morality is by whoever the strongest is...and that obviously is slippery and would change a lot. What Rousseau is aiming to do in this part of the social contract is to tear apart any sort of justification of slavery. So after rebuking the argument that might makes right...he is left with the second way someone might have become a slave back then..by their own consent. Believe it or not guys, some people willingly agreed to being a piece of someone else's property...there were many different reasons someone would do this back then...so it begs the question...can someone willingly sell themselves into slavery? Rousseau says no. Slavery is even wrong in THIS case and he argues by responding to the guy before him that argued the other way around Thomas Hobbes. remember Thomas Hobbes believed that maintaining order was the ultimate goal of the sovereign and that people COULD "give themselves over" to the sovereign and it doesn't need to be a bad thing or something that's morally detestable...it could be a personally beneficial thing to do. Rousseau doesn't agree with this line of reasoning and he is responding to Hobbes' and his idea of the sovereign supposedly benefiting all these people when he says: "The despot guarantees civic peace in the state', you may say. Granted; but what do the people gain if •the wars his ambition brings down on them, •his insatiable greed, and •harassments by his ministers bring them more misery than they'd have suffered from their own dissensions •if no monarchy had been established? What do they gain if this peace is one of their miseries? You can live peacefully in a dungeon, but does that make it a good life? The Greeks imprisoned in the cave of the Cyclops lived there peacefully while waiting for their turn to be eaten. To say

that a man gives himself to someone else, i.e. hands himself over free, is to say something absurd and inconceivable; such an act is null and illegitimate, simply because the man who does it is out of his mind. To say the same of a whole people is to suppose a people of madmen; and madness doesn't create any right."OK, so what hes saying here is this: Brute force is not a legitimate way of determining what rights people have. The only way is by social agreement. Rousseau thinks that for anybody to actually volunteer themselves to forfeit every right that they have they would have to be crazy. He says if you doubt this...just look at the contract this guy is signing.Uh so let me get this straight. you're giving up your status as a man, your rights as a human being and even your duties as a human being...and I give you a slaves life. What sane person would ever sign that agreement? Rousseau talks about how any agreement, to insure it's beneficial to both parties in the long term and to make sure no one is taking advantage of anyone needs to be signed and readdressed at usual increments by both parties...but what would those meetings look like in the case of a slave? OK...well I own you and with it every right you have to speak your mind about anything...so this meeting is adjourned.What kind of agreement is that? What kind of insurance can you have that they will do anything that they said if they own you? Like, what kind of requests could you ever make there?After all, how can you be said to be agreeing to anything if you have no choice in the matter? Then Rousseau brings up what I think is one of the most powerful points in any of his works...can morality exist without freedom? If you aren't free to be making poor decisions, how can you be said to be making good decisions? You don't have a choice in the matter. In that same way...when you remove someone's freedom...then you remove the morality from anything that they do...And that would prove to be immensely important when it came to his political philosophy that we will talk about soon.As far as slavery being a lesser evil than killing a conquered population...Rousseau thinks all you are really doing is extending the state of war into a master-slave relationship.So the point of this episode was two fold...on one hand I wanted to provide a bare-bones foundation for the next episode when we really look into the politics of Rousseau...and on the other hand I wanted to emphasize what's at stake whenever we hold beliefs about something.

And look, I get that this stuff isn't rocket science, but seriously look around you. This is something that most people take for granted. Just ask yourself a question right now... Do you honestly think that you know everything? You know... it's easy to look back at people 100 years ago and laugh at how stupid they were... ha! look at them thinking there's nothing wrong with the treaty of Versailles! look at them in the 1400's with their crude medicine and superstitions! You could do this with any time period... you could take it all the way back to 500 BC and these people could honestly sit around and watch Nick Jr. all day and never stop learning stuff. But I'm not trying to beat a dead horse here... do you honestly think that you're exempt from that? Do you think that this generation is some sort of evolutionary endpoint... future humans are going to look back and say... wow THAT'S when they finally got it right! I got news for you... we are all going to be seen as barbarians... obviously not as much as previous generations... but if you're perceptive you can look around you and guess the kinds of things that future generations are going to look back on and think we were insane for accepting. Look this shouldn't be a defeatist attitude. The fact that by the time you turned 18 you didn't know everything there is to know about the world shouldn't be something that makes you give up or be depressed.... it should be inspiring! You shouldn't just say, well you can't know anything for certain anyway, so I'll just believe whatever makes me the happiest! No, you aren't the center of the universe... you aren't the only thing that needs to be considered because your beliefs affect a lot more than just you. By all means... if you hold a belief that makes you happy... keep it. I fully endorse that behavior. But understand that there is a whole other side to that belief and if you're going to resign yourself from trying... can you do the rest of us one favor? Before you decide to purposefully suspend your critical thinking out of convenience... before you decide to put the blinders on for the rest of your life... for the sake of the rest of humanity... can you just take a few days and think about that belief... do a little bit of research and find out if it could possibly hurt anyone else around you unfairly? At least do that and then go on about your life and be happy. Now, we've been talking a lot about our individual beliefs... how they affect our lives and the people around us... but the enlightenment wasn't just a leap forward in this area... it was an exponential

leap in many areas of thought...economics...government...etc....and we're going to start looking into others starting next episode. But keep these points in mind as we move forward and I look forward to seeing each and every one of you next time...the most open minded audience in the history of podcasting.

Rousseau Government pt. 1

Episode #045

This is a transcript of episode #045 on Government. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Ahoy Maytees! I'm Stephen west the host of the Philosophize This! podcast and I want to start the show today by using our imaginations! We're gonna start the show today with a little thought experiment. I want you to imagine that were all taking a vacation and were meeting up in Los Angeles harbor, tens of thousands of people all meet up, our bags are packed, we all have terrible Hawaiian shirts on and were going on the Philosophize This! cruise line! We're gonna talk about philosophy, we're gonna play board games, it's gonna be great! We all file onto the ship...we get out into the middle of the ocean, and then BOOM! The ship hits something! It springs a leak! We look on the starboard side and it turns out we hit a coral reef...we hit a rock...we hit that giant patch of garbage that's floating out in the middle of the pacific...and the ship is going down. There's nothing we can do to plug the leak, but lucky for us, everyone gets off the cruise ship safely because there is a deserted island not far away from the wreckage. We all get up on the beach, we begin to assess the situation and we realize very quickly that our situation is a dire one. The captain was drunk, fell asleep at the wheel...fell asleep at the helm...which explains why he ran directly into the giant patch of garbage in the middle of the ocean...we all realize very quickly that he didn't radio for help and that we are marooned on this island with the only possibility of escape being that a ship or plane passes by and sees us frantically waving around on the beach. What do we do now? Cause there's gonna be that moment when we all start to look around and size each other up. At least I know I would. Look, the problem with being stranded on an island with you people is that I know every one of you has read Lord of the Flies. I'm not gonna be the piggy on this island. Am I gonna be piggy? No. Fact is everyone's looking around for people with big forearms and calves because as soon as we can't find food on this deserted island...you're going to be

the first one spinning around on the rotisserie with an apple in your mouth. But it doesn't need to be like this. We're going to be standing around on that beach asking questions like, What are we going to do? Who's in charge? Is there anyone in charge? What do we want this person that's in charge to do? What are the limits to this person's power? Why does it have to be a single person, can't it be a council of people?

The fact of the matter is, if you were an enlightenment age political philosopher...this is the situation you had to put yourself in to be able to properly think about what the role of government is and why it is justified. You know, we're all born into a world where there's just a government. You pay money to it and it protects you in various ways, or at least tries to. Most of us don't really question it...living under the protection and control of a government is just something we take for granted, and historically, dictators have realized this. You may be born into some sort of tyrannical regime and never really question why you're paying these people taxes or why you're listening to them. Why do you pay money to the country you currently reside in? Most people haven't thought about it that much. They just do it. Well there were a lot of things in this new enlightenment world that were getting rethought. And as we started to think about all these old assumptions we were making that were potentially holding us back...what's the first place you're gonna start looking? Oh...how bout that guy over there in the velvet robe with the scepter that tells me what to do all the time? who's that guy...when did I agree to be his sugar daddy for the rest of my life. You know...some guy comes up to me on the street and takes my money...that gets him thrown in prison...the guy on the throne comes and takes my money...well that's called a "tax". How is this justifiable? What is he doing with that money? What is the extent of his power and how do we insure that? We were asking a LOT of questions during this time period...and the biggest one is probably the first question you would ask: Why do we even need a government at all? This is a very good question to ask...and it's far from an obvious answer. Are we better off as individuals without a government? Well, to answer that let's think about what a government even does for us...then let's imagine ourselves without it. Lucky for us, this isn't gonna be very difficult because we're all stranded on an island right now. So let's

think about it. Let's say we never organize a government and the island turns into an every person for themselves situation. What would that world look like? Would it be chaotic? Would it be very peaceful? Philosophers largely disagree about what just this state of nature would even look like. Thomas Hobbes, guy we've talked about before, he thought that it would be a constant state of war. Remember he called it "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short". That was life in the state of nature. There is no right or wrong because there are no laws in place to deem what is right or wrong....so in Hobbes' state of nature It wouldn't be wrong for one of you on the island to kill me and take all my stuff because there is no contract that we've both signed that insures anything. This a good place to pause and think about something for a minute. When we think about this hypothetical shipwreck that we were just in...we can all imagine Hobbes' state of nature becoming a reality. Maybe people separate into warring factions...maybe the most powerful guy just walks around taking stuff or enslaving other people....the point is we can all imagine an island where it might be beneficial to band together and make an arrangement. Most of us probably agree that we don't want certain things coming to fruition. Right? Let's just pick a basic example. We could be standing around on the island and we could say, OK, I don't want to be murdered. Do you want to be murdered? How about you guys over there, do you want to be murdered? OK well now that we know we all agree there... listen...I know this really big muscular guy...the guy is terrifying...he's got crooked eyes. How about we all live in this general vicinity and if anyone comes around talking about how they're going to murder someone, This guy with the crooked eyes will show them the door. But this guy needs to get paid right. He's not going to do this for free. How about we all chip in 100 bucks and make sure he makes this happen and we all benefit from it! Now, from here it's easy to imagine this extending beyond just murder. There are certain baseline insurances that we would want this very basic island government to maintain for everyone that is part of our group. So obviously Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau never used the island example... with the dude with the crooked eyes.... but this is just a way for us to think about this initial question: Do we even need a government in the first place? Well on our deserted island, we can see how

having this third party with certain clear tasks assigned to it could be tremendously beneficial to us. But Jean Jacques Rousseau didn't necessarily think that this had to be the case though. You know, if you look back at history...whenever there are giant shifts in the way that entire societies are thinking about things, there's always going to be a backlash. These things rarely go smoothly...I mean the scope of the change that was going on during the enlightenment period was completely unprecedented...we can expect consequences. When you go, in such a short period of time, from thinking the way we were thinking for centuries to the enlightenment...you know zero to the enlightenment in 4.3 seconds...there's going to be side effects and one of these side effects has become known as Romanticism. We all know by now...starting to sound like a broken record that the enlightenment is characterized by rationalism. The application of reason to all of these longstanding institutions that needed fixing. Well after a while of doing this...people starting thinking that maybe we went a little too far with all of this reason stuff. You know...think of reason like it were medicine. Nobodies questioning whether we were sick...and when you're sick and you take some medicine...you feel better, but if you take too much medicine...you could be talking like you're Al Sharpton the rest of your life. When you exalt reason to the level that was being done during the enlightenment and you suppress something like human emotion...something that is such an undeniable part of our experience on this planet...you can expect backlash and that backlash was Romanticism: A strong emphasis placed on human emotion as a superior guide and in not all, but many cases ...a heightened focus on humans in nature and looking back to times when humans were closer connected to nature as better than where we are now. I'm not going to be able to sum up Romanticism in a single sentence, but let's talk about Rousseau's contribution as an... enormous influencer in the movement and more importantly how all this relates to us finding the best way of governing ourselves while we were stranded on the island. So...due to circumstances in Rousseau's life...there was a period of time that he would commonly take a really long trip through the woods... on foot. Now, on one of these trips he was trying to pass the time and he was reading the newspaper. In the newspaper...on this particular day, there was a contest. They asked the

readers of the newspaper to write an essay giving their opinions on a question and the question was: has the progress made in the areas of the arts and sciences been more of a bane or a benefit to society. Now keep in mind, 90% or more of the people responding to this question would have looked around them and saw categorical improvements in people's lives... systems of government, improvements in medicine, the industrial revolution...but the position that eventually won the contest for Rousseau, the epiphany that he had sitting under a tree on this long walk through the woods that day was the opposite. To Rousseau, we weren't better off because of all of this progress. In fact, the entire long history of civilization... can really be seen as things getting worse. Because the further we get into this artificial state that we call culture and art and sciences, the further removed we are from the state of nature, where we really belong. He gives a few different examples in the writing...he talks about early civilizations like Sparta and how they're more simplistic and natural and he contrasts that with the civilizations of his time or even what Athens eventually became. He sums up his thoughts really well here: "While government and laws take care of the security and the well being of men in groups, the sciences, letters, and the arts, less despotic and perhaps more powerful, spread garlands of flowers over the iron chains which weigh men down, snuffing out in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they appear to have been born, and make them love their slavery by turning them into what are called civilized people." So Rousseau is obviously taking a very counter-culture position here. To be what we call civilized during the time of Rousseau is just to be someone that has been made to love your form of slavery. The arts and sciences are just garlands of flowers sprinkled over the iron chains that weigh people down. What is it to be civilized? And is that necessarily a better state than what came before we were civilized? Well what came before? If you listen to Hobbes...the state of nature was really bad. A state of CONSTANT war. Who wants to live in that...and this was his justification for why it actually benefited people to sacrifice many of their rights over to the sovereign whose job it was to "maintain order". That was the role of government to Thomas Hobbes, to maintain order. Like remember back on the island when we were standing in a circle talking about that guy with the crooked

eyes...when we give him 100 coconuts...what do we want him to do for us? Well it goes beyond protection from murder...we don't want to be stolen from, we don't want to be assaulted, we don't want to be enslaved...well what all these political philosophers did is they tried to find out...is there something that underlies all of these individual insurances that we want? Is there a macro for all of these micros. Well Hobbes thought that what were all really asking for...what the role of government is...is to maintain order at all costs. In a way, he is right...nobody wants to live in the chaotic world that he describes in his state of nature. John Locke years later writes what he thinks is a correction of Hobbes and says that the role of government is actually to protect our natural rights...life, liberty and property. And Rousseau...as we read from last time, obviously disagrees with Hobbes...you know he says that there's a difference between living a peaceful life and living a good life. Sacrificing your rights to a sovereign whose sole job is to maintain order may yield a PEACEFUL life, but you can live peacefully in a dungeon...that doesn't make it a good life...there must be more. The role of government to Rousseau was to promote the general will of the people. What is the general will of the people? Well I actually want to do an entire episode on it next time, I've been looking forward to this episode for a while...tons of great questions to ask about our government, what their responsibilities are... but for now let's just realize that Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau represent three very different often times conflicting viewpoints on the role of government. Now you'd think that there wouldn't be that much to disagree about...I mean they're all talking about how the government should be implemented in the same world right? Well, not really. One of the reasons there are so many conflicts between the thinking of Hobbes and Rousseau is because of their very different views of where we come from. They disagree on what the state of nature truly was like. When we're shipwrecked on the deserted island, Hobbes thinks that the state of nature is going to be terrible. We all can see where he's coming from, but I want you to imagine something different for a second. Imagine that during the shipwreck, as the ship is going down... we all get a very strange case of amnesia where we have zero recollection of anything civilized. We'd have zero recollection of private property, of social conventions, of how

governments operate... everything in that sector. Would that have any effect on what the state of nature looks like? Would we still enslave each other? Would we still kill each other over a pineapple? Would we still steal things from each other, or would we have no conception of what stealing is because nothing belongs to anyone? Rousseau thought we wouldn't..Rousseau thought that the state of nature...the original state that humans lived in pre-civilization was actually great! Instead of solitary, nasty, brutish and short...we were peaceful and noble and natural and good. To Rousseau...things only started going downhill when civilization started cropping up. In our natural state we do just fine...but we've been corrupted by civilization! In fact, he can identify the very moment when it all happened...although he doesn't claim that this ACTUALLY happened...he is just pointing to the phenomena that led to where we are now.Rousseau speculates that in the beginning, it all started going downhill when the first guy cordoned off a plot of land, told everyone around him that it was HIS, and they were stupid enough to believe him. That's when we all started to become corrupted. He talks about how when early man would create a hut so that they could co-habitate with the females of the species, that was the straw that broke the camels back. It's all gone downhill from there...one day you're building a hut...the next day...a sky scraper. "Beware of listening to this impostor; you are undone if you once forget that the fruits of the earth belong to us all, and the earth itself to nobody." But there is great probability that things had then already come to such a pitch, that they could no longer continue as they were; for the idea of property depends on many prior ideas, which could only be acquired successively, and cannot have been formed all at once in the human mind."So what hes saying is that in reality...The fruits of the earth belong to us all and the earth itself to nobody...but naive humans just cannon-balled into the chains that hold them down...they realized the benefits of political institutions, but they lacked the level of foresight to see the problems with them in the long term.Like I'm sure all of us have wondered at some point about how arbitrary and strange it is that anyone OWNS a plot of land. Like there was some point in history that someone put a flag in the ground...and now that section of the earth belongs to THAT homo sapien. Anyway, some of the most interesting pieces of Rousseau are in this

narrative that he gives for how humans were corrupted by society. Let's say we were stranded on this island and as the ship crashed we all got a case of amnesia about everything we've come to know about society, we wouldn't even need a government. In fact, we probably wouldn't ever want to be rescued...but Rousseau says that we've been irreversibly corrupted by society. Rousseau says that the state of nature was a GOLDEN AGE. But what happened was as we learned to love each other we also learned to be jealous of each other. We started to compare ourselves to others around us.. this was the first step toward inequality....when you create this hierarchy...all of a sudden everyone wants respect from each other...they want to be seen as better than those around them and eventually, with the same dynamic existing when it comes to private property, eventually the vast majority of humans are unknowingly sentenced to slavery. Now this is far from the extent of Rousseau's criticism of organized society...in fact he points out several flaws in the way that it typically pans out. One of the main ones to him is this: so one of the common things people want their government to do is to protect their property. You know...in our island scenario...if we work hard all day to make a strong shelter and collect some food, we don't want someone else to just come along and take it from us. But Rousseau thinks there's a problem whenever protecting property becomes part of what the state does. Rousseau would ask...how is that fair to everyone? What about the people that don't have any property? What about the people who have less property than others? Although it benefits everyone to a certain extent, it will always benefit the rich more than everyone else because they have more property that's being protected. In this way, society could never be completely fair...this is always going to lead to resentment...people become envious and hateful and this leads to all kinds of other problems, but maybe the most interesting one for us to reflect on is that Rousseau thinks that people living in a society are constantly outside of themselves. They're constantly away from their true nature which is to be free. They don't get validation from themselves anymore, like they would in the state of nature, they get it from other people around them. We're all just putting on a giant show for everyone around us...we don't ask who we are anymore...we ask other people who we are. And this goes against our very

nature. It's like turning down free pizza. But it's important to note that just because society can never be completely fair and will always be corrupting us...that doesn't mean that it always needs to be unjust. The way that you establish a just society is by the members of the society forming a legitimate social contract. Rousseau talks about how whenever you enter into a legitimate contract two things happen...you are giving something and you are getting something in return. In the case of the social contract, because in the state of nature you were born free, you are sacrificing this natural freedom for what Rousseau believes is a more useful kind of freedom in today's day and age: political freedom. So we're going to continue to expand on Rousseau's views on government in the next episode and we're going to continue our shipwreck analogy. But I want to end the show with something that is extremely powerful to reflect on this week. Why is it important to think about what we want from our government? Why is it important to do this thought experiment where we pretend like we're stranded on an island and think about how we want the government to execute our expectations? Now on the surface, this may seem like a pointlessly abstract question that isn't going to accomplish anything...I'm sure there's people out there thinking this way...why would you ever sit around trying to think of creative forms of government...there have been plenty of good ways of doing things already laid out...let's just talk about what the best one of them is. Pick from what we already have. But I disagree...I think of all the questions you could think about...if you were just going to sit down on a Saturday and ponder an interesting question...this question may be the that you are most likely to come up with some idea that changes the fate of the human species. There are a lot of abstract questions you could waste your time on...but what makes this question so different is technology. Because no matter how brilliant you are...no matter how brilliant Rousseau, Hobbes and Locke were...there are just ways of implementing government that are possible in today's world that they could never even dream of. The efficiency that is possible with the technology that we have today is something that opens up new, exciting possibilities. I mean, there are dozens of examples of this, but just to give you a sample of what I'm talking about...back during the time of Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes...having

an absolute democracy where every citizen votes on every single issue was completely ridiculous. There was just no way it would ever work...there were just too many people. It was seen as something that was a good idea in theory...but in practice it could never work if your population was over 50 people. My point is, this wasn't even an option to the enlightenment thinkers...but in today's world of smart phones and instant connectivity...we can imagine very easily a world where every citizen could vote on every issue...where we wouldn't need representatives. Now, trust me...I'm not advocating this way of doing things...I tend to fall into the category of people that thinks that the obstacle of taking Thursday morning off of work and having to travel somewhere to cast your vote and get your free cup of juice is a nice filter to have in place...I mean..just imagine this: We interrupt your episode of duck dynasty so that you can vote for president! Please make your selection! My point is that with new technology come new possibilities...and it isn't crazy to think that with all this new technology there might be methods of implementing government that are better than any way we've ever done it in the past. It's not crazy to think that one of you might come up with the idea.

Rousseau pt. 2

Episode #046

This is a transcript of episode #046 on Government. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). This is part two... of what might eventually go down in the annals of history as a series of episodes on How to build a society from scratch. Cause I was thinking about all the stuff we have coming up on the show in the coming weeks and I really think that's really what we're doing here...I was thinking about it. My wife and I own a cupcake shop in Tacoma. (Tacoma is a city in the state of Washington) Anyway, the point of this is that when you talk to my wife about how she comes up with a new seasonal gourmet cupcake flavor or what goes into all of the classic cupcakes...she doesn't think about it in terms of a recipe. I mean, there's a recipe now for the sake of consistency, but before there was a recipe for any one of these cupcakes there was an elaborate test baking phase where she made tiny adjustments...she understands the function of each ingredient in every cupcake.

Like, for any of you that don't know, the process of baking something is a really delicate science. This is something I had to learn the hard way...I mean for my whole life baking was very simple...it was just pulling a red box out of the cabinet, adding water and putting this brown mixture/paste into the oven...but you talk to my wife about this stuff...she is a mad scientist. But she's better than a mad scientist because instead of making beakers of weird smoking liquid, she makes these cupcakes that honestly make me contemplate obesity every day of my life.

And you talk to her about it and she understands everything. If a delicious cupcake is a chemistry experiment...she talks about things like how the eggs interact with the baking powder on this one flavor of cupcake...she'll talk about how and when to add certain ingredients...you know...where in the oven this particular flavor needs to cook to get the right dosage of heat at the right time. It's ridiculous.

Anyway the point of me wasting the last 60 seconds of your life with this long winded example is to illustrate the value of building a government from scratch. We're all born into a world where when it comes to government, there is a recipe book for us to look at. But by forcing ourselves to pretend as though we're stranded on an island building one of these recipes from scratch, by pretending that there isn't a recipe available to us...we not only have the opportunity of arriving at a customized personalized batch that we think is great, but by thinking about it in these fundamental terms we can better understand the role of each ingredient in these government recipes that were looking at in the future.

We're trying to become more like my wife making cupcakes and less like me making cupcakes...and if that's not enough of an incentive for you, you've never seen me make cupcakes.

So real quick, last episode...we all got aboard the Philosophize This cruise ship...our ship crashed into the side of the great pacific garbage patch and before we knew it we were hopelessly stranded on a desert island and forced to establish some ground rules. Now when we crash land on that island with no hope of rescue, there isn't a government in place. There's no police force or fire department or court system...life on that desert island during that interim between when our ship sunk and when we come to some sort of arrangement is the wild west for all intents and purposes. It's a situation that political philosophers call, "the state of nature." The state that things were in BEFORE humans made any of these arrangements to have a government. Pre-civilization.

Last episode we spent a lot of time talking about the giant differences... between how these political philosophers thought this state of nature played out...most notably...the differences between Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau. ...Hobbes thought the state of nature was a terrible state of constant war...everyone warring against everyone else...and Rousseau didn't agree. In fact, this was one of the biggest critiques Rousseau has against all of the political philosophers that came before him...that they are

dishonestly projecting their own biased, post-civilization views of what humans are... onto these pre-civilization humans who were in their more natural state and lived nothing like what Thomas Hobbes says they did.

Well what do you think the state of nature was like? Regardless of where you fall between Hobbes and Rousseau...you have to appreciate what Rousseau is doing here. He's questioning an assumption about human nature. Are humans inherently violent, selfish, brutish?... whatever adjective you want to use to describe them. This is a really interesting place to pause and think about human nature and how brilliant this critique by Rousseau is.

We've all heard people say it in today's world. Look at human history...it's just one war after another...it's human nature to be uncaring and selfish and to just conquer land at the expense of everyone around you. Well is it really fair to label that as "human nature"? Is it really fair to just brand that into the side of what it is to be a human? After all, when we look back at human history and see all of the terrible stuff...what are we really looking at? We're looking at the decisions of a very small handful of ambitious men making decisions at the top of civilizations during their respective time periods.

Now bear with me...its very easy for me to start sounding like a white knight here, and that is not my intention at all, I just think this is a really interesting thought experiment...how would human history look different if instead of men being at the helm of all of these societies...if instead women were in charge. If we were a matriarchal species. Would there be as much war? Would there be as much opportunistic exploitation?

I'm not even saying there wouldn't be...and you can replace women with any other subdivision of human beings. The point is...why is it fair to conflate the decisions of a few hundred ambitious rulers from history with human nature itself? I mean...if were talking

about what it means to be human...women are 50% of whatever that is. So when we think about what the nature of a human is...when we think about how we expect humans to act in the state of nature...we need to be careful of not doing what Rousseau thought other political philosophers were guilty of: painting "human nature" with too broad of a brush. Nonetheless, when our cruise ship crashes and we are all stranded on this island, this conversation doesn't really matter much. Because in the eyes of Rousseau, everybody listening to this has already been corrupted by society since birth. Nothing changes about the fact that we can imagine a world where it would be beneficial to make some sort of agreement where a third party insures certain things for us as citizens of this island.

And Rousseau thinks that no matter how hard we think about what that third party looks like...no matter how long we deliberate about what kind of government we're going to have, ultimately it is going to be one of three types. And keep in mind, Rousseau isn't saying that every government that has ever been created neatly falls into one of these three categories...there are tons of obvious examples that don't...governments that fall in between these three categories...governments that are a combination of two out of the three, but to Rousseau...every government is ultimately derived from either a Monarchy, an Aristocracy or a Democracy.

When all or most of the citizens of a society are what he calls "magistrates", the government is a democracy. When half of the citizens or less are magistrates, the government is an aristocracy. When there is only one supreme magistrate, the government is called a monarchy. So he's making a distinction...very similar to Aristotle before him...that the three ways we should think about how government is structured is a government by the many (democracy), government by the few, (Aristocracy) and government by one...Monarchy.

So its important to note that Rousseau doesn't think there is one end all, be all correct answer for what the best form of government is. But he does think that certain types of government lend themselves to certain situations. He gives several ground rules...generally he thinks that the more people you're dealing with, the fewer number of

people should be making all the decisions. So to put it simply he thinks that large societies are best off with a monarchy, medium sized states are best off with an aristocracy and small states are better off with a democracy...you know our hunter gatherer tribe of fifty people where every citizen votes on every meaningful issue. But just because Rousseau thinks that certain types of government lend themselves to certain types of societies, that doesn't mean he doesn't have a favorite form of government....and it DEFINITELY doesn't mean that when he's looking at these different options for how a government is structured that he doesn't see glaring problems with the way certain ones are designed.

Case in point: Democracy. For us on the island, now that we've decided that we NEED a system of government, our next task is to find out what it's going to look like...well what if we chose to have a democracy? What are the problems with that? What would Rousseau be warning us about if we chose a democracy as our form of government? Well, to put it short: he doesn't really like democracy. He thinks its one of these things that sounds great in theory but whenever its put into practice, things never really go that well. And let's all keep in mind before you start sending in the emails that Rousseau is not talking about democracy as most people think of it today...hes not talking about a system where we elect people to who sit on a panel and make decisions for us...he's talking about a system where the citizens themselves are the people sitting on the panel making the decisions. Most of if not all of them.

He says, "there has never been a true democracy, and there never will be." He gives a few reasons...one big issue he has is that simply by structuring society in this way... you are fighting an uphill battle from the start. He says that governments....by nature...always deviate towards having less people in charge than more people in charge.

If we lived in a world where no one was ambitious, or greedy or power hungry then there would be nothing to worry about, but as the world exists now, eventually that power that was originally spread across all of the citizens... will become funneled down into a smaller group of people and then a smaller group of people until eventually the democracy is either a complete sham or ceases to exist altogether. This is why he thinks it

is suited to smaller populations...it's not that Rousseau thinks democracy can't be implemented...its just a very volatile system of government once its in place.

Not to mention the fact, another big problem with a democracy to Rousseau is the fact that it doesn't do a very good job at accomplishing what HE thinks is one of the most important goals that a government should have: to maximize and insure the freedom of the citizens. Rousseau would say, sure it SOUNDS great that every citizen gets to be part of the decision making process...no one is ever going to feel like they're not included...but just think of what that means for you.

Is that REALLY what you want? Do you REALLY want to be a full time politician or a congressman ON TOP of having a full time job and a family and doing everything else you need to do to be a citizen of the government? Think about it on the island...do you really want to go out in the blistering sun all day collecting coconuts and firewood and trying to get enough food to survive for the day and then come back to your makeshift shack...you know this hovel that you've constructed...set down your work tools, do an about face...march on down to where we congregate to make the decisions on the island and put on your politician hat for the rest of the day...Is that the life you want?

Now the only reason I'm framing it this way is because Rousseau thinks, and we can understand where he's coming from, that if part of the reason we have this government to begin with is that we want a sort of freedom insurance...this design of a government doesn't leave us much freedom to work with when its all said and done.

Now on the other side of the spectrum is a monarchy....and it probably wont come as a surprise to you people that Rousseau doesn't like the idea of a Monarchy very much either. Just like a democracy...its not that it could NEVER work...its not that its impossible to imagine it being a good form of government for a period of time, On the surface its great...Oh look, one really smart, altruistic guy making all of the decisions! Talk about efficiency! There will never be any sort of bipartisan gridlock, executive power will run smoothly and quickly...things will always get done. But again, Rousseau thinks...its one of those things that sounds good in theory but when put into practice there's always problems that rear their ugly heads.

Again, if there weren't any ambitious, greedy or power hungry people in the world, this system of government may be perfect...but as long as you have an inordinate amount of power in the hands of one person...as long as what the government sees as best is restricted to what one, single person sees as best...you're setting yourself up for failure. Not only because that person might end up being a Hitler or a Stalin or a Mao, but also because their decision making is always going to be limited to one set of experiences. One guy can't be an expert on every subject...you can be an expert on one...MAYBE two if you're really smart...but if you ever run across anyone who always has the answer to any question you ask them...they're probably pretending and in desperate need of therapy. You know...the idea that a monarchy isn't the way to go probably isn't going to take much convincing of you during our time period, but it was a tougher sell during Rousseau's time. Just to run through a couple of his reasons for the sake of being comprehensive...Rousseau talks about how one guy can't do every job, so what he's going to have to do is appoint princes and officials and people to oversee all the various aspects of a kingdom, but he's appointing him with that limited set of experiences...and usually appointing people that promote HIS agenda, not necessarily the person that's the most qualified.

I'm sure we've all had a dead end job with terrible management that's given the promotion not to the most qualified person, but the person that goes along with whatever their plan is. Well what happens in that case? The company starts running less efficiently, people start resenting these "appointed officials" and whatever the function of the business is...it starts doing it worse than before. These are the kind of problems Rousseau thought were inevitable for a Monarchy...and to extend this example he also thought that because of this "ruler" dynamic ...a Monarchy is never going to have a clear vision or goal for any length of time. The reason why is because If the vision or goal is restricted to the will of ONE person with a crown on his head...when a NEW monarch takes the throne he is going to have a different agenda than the last guy...and then think of all the wasted effort during the last 50 years to try to enact the last kings agenda. It's a

mess...and we can easily imagine all of these things going wrong on the island. We're probably not electing a supreme leader to deal with everything for us and Rousseau does a really good job in helping us imagine what might go wrong.

For all these reasons and more, this is why Rousseau's favorite form of government would be an Aristocracy, a government by the few. Don't confuse this with how we typically use the word in modern times, where it might refer to a handful of rich or culturally elite people running the show...no...Rousseau would have been using the word Aristocracy the same way that the Greeks used it where it literally translates to "rule of the best". Or the rule by a handful of people who are the best to rule.

Now there are three types of Aristocracies to Rousseau, Natural Aristocracy which he paints as a sort of primitive form of government where the leaders of factions or a council of elders rules...A hereditary Aristocracy...the WORST form of an aristocracy to Rousseau because the rulers consist of the offspring of any one given family...not much explanation needed there...i mean there's no merit involved there at all...just imagine getting an organ transplant by the surgeon's son who never went to medical school...oh well his DAD was a good surgeon! He's gotta be great too!

The best kind of Aristocracy is the third kind...an elective aristocracy. The government by the few where those few...are elected by the citizens. To Rousseau there is too much of an upside here to ignore.

Think about it...The population can still all collectively agree upon laws and a vision that doesn't change just because some Monarch leaves office...they can still elect a group of people to rule for them instead of forcing them to spend all their time being a politician...and the best part of all...all the ambitious, greedy or power hungry people aren't going to last very long in government because the citizens will see who they are and boot them out of office...IT'S PERFECT!

Well, it's far from perfect. Even THAT system of government relies on a lot of things that

are far from guarantees. Not the least of which is that it relies on a properly educated populace. This is a tremendous obstacle...for any system of government.

Like let's say we have an elective Aristocracy on our island and I'm elected to oversee some sort of elaborate coconut production that we have going on...what if I'm going behind everybody's back? What if I'm making back room deals with other people on the island where we take one out of every ten coconuts and hoard it in a cave as our own personal stash...just in case if we can't find any more food? Or because I want to use those coconut resources to bribe people or trade for other things that make me more powerful?

The point is...I'm just as ambitious or greedy or power hungry as someone in another form of government...I'm just more covert about it. Yeah, theoretically there is a system in place for the citizens to kick me out of office if they ever find out about this stuff...but what is forcing them to investigate me? If I'm really good at hiding my corruption and greed...there's never going to be a majority that oppose me...there's never be enough people that know the truth about me to rally together and kick me out of office. Not to mention, if Aristocracy directly translates to "rule of the best"...that's kind of presumptuous don't you think?

I mean, how do we really know that we are getting the best people for the job in office?

The person that we elect as the "best" really is just a representation of who the population THINKS is the best at the time of the election...which is fine, but it's certainly not fool proof.

I mean, we've all seen someone elected to office at some level of government that we think is incompetent...or corrupt...or doing it for the wrong reasons. That's because even though we have the ability to elect the best people...every decision... about who we think is the best for the job is based on the information that is available to the population at large... and its contingent on the fact that the people voting are truly working hard to educate themselves.

Think about it...even on a deserted island you need to filter information...you need to try

to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to the information you're getting about the people that you're electing to govern. There's gonna be gossip. There's gonna be biases. There's gonna be misinformation...conjecture...jealously...agendas. If you're thinking about voting for me to be in charge of the coconut production...one person says I'm trustworthy...another says I'm the devil incarnate and a secret member of the KGB...who do you trust? How can you know who to trust? Let's think about the challenges we face when choosing this elective aristocracy as our form of government on our island.

This task is difficult enough on a small island with a few thousand people...and now consider it in the context of our modern world. Think of the access to information that we all have. For any political issue that you could possibly think of...no matter how confident you are...no matter how many statistics you can point to...no matter how much history reinforces what you think the correct decision is...in today's day and age you face a unique challenge. You can go on Google and find hundreds of people that are just as confident as you are while arguing the other side of the issue...and they point to different statistics and different moments in history to strengthen their point.

Now don't misunderstand me here...that doesn't mean that both positions are equally valid...obviously that's ridiculous...but what it does do is cloud the waters and make it a lot more difficult..or at least time consuming to know what the truth is. So what people end up doing, and on one hand you cant really blame them for it...is deem one source or a handful of sources as authoritative...and trust them.

Fox news, MSNBC...just a large scale example of what I'm talking aboutthey both have a very clear agenda that they're peddling that isn't really based on reality on realities terms. But let's say you make the case that you've found a collection of sources that inform you about political events that are COMPLETELY unbiased, which would be very difficult if not impossible...they are still giving you a completely unbiased account of only one piece of the truth. A facsimile of the truth.

The reason why is because... No one source can possibly know everything there is to

know about a single issue. And that's not only because they are limited as human beings with a finite number of experiences and flawed senses, but also because of things that aren't their fault at all. What they're telling you could be limited because certain pieces of information are just not made available to the public. You know...just an example...let's say there's some new crisis afoot...look I know this is going to take a strong imagination...but let's pretend the United States is thinking about taking military action somewhere...boots on the ground...there's a presidential election coming up and you want to educate yourself on this issue and make sure that you're choosing the right guy with the right plan at the right time for this crisis our nation is going to have to face. Well even if you spent every second of your life educating yourself on this crisis...even if your TV screen was a constant loop of Bill O'reilly...Rachel Maddow...Al Jazeera...even if you went online and read dozens of blogs and articles and opinion pieces and you consumed every PIXEL of content available on the issue. You would be the educated guy in your office. You would be the most educated guy in your city...but you would still only have... a solid idea of the information that is available to the public. You know...we talk about the veil of perception...this is the veil of classification. This information is classified...all of the Intel...all of the stuff they see on satellites...the decades of history of what is actually said behind the scenes when we've made agreements... You can't possibly know any of this stuff...yet...you are the most qualified to be voting and everyone around you watched a 30 minute special on Bill O'reilly last night and feel super confident that they know the right guy for the job is and exactly the plan that needs to be put in place.

Now this may seem like a tangent but it all comes back full circle. Rousseau would warn us on our island about the potential downfalls of a democracy and a monarchy, but even his favorite form of government, the elective aristocracy is riddled with problems...one of the most glaring is this problem of educating the populace. If we allow the average citizen to vote and elect members of this aristocracy, we better hope that a world exists where those citizens ...at LEAST...have access to education. And as we just pointed out...even if we give those citizens education...the problems don't stop there. It starts to raise the

question of whether the average citizen is the right person to determine who their leaders are.

I always say that voting for president in today's world is like choosing your wife by looking at two online dating profiles that were written by their mothers. The online dating profiles represent the only information we have to work with...things like articles or news reports...and the mothers that have an obvious bias in one direction are people like Fox News...MSNBC.

The point is...when it comes to the structure of government...we are by no means at any sort of evolutionary end point here...but we still have to choose one for our island. And in keeping with Rousseau...let's move ahead with caution. Let's make our island government an Elective Aristocracy and keep in mind the strengths and weaknesses. Because as we continue to add layers to our new society and it becomes increasingly complex, our understanding the function of each ingredient in this cupcake recipe is going to make a big difference. Thank you for listening...I'll talk to you next time.

Rousseau pt. 3 - The General Will

Episode #047

This is a transcript of episode #047 on The General Will. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So our ship crashed.

We're on an island with no hope of rescue. We've decided that having a government is more beneficial than NOT having a government, and we've decided that the structure of the government is going to be Rousseau's favorite kind: the elective Aristocracy. Now what? Well to answer that question, I want to ask you a question. When was the last time you went to Ikea? I'm serious...when was the last time you waddled through that giant...maze that they make you go through? It's like being a rat in a maze, but instead of looking for cheese you're looking for a cheap coffee table. You know...you sit down in all those different pre-constructed living rooms and you imagine yourself, if only for a moment, having a different life...one where you felt alive again. The reason I'm asking is because whenever you buy one of these cheap coffee tables they come with two things: the parts you need to build the thing...and the instructions on how to put it together...you know they don't use any words because they don't want to print a different set of instructions for every language, so they try to harness a universal language across all humans and apparently that language uses a lot of arrows and happy faces. The point is, we've talked about the different parts of government...the coffee table comes with wood, screws, an Allen wrench, all the things you'd need to build it. We've talked about how the different parts of government are assembled...the coffee table comes with the universal picture instruction manual. But nothing in the coffee table package tells you what the function of your coffee table should be. Nobody at Ikea is going to tell you what to do with your coffee table once you've assembled all the parts. And if the function of a coffee table is to hold coasters and novelty books that no one reads...what is the function of our

island government? What the heck do we want this thing to do for us? Thomas Hobbes said it was to maintain order. John Locke said it was to protect our natural rights of life, liberty and property...and Rousseau said it was to serve the general will of the people....now...at first glance it may seem pretty obvious what he means here. Oh, general will...that just means it's the government's job to do what everyone wants them to do...right? Well...it's not that simple. And really, what did you expect from philosophy? Especially when it comes down to so many moving parts...I mean think about it. It's hard enough to try to take into account the thoughts of every single citizen equally...but then from there to try to distill it down into one thing the government can act upon...i mean come on! That's just ASKING for every philosopher and their mom to try to criticize you...and that's exactly what happened. This concept of what the general will is and how to adequately arrive at... it is one of the most commented on things in the history of political philosophy...and there's far from a clear answer when it comes to knowing exactly what Rousseau was talking about. It can even at times be downright confusing. But by looking at the different arguments and by understanding what makes it confusing, we can all arrive at a solid understanding of what the general will is...ALBEIT an imperfect understanding, but a better understanding than most people and definitely a better understanding than someone who claims to KNOW for certain ...what Rousseau was talking about in the 1700's. So to get started...There's not just one thing that's unclear about Rousseau's concept of the "general will". Now, as I said, this is one of the most commented on things you could find from Rousseau...and once everybody said their piece, if you wanted to identify one of the big areas of confusion about defining the general will...it wouldn't be a bad place to start to ask the question: if what we're trying to do is take the individual wills of all the individual citizens and arrive at the common ground between them all...which one of their "wills" should we be looking at? Rousseau talks about it at length. Think about it...people are complicated. We don't just identify our self as an individual... and then ignore everything outside of that. Okay...people have multiple causes that are important to them that might influence what they think they want from the government. Let's think about it in terms of our island. Aside from

everything else...every person on this island identifies themselves as a person...an individual...with needs and wants. This personal will, if they were naive enough to allow it to...could shade what they think they want from their government. For example, any one person on our island could say...okay...you know what I want from MY government? I want to do nothing. I want there to be zero taxes. I want to never have to contribute to society in any way. I want my government to insure that I never have to work and that I will be constantly entertained for every second of my life. I want them to assign me twelve people...we'll call them my disciples...twelve people that follow me around and do everything for me...they fan me with palm leaves...they massage my feet...they feed me...they build a better shelter for me...they collect coconuts for me...that's what I want from my government. Well this is an extreme case, but you get the point. We can all imagine how someone thinking in terms of only themselves... could be led to expect things of their government that don't necessarily correspond with the common good. I mean, what an example of something that would be a massive expenditure of government resources on something that would only really benefit that one person, and stand to hurt others. This is important because the second will that Rousseau thinks we can think on behalf of...the second way someone can identify themselves that would affect what they expect from their government...is by identifying themselves as one part of the whole society. One citizen that wants the government to do what's best for the collective body...a citizen that sets aside their own personal, selfish desires so that instead there can be a set of laws that allow all the different parts of this whole... to have an equal amount of freedom. Now...in an ideal world...this is how everyone would think...but Rousseau says to expect people to be wise enough to always realize that this is the best way to think about your relationship to the state is just a waste of time. In the same way people can identify their will with that of everyone in a society...they can also attach themselves to other groups. You know...they can become a single-issue voter...they can champion the cause of anti-gay marriage...they can champion the cause of food-stamps for the poor...they can attach themselves to a particular company that they work for or even...a rival state. The point is...with all these different potential "wills"

hanging in the balance...it becomes very difficult for individual citizens to come together as single pieces of an assembly and arrive at a set of laws that treat everybody equally. In other words...it's tough for us as admittedly...flawed human beings...with biases and agendas to arrive at a set of laws that ACTUALLY reflect the general will. This is something that's extremely important for us to understand...the set of laws that we agree upon on the island are a reflection of the general will of the people. It's not hard to imagine on our island... how differing values and priorities might lead to laws that unfairly restrict one person...or one group of people. And this is a problem to Rousseau. you know... He says that in order for it to truly be considered the "general will" it must "come from all and apply to all"...but this is much easier said than done. Even if we arrive at a place where no one group is being unfairly scrutinized...this can work going the other direction too...we have to create a set of laws that don't unfairly benefit one group of people over another....which would be easy in the infant stages of a society...like our island government...but you can imagine how much more difficult that becomes the more layers you add to this society...the more complex and diverse this society gets. Like...as we talked about a couple episodes ago...Rousseau thinks that even something as simple as private property is impossible to make equal laws about. Because as long as one of the things we want our government to do for us is protect our private property rights...that will always unequally benefit people that have more property. Much of the confusion between commentators comes down to the question: well how do we arrive at what Rousseau calls the general will? And they usually think about it in one of two ways. These two ways have become known to history as...should we think of it as the "democratic" general will or the "transcendental" general will...and let me explain what they mean by both. So one one hand...the general will could be what results from when all the citizens come together in some sort of assembly....you know we all congregate on our island...we argue, we talk about priorities...we talk about values and we come to some sort of agreement about what we want that it's the government's job to execute. This is known as the "democratic" general will. On the other hand, the general will could be something a little more abstract. You know...exterior to what any one person actually

wants from the government...you could make an argument that there is some general will that is transcendent of anything we could ever arrive at in an assembly. You know for example, the citizens of a state could all come together and decide that they don't want to pay a tax of .25 cents for every gallon of gas they buy, but paying that tax might ultimately be better for the common good. Which general will was Rousseau referring to? Another thing that's confusing about THIS interpretation of the general will...who's job is it to determine what the general will is? Who decides what's best for the common good? If you think the general will is not democratically arrived at through an assembly of people, and that it's actually some transcendent thing, whose the guy or gal that determines what that thing is? Because it's not always clear who that person is and we've tried a lot different things throughout history. Is it the strongest person who should decide? Is it the government itself? Is it the cultural elite or rich people? Is it famous celebrities? Well a lot of what makes this debate confusing is still up in the air, and we're not going to get to the bottom of it in this episode, but most commentators agree on one thing: that with the correct restrictions and operating within the correct conditions...it stands to reason that citizens will be able to come together, discuss priorities and arrive at a set of laws that reflect the general will. Again...this is important...the laws are a reflection of the general will. On our island... the laws that we put in place are a representation of what we all collectively want from our government. And in that way...we can have a working knowledge of the general will by thinking of it as: A consensus among the people about what we should do when it comes to our political, economic and social systems. So what is the government? The government is just a company that we're commissioning to carry out the general will. Really, try to think about it in that way, cause it's really easy for us to look at the government as this secretive...powerful entity that is kind of like our parents. This faceless enforcer that we really have no right to question...our job is to fall in line with the rules that it gives us...or else. But just for a second, think about the government like it is a company that we're paying to do something for us. In the same way that you pay Dairy Queen to make you delicious ice-cream...in the same way you pay Home Depot to get you home

improvement supplies...you pay the government to enact the general will. The reason this is an important way to think about things is because...just how Dairy Queen has to compete with places like Burger King and McDonalds and Wendy's...the government has to compete with people too. Not internally....in fact that may be the biggest criticism of government is that there isn't another government down the street you can go to if you don't like this one...what I mean is that we exist in a world where every country is made up of a giant population of people that have basically commissioned a company to carry out the general will of the people. Spain has a company carrying out THEIR general will. England has a company carrying out theirs. Iran, Iraq, Russia, China, Zimbabwe...the United States...we all have a company...and sometimes the general will of these countries...the tasks these companies are commissioned to carry out...sometimes they don't correspond with each other. Sometimes the consensus of the people of France when it comes to their political, economic and social systems doesn't mesh very well with what another country wants. Sometimes it creates tension. Sometimes difficult decisions need to be made. In fact, just think about something for a second. COMPLETELY setting aside how difficult of a task it is to arrive at what the general will of a given society is...and understanding the fact that you're looking at a moving target...i mean the general will of a society is constantly changing...even if the government knew EXACTLY what the general will was, they would still have to agree upon a plan to get there. If part of the general will is to be as peaceful a nation as we can possibly be...there are many different ways to arrive at the same destination...for example you can create a climate of peace because you're bigger and stronger than everyone so no one wants to mess with you...or you can be peaceful by just agreeing with anything any country tries to do. This is just one example, but you can see that defining the general will is only the first step...then you have to agree on what path to get there. But even THAT'S not the end of it, because even if you could agree upon which path to take to get there...there are still dozens if not hundreds of options of exactly how you're going to execute that path. I'd compare it to taking a road trip. Imagine everyone in the United States on a giant truck and the president is in the drivers seat. Even if they could determine where on the map we

wanted to go...let's say everyone wants to go to Pittsburgh...he'd still have to argue with everyone about which road to take to get there. One guy says to take the interstate...another person says to take the surface streets...one person knows a shortcut! Someone else says that shortcut goes through the mountains and is dangerous! Let's say they decide were taking the interstate...we still have to decide what sort of travel schedule were on...when do we sleep? how fast do we drive? Are we even driving at all...or should we walk? This example is not to be obnoxious...it's just to illustrate the mountain of choices and arguments that go into even executing a single thread in this tapestry known as the general will. I would never want to be at the head of one of these companies whose job it is to execute the general will. I mean...just consider for a second the kinds of decisions that these people need to make on a daily basis....even stuff that seems really easy is enough to drive me, personally into madness. Take something like the Iraq War... Widely considered to be a political blunder. Even if you agree with everything that was done and think it was fully justifiable...you have to acknowledge that there is a large group of people that disagree with you. A group of people that say that history will look back on the United States invading Iraq in 2003 and think that it was a horrendous mistake in foreign policy...you know...it created this power vacuum and now all this stuffs going on... Well how bout a quick thought experiment. What if...100 years from now...something happens where it turns out the Iraq war was the greatest political chess move that ever happened. You know...the dominoes that were set in motion because of the Iraq War eventually made possible something that ushered in 10,000 years of world peace...obviously corresponding perfectly with the general will of the united states? What then? Now I'm not justifying these actions by saying that something good MAY happen down the line...I'm not saying it would have been planned...I'm not saying George Bush is like the Rain man and he was 25 steps ahead of anyone else when he made the decision to do it...what I'm saying is that the decisions that we make today on behalf of the General will don't just affect us today...or tomorrow or even a year from now...but centuries. If part of the general will is to protect the united states and it's allies...because in modern times you need allies to win any sort of major war...what

happens when Britain is attacked? What is it like to be at the top of one of these companies that we've commissioned to carry out the general will? At what point is stepping in militarily going to yield more peace in the long term than staying out of it would have? Will it jeopardize our relationship with any other countries? What are the economic implications of this 10, 20 100 years down the line? You can just imagine an ENDLESS decision tree that these people have to take into account...an endless number of scenarios...if this happens and they respond that way...then we do this.. and they're doing all of this with a single goal in mind: the common good. what is the absolute best decision we can make that promotes the general will? By the way...these problems are not just on a global scale when we're dealing with the threat of war...these things happen domestically all the time...for example: the illegal immigration debate. On one hand you have the human side of it...how horrible is it that by no fault of this person...this person didn't have a choice...simply by virtue of being born on one side of an arbitrary line in the sand that we drew 200 years ago...this person will live a completely different life than someone born 100 feet away on the other side of this line. Across the board they will have fewer and worse opportunities available to them simply because they were born 100 feet in the wrong direction. It's terrible...and this fact leads certain people to advocate an open borders policy. You know...who are we to tell someone where they can or can't live like we OWN THE EARTH or something? These people say if someone wants to live here...let them live here! We can totally see where these people are coming from...and how could the government be mad at them? They're compassionate people! But it's also easy to see the governments side of an open borders policy. You know...when we think of the government as just a company that we've commissioned to do a job for us...what are they going to do to make sure the job gets done? What would any of you guys do? If the government has ever actually considered a policy of completely open borders...I can imagine them as an entity commissioned to do a job going back and looking at history. Finding examples of governments that have been rich and in turn...given out a lot of stuff for free to its citizens. Then they look to see if that combined with having a lax immigration policy has ever led to problems down the road. Can you give citizenship to

every single person that wants it? They probably look around them and see that every developed country has criteria that someone has to meet before they're granted citizenship. Why is that the case? We can see them having these sorts of discussions saying look, we have one job that was assigned to us...and our choices don't necessarily need to make everyone in the entire world happy...ultimately its the general will we're concerned with. Again, the point of all this is not to say that its impossible to make these decisions...its not to say that we shouldn't be making these decisions. It's just to help us understand the task at hand. The general will, whatever that thing is, is a tough thing to get a hold of...and even if you can grab a hold of it...you gotta agree upon a path to get there...you have to choose from all the options and find the best strategy to execute that path... and also consider a million different other factors that might make your decision a bad one in the long run. Let's all consider the monumental task that we ask of our government. This collection of people...this company that we've commissioned to do this job for us. Whether we like it or not...we live in a world of competing nation-states. Most of the time we get along, but sometimes the goals of one nation-state don't correspond with another...and difficult decisions need to be made. This is just...reality. All I'm saying, is that when it comes to being one of the people making the decisions on our island, I would NEVER want to be one of those people. To be at the top of this company that we've commissioned...you have to be a pretty incredible person if you're doing your job properly. We're going to need to work really hard on our island.. to find a collection of the most incredible people that we got, because if we take that task lightly... we could easily end up dead. Think of how much is at stake on the island, these people are going to be making the decisions while our lives hang in the balance. And the most terrifying part of all...is that this isn't just a thought experiment. It's easy to be cavalier about this situation when were playing make believe about being stranded on an island, but back in reality are things really different? Think about the way that we elect leaders in today's world: You look around you and you see so many single issue voters...so many people voting based on about thirty minutes of actual research...you look at the direct connection between campaign advertising dollars spent vs elections won...you know your

character doesn't need to have merit at all...as long as you can run more ads than your opponent...all it takes is a commercial to influence who humans vote for. You see people voting for people because of what letter is next to the persons name...or what gender they are...or what ethnic background they're from...that's my favorite: YOUR ancestors had sex in a similar geographic proximity to MY ancestors. I like you! You must be the right kind of person to be making these massive decisions on behalf of the entire population. Here's the keys to the entire civilization. Here's the keys to the wealth of our nation. And on that note I will leave you until next time when we talk about an economist that would have a lot to say about this island nation that we're building that finally has a government. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Adam Smith pt. 1 - Specialization

Episode #048

This is a transcript of episode #048 on Specialization. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So, funny story. I was at a sports bar the other day and embarrassed myself. You know...I walked into the place...loud music...a hundred plus TVs plastering the walls...all playing different sports games...and the place was completely empty. Like, I was truly the ONLY guy in the entire bar...and I walk up to the counter and I sit down and a nice gentleman behind the counter greets me... And I don't know...I didn't realize it as I was doing it...but I guess as I was soaking in this really crazy atmosphere I was looking around and smiling. And the bartender guy comes up to me and he says something like, Hey look at this guy! He's feelin' good right now! Why you smilin' man? I said, I can't really think of a good reason NOT to be smiling right now. I'm happy! And he says, why are you happy? I say back...because I'm talking to you right now in this wonderful place. And he get's this serious look on his face and he leans in and says, but no, really...WHY are you happy? Now at this point I'm like...oh my god. This guy's a philosopher! This is the Socrates of the Buffalo Wild Wings! He finds people, asks them why they're happy and then tries to really get to the bottom of what makes them grateful to be alive! I like this guy...and at this point I decide to go into the more honest, FULL answer cause I think this guy isn't satisfied with my disingenuous, non-philosophical answer. So I give him it. I say, you know what it is? I feel like a King right now. In fact, I feel like one of the most privileged kings that has ever lived in the history of man. I just look at my life and I compare what I have at my disposal with what every other generation of humans have had at their disposal and It's impossible not to be smiling. I mean think about it in the context of this one piece of my day. I drove my giant metal horse down here...it took me five minutes. Except it has the power of 200 horses and I can go anywhere I want on a moments

notice. I come here to your fine establishment that is well-lit, and safe, and clean and a servant takes my request for what my professional chef is going to prepare for my cheat meal that week. By the way, there's SUCH an abundance of high calorie, professionally prepared food around me that I have to limit myself to one meal a week so that I don't eat myself to death. I sit here waiting for my chef-prepared food and I am constantly entertained by these magic boxes all around. Think about it: 500 channels all competing for my attention, they have a team of people...constantly honing their programming, fine tuning things trying to create the best product they possibly can... so that I watch THEIR channel instead of the other 499 channels...and if I'm bored of these I can go on the internet...an ENDLESS SEA of entertainment competing for my eyeballs. Youtube videos, blogs, podcasts all vying for my attention. And right now, my newest friend, I've chosen to watch sports. I don't even watch sports that much...and despite that...this guy on the TV has been killing himself ALL WEEK LONG for my benefit. This guy's been running laps, lifting weights and pushing his body to it's extreme all week during practice to get to a place where he can show up on Saturday and not just try to perform well...but try to put on the BEST PERFORMANCE he's ever put on in his life...He's going to try to do SUPER HUMAN things so that I will be entertained. So I'm happy and I'm smiling because I feel like a King right now. I'm not rich by society's standards, and yet all of this stuff is available to me on a moments notice. I can't think of a single King from human history that wouldn't trade lives with me in a heartbeat. That's why I'm happy. And the guy says back to me, Yeah...I've heard that you can take like 500 dollars and live like a King for a day in a country like Nicaragua. Well in the moment I felt like taking my own life. I felt like beating my head into the granite bar until I was a senseless vegetable in the hospital. But it was all my fault. This guy just wanted to have a normal conversation...I'm the one that assumed he wanted to hear all the twisted thoughts going through my head in a given moment. This guy may not have been interested, but the sentiment of what I'm saying here is definitely not going to be lost on my closest friends. You guys. In fact, what I'm talking about here is something that the famous economist Adam Smith would have a lot to say about. Adam Smith is one of these enlightenment age philosophers that made

his name in the field of economics. Now, just how the enlightenment as a whole is characterized by a fundamental questioning of assumptions that we had made in the past about different elements of living, You know...Rousseau questions government...Voltaire questions the churches moral authority...etc...Adam Smith is the most famous guy in this period that tackled the field of economics. Now, the conventional wisdom that Adam Smith is calling into question here in the area of economics...is what is known today as Mercantilism. We're going to be talking a lot about Mercantilism in the next episode of the podcast when we talk about what it means to be a wealthy nation...were going to apply it to our society that we're building...while stranded on an island...but today we're going to be talking about what it means to be a wealthy person. What does it mean to be a wealthy person? How do you measure wealth? Ideally, I think we'd all agree that if we were creating a society...one thing we might want to at least consider is a strategy for creating as many wealthy people as we possibly can. So how do we do it best? You know it's funny, when most of us think of wealth...we think of it in terms of how much money someone has in the bank...or what their net-worth is if you combined all their assets. But is some dollar figure like that really a complete way of assessing wealth? Now I'm not saying the dollar figure doesn't matter at all...it certainly DOES matter...all I'm saying is that this idea of wealth is a big topic and by only looking at the dollar figure, you're only looking at one little piece of this discussion. Maybe a good place to start the discussion is to ask the question: What does \$1 buy you in today's world? Maybe the better way of looking at it so it translates well across different time periods is ask the question what do you get for one hour of work today, as opposed to fifty years ago. 100 years ago. 200 years ago. This is how things work: we trade hours of our work for money. We use this money to buy things that we want, but how wealthy we consider ourselves..is directly related to how much that money buys us. You know, I'm sure we've all heard the example...well you have a million dollars and I have a cheeseburger...if we're stranded on a desert island with nothing to spend money on, who is richer? Let's look at one example. One of the things we want to spend our money on is light. We want our house to be well lit so that we can actually do things...and most importantly you don't want to be walking through your

house in the dark and stub your toe on a chair or an end table...it hurts. Let's look back to the year 1800. In the year 1800 the primary means if you wanted to conjure up some light was a candle. If you wanted to buy a candle from the store...that burned and created one hour of light for you in the year 1800, one hour of light to read your old English philosophical text...that candle would cost you the equivalent of six hours of your work. Now just 80 years later in the 1880's...with the advent of the kerosene lamp making the conjuring of light much more efficient, to get that exact same hour of light to read your 1880's Victorian era magazine would cost you the equivalent of 15 minutes of work. In the 1950's, one hour of light took you eight seconds to earn and in the twenty first century you earn what you need to earn to conjure up one hour of light in just over half a second. In 200 years, the efficiency of your work hours in this small area has improved by 43,200 times. Really, this whole situation doesn't really matter as far as the average person is concerned. Not many people think about their level of wealth in terms of how it compares to the way people lived 200 years ago...they think about how they stack up against everybody else in modern times, their friends...neighbors. If everybody had a castle in modern times, it would be common for people to be complaining that they only have a castle and not a helicopter pad like their next door neighbor. But it's interesting to ask: why does this dynamic exist? In the area of producing light...why are we 43,200 times wealthier than someone living 200 years ago? There are a number of reasons but two of the biggest are technological innovation...you know over the years we've just invented better and better ways of generating light...and this has been done by people who specialize in the field of light generation...if that's what you want to call it. Technological innovation and specialization. These two things are intertwined. ...People specializing in a certain field leads to technological innovation...and then the people that specialize in this new innovation create NEW technological innovations. It's a vicious cycle...but a cycle that makes living as an average citizen in the 21st century better than living like a monarch did in the year 1800. And this specialization and the enormously beneficial effects it has on society is something that Adam Smith talks about at length. He uses the example of pins. Not a pen that you write with...a metal pin that you use to

sew stuff and stab people...whatever you do with a pin. He says that before humans began specializing in stuff we were doing things REALLY inefficiently. He gives the example of one guy...you know...if one guy decides he's setting out today to make a bunch of pins for his family. That guy has an absolutely giant task ahead of him. Adam Smith talks about how even when we consider something that seems as basic and simple as a pin there are multiple different steps to making it. You gotta lay out the strip of metal. You gotta cut the pin down to size. You gotta sharpen the pin. You gotta buff the pin down to something shiny that isn't going to create friction when you're sewing. You gotta poke the hole at the top of the pin. Adam Smith lays out over a dozen steps that go into the making just one single pin...and if this one single guy spends his day making pins...Adam Smith says he'd be lucky to complete even ONE pin. Think of all the transition time. Think of how inefficiently he's doing all the steps. Think of all the mistakes he stands to make or the unrefined system that he's using on any one step. I mean, we can all relate to what Adam Smith is talking about here. Spend a day trying to make anything around your house and you'll see what I'm saying. You don't make spoons for a living. For you to try to do all the stuff associated with spoon making by yourself...is just an inefficient use of your time, and if this seems obvious to you now, it wasn't back in the time of Adam Smith. He offers an alternative to having one guy spend his entire day trying to make pins... by looking at a pin making factory. An operation that dedicates each day specializing in pins. Instead of one person doing all the steps themselves, a different person would specialize in each of the different steps. One person would specialize in laying out the metal, one person would specialize in cutting the metal, one person would specialize in putting the little hole in the top. You guys get the point. Adam Smith says that by his estimation, while the single guy making pins.. only makes one pin per day...this team of specialists...when humans are working together..could make almost 50,000 pins in a day. And when you look at it that way...the potential benefits to growing society are just obvious. Think about it in terms of our growing society...our island. How do we want to do things? Well, one option is to have a bunch of people going at it alone. Thousands of individual, subsistent people all providing for themselves and

whenever they need anything to make their lives more livable, they have to make it themselves. Because these people have to make everything and can never specialize in making any one thing, what they end up with is a relegated version of everything...at least when compared to what they could have if the society adopted an attitude of specialization. I'd compare it to a Swiss Army Knife. Like, when you have one person that makes a knife and a nail file and a corkscrew and a GPS machine and all the stuff that comes on one of those things...you could just buy a good knife from somebody that makes knives and a good nail file from someone that makes nail files, but instead you get a mediocre knife, a bad nail file and those little scissors that...Who are these Swiss army people and do they really think anyone has ever used those scissors for anything? Have you ever seen those. Like what am I...am I giving haircuts to insects or something? Why do I need these little scissors? My point is, life pre and post specialization is a very different place. What if instead of living individual, subsistent lifestyles on this island we all find something that we think is going to be useful for everyone and specialize in making it? And throughout this process of specializing in making something... you're going to develop new systems and new technology that makes your job of creating this thing better designed and more efficient. Eventually, you have a stockpile of these things that you make...that are useful to everyone in society... and you go around trading for the stuff that OTHER people specialized in, which in turn will be created with a better design, more efficiency and a higher quality than you could do if you did it yourself. This is all very awesome and very straightforward, but probably the MOST awesome and revolutionary thing about this small section of Adam Smith's thought, is that it creates that vicious cycle that we were talking about. Think about it, people are willingly living their lives each day...improving the world that we live in...not because they're Gandhi or some particularly altruistic person or because a King is forcing them to... but out of their own self-interest! This was MASSIVE at the time. Political philosophers before this time talked all the time about what the duty of a citizen was to their country. Part of this duty, historically, was always to quell their vices. You know, if you want to indulge in too much of any one kind of pleasure, you owe it to your fellow citizens and country, as one cog in

this giant machine...to dial it back a bit. For example, you may love bread. You may want to eat 100 loaves of bread in a day. But that might not be the best thing for society. When you go to the bakery and do your best impression of the cookie monster and eat 100 loaves of bread, there may not be enough bread for the rest of the people that need to eat that day. But in Adam Smith's new way of looking at things, people's vices can actually serve to benefit society as a whole. This was giant. For example, what if this person loves bread so much that they decide to specialize in bread making. What if they want to find a way to create a bread surplus so that they can still have their 100 loaves of bread a day while everyone else gets theirs too? And this person takes their bread really seriously...they only want the softest, tastiest bread with the perfect golden brown crust and their new system makes that a reality on every single loaf? The point is: there's a self interested motivation there for improving bread production and it has nothing to do with waiting around for some altruistic person to build a better mousetrap. That strange vice that you have for eating mice is the thing that motivates you to build the better mousetrap. And this is a simple but crucial shift to Adam Smith. He talks about bargains. He famously said that Man is an animal that makes bargains...and what he means by that is that it is a uniquely human characteristic to trade useful things for other useful things. I mean, you don't see zebras trading grass or beavers trading supplies for building their dams. No, it is a HUMAN characteristic to make bargains...and one of the most common tactics that we use to try to get what we want from the other person is by appealing to their self-interest. You know, you say here's the reason why it benefits you greatly to make this deal with me. Now note the distinction here...we aren't begging this person to give us what we want by appealing to their altruism. We aren't asking them to make this bargain because it would be a really nice thing for you to do for me and it would make my day... We tell them that the way they can have this thing that they want is to give you what you want. And this process, while done on a small scale with these individual transactions, is simultaneously being done on a large scale with society. We don't wait around for some knight in shining armor to create the iPhone for us... you know...I'm doing this so that people can text each other and finally be happy! No, Steve Jobs builds a

team of people that creates the iPhone for self-interested reasons...whatever reason it may be...maybe he wanted glory...maybe he wanted to go down in history as someone that drastically improved the lives of billions of people. Who knows...and Adam Smith's point is who cares? His vice of wanting to be put down in the annals of history ultimately is a great thing for everyone. As humans, as soon as we realized that we could make these bargains with each other that are in the self-interest of both parties involved...that led to a massive change. Because now, every single person doesn't need to be self-sufficient. So what does it mean to be a wealthy person? Let's go back to the beginning of the episode with my overly-sanctimonious proclamation that I made at the alter of Buffalo Wild Wings to the bartender. This long explanation for why I'm happy, referencing all this stuff...is honestly just a love sonnet written to Adam Smith's writing on the benefits of specialization and these self-interested bargains that humans make. Think about it: one of the things I talked about was the professional sports player...this guy that spends his days running laps, eating a perfectly clean diet and pushing his body to it's physical limits simply so that I can sit down in my modern day Colosseum and be "entertained" by the show he's putting on for me. Well, in reality, that's not what's happening at all. This guy doesn't even know who I am...couldn't care less about me. The reason HE'S doing all this stuff is because it's in his self-interest to. Maybe he loves his job...he loves playing the game. Maybe he is doing it because he likes the idea of making 20 million dollars a year. Maybe he's doing it to etch his name in the sports history books and become immortalized as a star. There are a lot of reasons why he could be doing it, but effectively...to me...it doesn't matter. I'm still living the life of a King that has people training all day every day to put on a show for me at the end of the week. In fact, I would say the show that self-interest and specialization produces is actually much better than anything a King could get. Let's consider the alternative. Let's say I was a ruthless monarch in the 1500's and I could somehow gaze into the future and see the life that Stephen West has in the year 2015...and I decide that I too want a bunch of people doing a grueling training regimen so that I have a show to watch on the weekend. Let's say that as King, I take 1500 people, force them to train all week long and I call this group of

people the NFL. I'm still getting a vastly inferior product than what we're getting in 2015. First of all, they have no motivation to push their bodies to the absolute max...when you remove the meritocracy of professional sports there's no reason for them to try as hard as they can, I mean why risk long term injury? They aren't going to like what they're doing...that's going to shine through. The game is just going to be less exciting all around. Consider for a second just how incredible it is that not only do we get a better product in 2015, but these professional athletes aren't doing this job because they're forced to...or because they are altruistic...you know...competing because they're nice guys that want society to have something to entertain them. We don't have to wait around for any of that...they do it because it is in their own self-interest to give everything they have in this area they specialize in. By the way, this applies to EVERYTHING from that long-winded example I gave to the bartender. Cars, buildings, light fixtures, professionally prepared food, bar stools, TV's, entertainment channels, TV shows and yes even sports stars. Just a few short generations ago, people would look at what we have at our fingertips on a daily basis and think that we were God-Kings. That...is pretty incredible. And it's only possible because of things like specialization and the self-interested bargains that we make with each other. So the takeaway from this is that when we're shipwrecked on an island...TV and movies have kind of shaded our expectations of how we expect things to go once we have to fend for ourselves. It's very easy to imagine us all living individual, subsistent lifestyles just trying to collect enough stuff to survive from day to day. But if we apply these basic ideas from Adam Smith...things might not be that bad for very long. Because by us working together with each other...eight hours of you working hard might not produce one pin...but closer to the 50,000 number. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Adam Smith pt. 2 - The Tip of the Iceberg Of Wealth

Episode #049

This is a transcript of episode #049 on Adam Smith. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Today's episode of Philosophize This! begins in a very normal city in the southern deserts of Arizona known as Nogales. If you walked through the streets of Nogales, Arizona...depending on which part of it you were walking through, you wouldn't think it was much different than where ever you live currently. You would see families and houses and children playing...but in this otherwise unassuming city lies a question...a question that may be the most fundamental question we, as humans could ever ask about civilization itself. And to the citizens of Nogales, Arizona this question stares them in the face...day after day. Because what you would see if I took you up onto the hillside of Nogales, Arizona...you know...the topography of the area is such where there is a hilly, mountain-like region that acts like sort of a crown around the head of the city where you can get a pretty good line of sight in all directions...what you would see on the right hand side is the beautiful city of Nogales, Arizona in the United States. And then as your eyes scan to the left you would see about fifty feet of cleared path, a small, flimsy fence...sort of poetically illustrating how flimsy these lines are that we draw...and then on the left hand side of this fence you will see the city of Nogales. But this isn't Nogales, Arizona...this is Nogales, Sonora in the republic of Mexico. I'm serious! There's even a picture you can look up and see it...I'll put it on the episode page at philosophizethis.org...because apparently that's what you do when you're a podcaster...and it's a picture from this very hillside...Now, physically speaking this is the exact same town...as far as physical barriers are concerned its only separated by about fifty feet and a flimsy fence. The REAL separation between these two geographic areas...lies in the lives of the average citizens that have to LIVE in these different areas. The average citizen of Nogales, Arizona has life... really good by global standards. The

average income is around \$30,000 per year. Everyone has access to roads that lead to neighboring towns that aren't crumbling. They have electrical lines, phone lines, a sewer system, public education...not to mention a functioning police department where the laws of the land are actually enforced. The bottom line is... people living in Nogales, Arizona... live their lives everyday feeling as though the government is working for them, not the other way around. They don't live their lives in constant fear of being assaulted or robbed or extorted or any other of our favorite pastimes. Now just a few steps away, the average citizen in the city of Nogales, Mexico is much different. The average income here is about \$10,000 per year. Yes, people have access to public education... but the quality of that education is severely worse. Couple that with the fact that most of the people living here have to drop out of school early on just to earn enough money to try to rub two pennies together... and what you're left with is a city where the majority of people over the age of 18 don't have a high school diploma. Across the board... the health of the citizens is far worse than their Arizonian neighbors. Infant mortality is higher, instances of sickness and disease are much higher... and let's say that you wanted to start turning this place around...let's say you wanted to start a business to try to bring a little value to the lives of the people living in this town... it would be an incredibly difficult, volatile and corrupt process through everything you had to do. Even if you just wanted to leave the city and get out... you'd still have to do it traveling on roads that are in horrible condition and difficult to navigate. What a massive difference just a few short steps can make. But why is it this way? Why is it this way? Let's just take a second to talk about how enormously important this question is. Think of what's at stake: the quality of life of billions of subsequent people yet to be born? The already diminished quality of life of the billions that are living now or have already lived? Are there many questions more powerful than this to consider when we're building a society? Look, Nations aren't just born wealthy or poor. So the thinking by the people that ask this question for a living is...the fact that that's true must mean there is some thing out there that happened over the history of the country...some thing we can identify that determined whether a nation eventually became rich or poor. Can it be broken down into a single mistake these

countries made along the line? Is it a combination of things? What makes a nation look like Norway instead of looking like the Congo. What makes a nation look like Canada as opposed to looking like Bangladesh. Why are some countries so much more wealthy than other countries? Forget about just us starting our hypothetical island society...if you even care a LITTLE bit about limiting the suffering of other human beings...you have to see how important this question is that separates Nogales Arizona, from Nogales Mexico. Although it may be wishful thinking...if there is some mistake that was made out there...if there was some mistake that the Congo made at some point in history and we could identify exactly what that mistake was...then we'd probably want to know about it wouldn't we? We're probably gonna wanna make sure anyone starting a society in the future... knows the answer to this question. Not to mention...if we can identify the problem...does that mean we can arrive at a solution...to the problem? Is it too late to right the course of the ship in Nogales, Mexico? This question... is a crucial one for us to explore on this show...because if one of your goals on this planet is to find a way to serve other people...there aren't many other areas you can focus your time on that with a single eureka moment ...potentially... could change the lives of billions. Anyway, it would be dishonest if I didn't start this discussion out by saying that there is far from a clear answer to this question...we're not going to come away from this episode with an infallible explanation for why some countries are wealthier than others...but just because there's no clear answer to the question...doesn't mean every opinion out there on the matter is equally valid and it certainly doesn't mean... we haven't made significant progress when it comes to answering this question accurately. Now there are a LOT of different answers thinkers have historically given to this question. But as we look at their answers... I want us to all look at the assumptions... that were made by these people. I want us to all look closely at the mistake that they made in their thinking...because it's a mistake I've been guilty of in the past... and it's a mistake that we COULD ALL easily make if we don't continue to question and reassess our beliefs with vigilance...and that mistake is this: You arrive at a conclusion about something that is not entirely verifiable, but you believe it anyway because it SEEMS to be true. You accept this conclusion that

you've arrived at as a premise for FUTURE conclusions to be built upon. You continue to stack these conclusions on top of that premise...story after story until you have an entire skyscraper built on top of it...but if that premise ends up not being true...the entire building comes crumbling down. You'll understand what I'm talking about in a second, so over the years..people have come up with all kinds of fun answers to the question of what makes certain nations wealthier than others. Uh, Montesquieu. French political thinker...he's the guy that came up with the idea that there should be a separation of powers in government...obviously heavily influential on the constitution of the United States. Well as good as THAT idea was that he had...they all weren't gems in the mind of Montesquieu. His idea? For why some nations are wealthier and better off than others? People from hot climates are just...lazy. That's right, just look at them! With their sun and their golden brown skin...let me enlighten you guys...when you live in an area of intense heat...the last thing you want to do is invent the iPhone...no once you catch your dinner...you know...your daily scorpion...its time to relax. The heat takes a lot out of you...but conversely...these people In colder climates... they just get bored if they aren't doing something...they start building castles...they start wearing chain mail. Keeps the blood moving. But this is just one of them! Economists throughout history have given all kinds of reasons...some say the reason countries are rich is because they were at one point a colony of England! Some say it all comes down to luck...that some countries just initially settled in an area that had more natural resources than others. The point is...there's no shortage of arguments, the vast majority of them have been dismantled and proven wrong long ago. This is obviously a very wide conversation, but if you talk to an economist in today's world here's basically where we're at: it's usually some variation of the idea that the wealth of a nation is directly related to the quality of it's labor force. Now that's an interesting distinction there. The QUALITY of a labor force. How can we find out what makes the quality of one labor force better than another? Now, it would be very easy to get deep down the rabbit hole of this discussion right now, but this episode isn't about modern economics...its about the father of modern economics...Adam Smith. And by the end of this episode we're going to come back to this discussion of the quality

of a nations labor force...we're going to come back to Nogales, Arizona...but for reasons you'll understand at the end of this episode...right now... I want to take you on a trip back in time. Back before our modern standard of living, before Medicare and Medicaid, before the civil war....in many cases before the constitution of the United States was even written. I want to take you back to a time in Europe when people were a little confused about what actually made a nation wealthy.Now, even though it is absolutely nothing like what actually happened in the history of the world...I always picture all the rulers from all the European countries coming together. You know...a bunch of dudes in tights...bunch of angry sociopaths laughing, syphilis eating away their brain...anyway...they're all sitting around having a chat about their respective countries and one of these kings that's having a particularly bad day that day pipes up and says...yeah mountains...mountains yeah that's cool...my country's richer.Needle scratches everyone stops and looks at him...wait a second...who does have the richest country? We gotta figure out a way to find out who has the high score! GO! GO! GO! ... and what emerged was mercantilism. That's such a stupid way of putting it. Okay, so before the enlightenment in Europe some people asked the question of what makes a country wealthy. The answer they came up with was that a country was wealthy in relation to how much gold it had in its reserves. It's the equivalent... of saying that the wealthiest person is just the person that has the most money in their bank account. ...We can kinda see where they're coming from, I guess it makes sense...but in retrospect...it's not that simple guys from the 1500's. You know, if you have two people in a room... one of them has \$5000 in their bank account and a job that pays six figures a year...and the other one has \$10,000 in their bank account but has a condition that makes it so that they can never work again...who is the wealthiest person in that room? Rough example, but it illustrates the point that how much money you have on hand is not all there is to it when it comes to how wealthy you are. But these people believed it! And imagine you're living in the 1500's...and you believe it and now you're assigned the task of arriving at economic policy...like they were. How do you think this premise affects your decision making? If you truly believed that the wealth of a nation is determined by how much gold

you guys have in the reserves, and your job with this economic policy is to extend the wealth of your nation as far as possible...can you think of any way this could go wrong here? Can you think of any way this might... lead to some PROBLEMS down the road? This is what I was talking about before with the faulty foundation that we build a skyscraper on top of...and it's the kind of thing that applies across basically ALL thinking. If the foundation of your beliefs in some area is based around a faulty premise...whatever it might be...you could be misattributing success to the wrong thing all along...You could be making decisions and planning for a future under the assumption that this premise that you have is true...and when you carry out these "policies" that you've arrived at with the premise in mind, you could actually be sabotaging yourself. Confirmation bias is a hell of a drug. For example, I'd compare it to our body and the way that we eat. Let's say that you're surfing the internet...if people even surf the internet anymore...and you come across one of those multicolored, blinking banners that tells you that this SINGLE MOM HAS FOUND THE ULTIMATE SHORTCUT TO HEALTHY LIVING! So you click on it, and read it and it convinces you beyond a shadow of a doubt that Vitamin C is the way to go. You can't live without Vitamin C and with every piece of food that you shovel into your mouth you should think of nothing....but the vitamin C content...that's how you get REALLY healthy. Don't worry about A, B, D, E, potassium, magnesium, selenium, NO! Vitamin C. Well if that was the health premise that you believed and you were assigned with the task of making eating policies for your body, you know...rules that you follow when you're considering putting ANYTHING into your body...if you truly believed that the more vitamin C you ate, the healthier you were... why wouldn't you make a policy that every meal put in your gullet should be centered around getting the maximum amount of vitamin C. Well this might be an okay policy for the first day. Or even the first couple days, but eventually your body is going to become deficient in other areas. Eventually this policy of Vitamin C at all costs is going to start making you feel sick...eventually...it will kill you. Well apply this example to economic policy before the age of enlightenment. If you truly believed that the goal of economic policy should be to get as much gold in the reserves as possible, then you're probably going to create policies

that aren't -- in retrospect -- GOOD for the economy, but ones that... keep as much gold in the reserves as possible...and these policies...like the vitamin C policy...eventually made these nations feel sick and deficient in other areas. The thinking by the people at the top levels of government was, IF our nation's wealth is just contingent on how much GOLD we have in the reserves...then why would we ever WILLINGLY send gold to another country at all? Why would we ever import ANYTHING that we didn't absolutely have to? Buy American...right? But this is the 1500's version of the buy American thing... taken to the absolute extreme. If it was even possible for you to make something or buy something domestically, the governments didn't want you importing it. Because... BY IMPORTING it and buying it from another country...your sending our gold to that country...making THEM wealthier. Why would we ever want that? Limit imports...encourage exports. Well, the people at the top of government knew this could only be done to a certain extent... there was no way a single country could produce EVERYTHING they ever needed...the governments job was to make sure things didn't get off the rails too far...to set regulations and restrictions and prevent citizens and businesses from importing too much stuff. Oh and by the way, the whole time they're doing this they can frame it as something that is ultimately good for the average person too, not just the vault of gold the government has. They can say...look...buy domestic...for the sake of job security! This whole importing business is a slippery slope! If no one buys domestic goods and everyone's just importing stuff cheaper from other places, how are we going to keep people employed domestically? Well, it's time to pull out your tinfoil hats everyone because there's something we need to consider moving forward here...actually it's not really tin foil hat worthy, it's incredibly plausible that this could have happened. There is a large group of people in today's world ...that look back on Mercantilism and this age of economic policy and say that none of these people at the top of government back then REALLY believed that the policies of Mercantilism were actually going to help. None of these people actually thought that limiting imports and encouraging exports was REALLY going to contribute to the wealth of a nation in the long term...what these say REALLY happened is that captains of industry in these

respective countries were in cahoots with the leaders of government and that they stood to benefit from the restriction of imports because it meant less competition for them in this emerging global marketplace. The Geo-political climate in Europe during this period in history is extremely volatile...more than ever before... in the history of Europe the governments of these countries were dead-set on war and territorial expansion. So much of their task during this time was fund raising... to accumulate enough gold to be able to fund these giant military expeditions...I mean this is the first time in the history of many of these countries that they have navies and ground forces that aren't temporary. Typically... it's just been an assembly of people that come together when they're needed...but during this period in time we're starting to see the emergence of full-time professional forces funded by the citizens....not just to fend off attacks, but to expand their borders. The beginning of this era of competing nation states is starting to change the way we see the countries that surround us. So if you're the captain of the shoe industry in the 1500's. If you're the Mitt Romney of shoes back then and all of a sudden there is this emerging global marketplace that you have to be competitive in...that's gotta suck. I mean for the longest time you've had the only game in town...I've had people's feet in a headlock, right? MY SHOES!...I don't have the machines or systems in place to compete with how these other, more efficient countries make shoes...I'm just not as good as them. So... how do I make sure things stay the way they are right now? Oh, I just walk on down to the city hall...head into the back room and...How bout this...in exchange for me paying taxes and levies..and by the way you're taxing my income here so the more money I make the more money YOU make...how bout in exchange for me paying into this system that funds your wars and expansion plans...YOU GUYS in the government enact policies that restrict imports so that I don't have to compete with other countries? Now if you think this sounds like a wack-job conspiracy theory...Really is it that crazy to think about this happening? I mean, think about all the other areas where progress was made during these couple hundred years we've been talking about ...and think about how much the old ways of thinking have always been rooted in, not what people legitimately thought was best for the whole, but in what makes a small collection

of people at the top the best off. Think of the reformation of the church. Think of the lives that people lived BEFORE the reformation of the church. I can't think of many people that would stand for these conditions having already lived in today's world...there is no personal relationship that you have with god. No, god has decreed this code of conduct... in a language that you can't read, in fact... no one can read it or interpret it accurately but this very small collection of people at the top of this church hierarchy. I mean, many of the priests at the heads of these local congregations didn't even speak Latin! They just knew that nobody else spoke Latin and they got up there pretending to be reading from the bible and just making noises that SOUNDED like Latin...and then they'd say "Okay well there's your lesson in morality for the day. Go ahead and put your donations in this hat and I'll retire to my harem of concubines because don't forget, I am the moral authority!"...It's not hard to imagine how this MAY have not been set up in the best interests of everyone...how maybe it heavily favored a small collection of people at the top of the industry. How about the area of government? Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes...what conventional wisdom were they railing against? Oh yeah, a small collection of people at the top telling the population at large that they were genetically predestined to rule over them. That there was a divine right of kings decreed by God and that their job as citizens was to obey God and serve their king. My point is, it's not CRAZY to think... that economic policy might have been structured the same way before the age of enlightenment. This application of reason to all of these long held institutions...has there ever been anything that served to benefit the population on such a wide scale more than this? The bottom line is: the economic theory of Mercantilism was a faulty premise that a skyscraper was built upon. And honestly, it doesn't matter whether it was ignorance or corruption that lead to it being adopted. You can take your pick. But the way that you view these decisions drastically changes the way you interpret some of these policies that these countries put in place. One of the tenets of Mercantilism WAS to limit imports, but the policies enacted on behalf of it, extended into a lot of other areas... all centered around dishonestly propping up domestic business to give it an unfair advantage over competitors in the global marketplace. For example, they would

use taxpayer money to financially back new industries in their country... then they would often times make those new industries exempt from any regulations or taxes...giving them a huge advantage... and then from there they would set up monopolies and prohibit anyone from exporting anything that could possibly be useful to another country trying to compete with them. Any tools, equipment, machines and even people who were skilled at their professions. They didn't want those people to go to another country and use their skills to make some other country richer. Then you have these broad, sweeping laws that were just crippling if you wanted to trade anything. In England there was something called the Navigation Act in the year 1651...and...it made it so that if you were a country in Europe, and you wanted to trade with England in ANY way...those things that you were importing needed to be brought to England ON an English ship...or even less likely...a ship registered in the country that those goods originated from. In France, Louis the 14th famously conferred a tremendous amount of power to his minister of finance Jean Baptiste Colbert. From the 1660's to the 1680's this guy DRASTICALLY increased the tax or the "duty" you needed to pay if you wanted to bring something into ANY French port for trade. So anyone that wanted to buy something from another country had to buy it from people that not only had to pay this giant tax, but also had to assume all the costs of transporting it. It made it very hard to be competitive. Well Adam Smith takes a look at this ludicrous world that's unfolding in front of him, and by the way we'll talk about all these things in more detail and how they apply to our island in the next episode, but he comes along and he makes a lot of good observations about this flawed economic climate. The first big thing that he points out is that, this idea.. of it not being good to import something because it sends gold out of the country...is flat out wrong. In fact, he says...it benefits us greatly to buy something from a country that produces it more efficiently than we can. If they have systems and technology in place that allows them to produce... shoes faster and cheaper than us, why would we use a giant chunk of our finite number of workers to inefficiently make shoes? Why not buy our shoes from them...use THOSE workers to specialize in some other field and use the extra money we save to buy other stuff or invest in researching new fields? Free trade benefits BOTH

parties... is what Adam Smith is getting at. Another revolutionary concept he arrives at that dismantles Mercantilism is the idea of economies of scale. Basically, because we'll talk about it more next episode...its the idea that there are certain fixed costs associated with any sort of production that are drastically more efficient when you are producing more units. The other major criticism Adam Smith proposes is against this toxic relationship that exists between government and the chiefs of industry. He makes a case that sure, its great for those people at the top, but it hurts the population at large. Again, something we'll talk about more next time and a lot as we head into the philosophy of this new corporate world that's emerging. So why is there such a clear difference between Nogales, Arizona and Nogales, Mexico? When you say that it has to do with the QUALITY of their labor force...it almost sounds like you're blaming it on the people. It almost sounds like you're saying...they just aren't working hard enough in Nogales, Mexico. But is the reason why people don't work hard always out of laziness? Why aren't the citizens of Nogales, Mexico going out there and working hard and innovating new things and trying to improve their lot in life?Well, nobody knows the answer to this question for certain, but if you take a page out of the book of Adam Smith and subsequent economists...they say it comes down to the incentives that the government puts in place. Look at how humans typically act...why would anybody work harder than they absolutely have to if there was no incentive to do it? One of the biggest incentives a government can provide to its citizens is a strong sense of law and order. Why innovate? Why try to serve others? Why take risks when any risk you assume to try to improve your lot in life is ultimately, probably going to be stolen from you? Better question, if this is the case, why wouldn't the government insure this basic level of protection to the people of Nogales Mexico?Kinda reminds you of the inner cities in America...why would anyone work to try to pull themselves up by their bootstraps if after they do it, someone's just going to steal their boots? Now some of you are gonna say, oh Stephen West, you're being naive! These governments don't actually care about the quality of life of the average citizen, all they care about is extending and sustaining their regime of power and reaping the benefits of more money!But I would argue against these regimes. If what you want is

more money to sustain your power...you know...more GOLD in the reserves...then doesn't it benefit you to improve the lives of your citizens? The formula is clear. If they feel their lives are safe, the quality of your labor force improves. If the quality of your labor force improves...they make more money...which you tax and then in turn, make more money for your giant vault of money that you dive into like you're scrooge McDuck. One things for certain about the differences between Nogales Arizona and Nogales Mexico...it's not the peoples' fault. There's just no incentive for them to do anything else. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Are You Left Or Right?

Episode #050

This is a transcript of episode #050 on the Left and Right. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

The year is 1789 and the citizens of France are deeply entrenched... in the battle for human rights that would forever change the course of history known as The French Revolution. See, because before there ever was a "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen"...before France became what it would eventually become...a war needed to be fought. But it wasn't a war on a battlefield with muskets and cavalry and all that kind of glorious stuff...it was a war of ideas in a place called the National Assembly. Kind of ironic...despite how revolutionary its production was...The National Assembly that brought these ideas to pass really only existed for a short period of time. Between the dates of June 13, 1789 to July 9, 1789...less than a month when it was all said and done...a group of people gathered together...and I could talk about the different estates of government in France during this time and the systematic political castration of the bourgeoisie...but out of respect to your time...the interesting part when it comes to our episode today is how this battlefield was laid out physically. Because just like in a battlefield with muskets and a cavalry... where the soldiers would position themselves on opposite sides of a room or a field....the people fighting in this war of ideas in the National Assembly about to what extent this French revolution is justified...ALSO positioned themselves on opposite sides of the battlefield. There was a president of this National Assembly...he would be in the middle of the room...the people that supported the king and the way that things currently were in France sat on the right hand side of the president...and the people that supported the revolution sat on the left hand side of the president. There was a clear divide between the two sides of the room...you can hear it in the testimony of the people who were there that quote "those who were loyal to

religion and the king took up positions to the right of the chair so as to avoid the shouts, oaths and indecencies that enjoyed free reign in the opposing camp."Well, eventually the people on the right hand side of the room became known as the party of order and the people on the left hand side of the room became known as the party of movement. This story of the National Assembly... and the war of ideas that took place in 1789... this is the origin of the terms right wing and left wing in our modern political lexicon. This is where the terms came from! The French Revolution!Now why are we talking about this? Well, the reason why is because I got about three or four days into writing what I THOUGHT was going to be the next episode of the show and I had all this great stuff about Adam Smith and the Free Market and Specialization and how all this stuff applies to us on our island civilization that we've been building...and then I realized I was making a giant assumption. Like, why am I just assuming that you people want Adam Smith's Free Market system implemented on our island? Because you don't gotta go very far...the comment section of any YouTube video...it doesn't even matter what the video's about...you will find someone railing against the failures of the Free Market system. They'll say that an unregulated Free Market system is a recipe for disaster and that even in today's world when we DO HAVE regulations in place...it just opens up another can of worms...that the richest and most powerful people and companies that stand to gain from not being regulated the most are the only ones with the resources to lobby congress and pay money to influence legislation in their favor. These people would say: the game is rigged...and since we now know by experience that that's the case, if we're starting a new society...why would we ever willingly cannonball into that pool again? Why not address the problems that arose in the Free Market system, come up with a BRAND NEW system that works better and use that one! Let's have a pow wow on our island! Let's all sit together in a circle and toss some ideas around...theorize...strategize...hypothetical example after hypothetical example UNTIL!....we arrive at what seems like a new, PERFECT system on our island!Nobodies arguing that Adam Smith's system is worthless...definitely better than Mercantilism among other examples...but it could be better. Why would we ever sit around idly when a

better system could exist out there...one that reaches our economic goals better than the old system does...let's say that we all sat around on our island and arrived at a brand new, abstract theory that our projections show is going to be WAY BETTER than Adam Smith's system...why wouldn't we use it? Let me just pose the question to you guys real quick: What would you rather do? Would you rather implement Adam Smith's system that we know works, yes it has its flaws, but at least we know it works and we can make gradual adjustments and try to make it better. Or would you rather revolutionize economics entirely.. and try a brand new system, that admittedly has never been tried before...but we have no reason to expect that it wouldn't work. It SEEMS way better than the other system, and we might run into problems but let's just correct course as we go!What you have here are two very different methods of approaching any task... any task you may assign yourself whether you're a government...a person...team...anything. We're going to come back to these two methods in more detail, but first let's talk about a couple of very important people from the enlightenment that embody these two approaches. There is a common misconception thrown around a lot today about a couple of political thinkers from the age of enlightenment. I've heard dozens of people say this thing over the course of my life...the idea is that when it comes to modern day political thought...there's two kinds of people in the world...whether you consider yourself on the left or on the right...your thinking if you traced it back...is ultimately derived from one of these two guys back in the age of enlightenment: Thomas Paine if you're on the left or Edmund Burke if you're on the right. They're two guys that agreed on a lot of things, but disagreed on a lot of things, their most notable disagreement was the French Revolution. Their ideas... no doubt would have put them on opposite sides of this national assembly... but can we really say that when you consider yourself left or right in today's world that really you're just making a decision between the thinking of one of these two guys?This is going to sound like a classic Stephen West-ism...I'm sure most of you are going to be rolling your eyes during this portion, but look...this show has to stand for something or else it just becomes boring very quickly. Alright? No matter how much someone wants it to be true...no matter how convenient it would be if it were true...the world is not that

simple (angry radio talk show hosts and cable news commentators!). The thinking of human beings... is not that simple. Imagine a modern day political disagreement between two coworkers that consider themselves to be left and right...saying that their disagreement is ultimately just the age old disagreement between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke...That's like saying that when a husband and wife are arguing in the store about which light bulbs to get, well they're really just having that age old disagreement between Nicola Tesla and Thomas Edison!I can't tell whether that example was genius...or absolutely horrible.Forget all the history between the age of enlightenment and today. Forget all the specifics that they're arguing about...Forget the statistics and facts and talking points that they disagree on...to say that in modern times all we have are tens of millions of Thomas Paines arguing against tens of millions of Edmund Burke's is just a shameful oversimplification. By the way...you knew they were oversimplifying things from the very beginning when they starting talking about left and right as though they're terms that are easily definable by one guy's thought anyway. How do these people think we define left and right when we're talking about them in today's world? Yeah, I get that everyone has their own definition of what they are in their heads...but you have to acknowledge that there is far from a consensus on what they are right? I mean it highly depends on who's talking about it and when. Some people say the further left you get the more government influence you think there should be in people's lives and the further right you get the more individual freedom there should be. Some people say the further left you get the more you believe in communal property and the further right you get the more you favor private property. Some people say the further left you get the more you believe in a planned economy and the further right you get the more you favor free enterprise. The point is...Left to Right is just a spectrum...and depending on what particular issue you're using as the basis for that spectrum...it might drastically change where your views fall on it. On some spectrums, anarchists are all the way to the right...on others...all the way to the left. We've all heard both sides say that if you left the other side to their own devices...the world you'd be left with would be Nazi Germany! Anyway, I'm not going to ramble about this all day...but this does raise an

interesting question for us to ask ourselves...and it goes like this: If this is untrue, if this is just an oversimplification...why do so many people trumpet this common misconception that we're all ultimately either Thomas Paine or Edmund Burke in our political thinking? I mean, if it was COMPLETELY unfounded it never would have gotten off the ground to begin with. Right? After all, the reason why stereotypes even catch on in the first place and have people repeating them is because there's at least some small, minuscule element of truth associated with them, and I've noticed that exact same pattern when it comes to oversimplified worldviews. If you were walking around saying that Leprechauns were controlling our political thoughts...everyone would look at you like you're crazy. Nobody would repeat that stuff...so what is the small, minuscule element of truth associated with us all being descendant from Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke? Well, let's talk a little about these two guys, but first let me just say that as a podcaster... I didn't even want to talk about these two people. They just lend themselves to people that like to cherry-pick scripture...you know they like to treat their books like they're the Bible and then put a ton of emphasis on certain passages that reinforce their interpretation of them but completely ignore other things that go against them. I mean, I've read a LOT of commentary on philosophy over the years and there are very few people that have the kind of revisionist history cult followings that these guys do...but anyway...just a word of warning: I'm not claiming that this episode encompasses every possible interpretation you could have of these two gentlemen...In fact I'm going to shy away from trying to define them at all. As listeners of this show, rather than me using your time up droning on about the myriad of different interpretations of their work and speculating about who these guys really were when you get down to it...I'm gonna do what I think is a much more productive usage of your time, let's ask ourselves the questions that these guys were asking about government during their time. Because I think by asking them we'll understand ourselves better....Edmund Burke was an Irish Political philosopher. He was born and raised in Dublin in the year 1729 and died in 1797. He was a huge advocate of revolutionary changes in India during this time and a huge advocate of the American Revolution in 1776. But he DIDN'T agree with the French

Revolution. He would have been sitting on the RIGHT side of the national assembly. It's not that Edmund Burke hated French people for some reason...he thought for various reasons that the French Revolution and the American Revolution were completely different. One of the main pillars of Edmund Burke's thinking that no one is going to argue with is the importance of tradition. Rousseau, Locke and Hobbes all talked about this state of nature that we were originally in... and it was through a social contract with either each other or the sovereign that we escape from this state of nature...much to our chagrin if you're Rousseau. Burke didn't see it this way...he didn't think that... whatever this thing called "society" was should be relegated to just... whoever is alive now and whatever material things they want the government to guarantee for them...No society is something deeper than that...it's something that's roots extend throughout the entire history of that culture...and that any contract that we have not only needs to consider and be respectful of the that are people alive today...but everyone who has come before us and everyone who is yet to be born. On that same note, just to mark another contrast between Burke and these other political thinkers...by this time it was a really common idea that human beings have certain natural rights. Rights that no matter what time period or society or culture we live in...we have those rights simply by virtue of being a human being. Life, liberty, the fruits of our labor, natural law...these sorts of themes pervade the works of Locke and Hobbes. But Burke didn't agree with this either...there is no BASELINE of rights that humans deserve inherently as is suggested by natural law...no you are only entitled to the rights that have been traditionally given to you ...in your given society. And if this seems weird to you, consider Burke's intentions here: it was to PRESERVE the wisdom from previous generations. The thinking was, if something had been a long running institution throughout a societies history and they had been successful with it for a long time...it must work. The true test of legitimacy to Burke...was whether something was rooted in tradition. This was a welcome change for some during a time like the age of enlightenment... when so many new ideas were being arrived at that no one truly knew whether they were going to work or not. This is what Burke is trying to circumvent...the implementation of these SWEEPING revolutionary

changes based on abstract theories to a given society...when that concept might not even work given the tradition of that society. He's not just worried about this new age of reason coming up with a theory that just generally doesn't work, but he's even more worried about the possibility of one these abstract theories being so incredibly foreign to the history of a society that it ends up failing miserably or not running smoothly...and therefore do more damage to society than progress. To hurt more people than it helps! This is why he was FOR the American Revolution and AGAINST the French Revolution. The American Colonies were colonies of England...the idea that was central to why they were revolting against England was taxation without representation...you know...England abusing their dominion over the American Colonies. Taxation without representation being a bad thing was something that was well-founded in the tradition and history of England, so starting a revolution in the name of going against it was perfectly justifiable to Burke. But in the case of France, aside from the bloodshed and brutality that came along with it that basically EVERY reasonable person disagreed with...Burke claimed that the ideas central to the French Revolution...liberty, equality, fraternity weren't based in the tradition of the people of France...in fact the whole system of government the revolution supported was in many ways completely ALIEN to the people of France and even if it wasn't ALIEN...he claimed that it doesn't adequately address man's nature. Again, it's not that Burke thinks the people of France deserve freedom less than the people of America. One of the most common misconceptions of Burke is that he is against all change and that society should always stay the same as how it used to be...no on the contrary...Burke completely endorses positive change...his disagreement comes down to the nature of that change. How should change be implemented? Should it be one sweeping, revolutionary, fast or fundamental change? Or should it many focused, ordered, gradual and small changes? Enter Thomas Paine. Born in England in 1737 and died in 1809...spent a lot of time in America writing pamphlets supporting the American revolution...then when his work was done there he moved to France to support the French Revolution. Needless to say, he was a fan of revolution...but maybe the more accurate way of representing his thinking is that he was a fan of reason

and believed that what is right... has nothing to do with tradition necessarily...and that every generation of people if they deem it to be correct at their time...should have the ability to make fundamental, revolutionary changes to their society whether it corresponds with tradition or not. Thomas Paine thought that when the people of France wanted these rights like liberty, equality or fraternity...despite what Burke says...these things are not abstract speculations...they're what humans have ALWAYS wanted...they've just been oppressed by government...the French revolution is just an attempt to end centuries of wrongdoing perpetrated on these people. Paine would say: what kind of logic are you using there...using tradition to justify behavior...You could just as easily look to the past and see that your culture has a tradition of slavery and use tradition to justify perpetuating it. What...just because something has been around for a long time you should preserve it? That doesn't apply to every case...The problem to Thomas Paine with Burke's views on the nature and speed of change.. is that when you do it this way the solutions to problems that society faces... are either not enough or come way too late if they even come at all! Paine would say that: The world is constantly changing. People's opinions about what is good are also constantly changing. How could you ever say that it is okay... to sentence the people of today... to the decisions made by other people that lived in a completely different world than them?I don't know about you guys, but I think they both have really good points. What we're talking about here at the most basic level are two different approaches to solving problems. But which one is better? Well, it can be kind of confusing to know what the correct approach is when you are deciding what the GOVERNMENT should be doing...after all...you're not a government...you're a person...there's a genius insight for you. So lets think about these two options in the context of solving a problem in our personal lives. A long time ago on this show I talked about making scrambled eggs... how I had been making scrambled eggs for years and I had always used the same system. Well, do me a favor for a second...think back to the first time you ever made scrambled eggs. When you were in that moment...you were faced with a problem...that problem was...how the heck do you make scrambled eggs?I looked at how my parents did it...I put the butter in the pan...I

cracked the egg in the pan...I scrambled the egg and I was done. Over the years I developed systems...I made small, gradual changes to my egg making process, much in the style of Edmund Burke. After all, if it ain't broke...don't fix it!

Refine...temper...strengthen the process, but why start some egg revolution in my household? Then that fateful day when I watched Gordon Ramsey cook HIS scrambled eggs on YouTube. These concepts that he was throwing out were COMPLETELY alien to me. Put the butter in AFTER you crack the egg? Continuously take the eggs on the heat and off the heat to prevent it from cooking too quickly? Season it AFTER you cook the eggs? To top it off...his eggs looked WAY better than my eggs! To me... This was like some EGG philosopher coming at me with one of those abstract theories that Edmund Burke was warning about! And look...if I cared enough about improving my egg making I could have arrived at these conclusions myself...maybe even better ones! If I cared enough to research the chemistry and logistics of making scrambled eggs to the point of mastery...I wouldn't even NEED this sort of intervention from the philosopher Gordon Ramsicles...Ask yourself this question: what do you do in your normal life when it comes to improving your methods for doing things? Did you arrive at a way of doing things a long time ago and day by day try to refine the process and make gradual changes...or do you watch videos and revolutionize the process every now and then with a new abstract theory that you've run across? Here's a better question: Do you really need to be one or the other exclusively? This is the minuscule kernel of truth that's at the heart of this point that people make that modern political thought is ultimately a bunch of Thomas Paines vs a bunch of Edmund Burkes. When we're faced with a problem as a society... what method do you typically want the government to use when solving that problem? Do you tend to side with innovation and change and revolutionizing the area that we have a problem in? Or do you tend to look to what we already know works and try to gradually make things better? You can see examples of this divide all around you in politics. For example, Obamacare. Now...I'm not naive alright...I fully understand the arguments on either side that would say the disagreement has nothing to do with fundamental principles of how the government should solve problems...but that....you know one side

would say the only thing the other side doesn't like about it is the "Obama" part of Obamacare...and THOSE people would say the only reason the other side likes it is that it attaches one person's decision making to everyone else's tax dollars...I get it...either way...isn't it interesting how the divide still exists even in something as politicized as Obamacare. We have a problem with our healthcare system. One side says that what we already have is good...it just needs some adjustments...why risk a complete overhaul of the system that might completely fail in this country or end up being worse when we have something that works. Again, here's Burke's adherence to tradition...gradual, slow changes. The other side says that the problems are systematic and epidemic and that no amount of knob turning is going to fix the fundamental problems that we have with it. We need revolutionary change in the healthcare sector. Let me hit you with the same arguments metaphorically speaking. When you're on the South Pole...any movement in any direction is north. When you're at rock bottom...any movement is forward progress. But we AREN'T at rock bottom in modern America...we actually have a lot of great stuff and there is way too much at stake to implement SWEEPING changes based only on abstract theories that have never been tried here before. The other side says sometimes if you want to reach your target...you just need to get moving. If we're taking a road trip from San Diego to New York City...It's much better to just start driving..check the GPS and correct course along the way than to sit in San Diego agonizing about what the PERFECT way to arrive there is. This was the major disagreement between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke. And I know there's not much room for my two cents on this podcast, but it almost feels like we need BOTH as a society. Sometimes, we need the broad sweeping changes... at other times we need the other side to preserve and improve those broad sweeping changes. It's terrible looking at the bipartisan gridlock in modern politics...and if you feel strongly on one side of the debate or another it can oftentimes feel like you want there to just be a dictatorship for like...two months...so that things can ACTUALLY get done. Things DO get done in a dictatorship after all. But for the sake of our island, where we'd no doubt have a strong divide between these two methods of implementing change...I think these two ways of thinking may need each other. Thank

you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

David Hume pt. 1

Episode #051

This is a transcript of episode #051 on David Hume. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So as you're all well aware...the last several episodes of the show have consisted of me rambling on about some island. Something about a shipwreck...somehow we're all STRANDED on the island...and for some reason we can't get off the island and we need to play make believe and imagine all the different ways our island society would look if we applied ideas present in various thinkers during the age of enlightenment. We've considered good ideas...bad ideas...and for six seasons of your life I've been talking about polar bears and smoke monsters and alluding to a climax where all the loose ends of the island will come together...and now its the finale and I'm giving you nothing!!Look, all kidding aside, I realized something this week. There's no clear end to this extended island metaphor we've been using. It's not like...oh you just talk about a little Adam Smith and a little Jean Jacques Rousseau...and now we know everything there is to know about how to build a society from scratch. No, political and economic thought doesn't just END during the age of enlightenment. And unless if this podcast is going to be one where just ignore any philosophy that doesn't concern itself with nation building...then we run into a very real predicament. There is going to have to be a time that we step away from the island...temporarily!...There is going to have to be a time that we talk about the breakthroughs in other areas of philosophy...metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, ethics...I guess what I'm saying is:This island... is going to have to be something that we keep referring back to...it's gonna have to be a mainstay in Philosophize This!and as avid listeners you'll know about it...everybody else tuning in for the first time will be completely confused...but it will end up being great. We'll talk for a while about our place as members of this society on our island...then we'll take a break and look at things in

terms of ...say being an individual, or in terms of being a thinking thing at all...then we can return back to the island and return to thinking of ourselves in terms of being one cog in this tremendous machine that we call society. So, David Hume. I feel it's necessary for me to say before we start that David Hume is one of my favorite philosophers of all time...not because I agree with everything he has to say, but because of how his brilliance is timeless. Like, whenever a philosopher comes out with an ambitious treatise laying out all sorts of ideas...once history gets done with it...it almost becomes like the carcass of a dead animal. because every philosopher that comes after them comes up to it and takes a little piece of it. They're like hyenas. They write their responses to the treatise...they often times make good points that the original guy can't respond to because... he's dead. ...and eventually it gets picked at so much that it starts to resemble a dead animal that vultures have picked clean in the middle of the desert. David Hume's work is surprisingly different. You know we often talk favorably about movies that stand the test of time...and what we're talking about when we refer to these movies is the idea that even after twenty, thirty, forty years...this movie endures as something that holds people's interest. So as we continue for the next few episodes talking about the philosophy of David Hume, just remember that his ideas stand the test of time not for 20 or thirty years...but for 250 years. Just keep that in mind as we go along. There are very few issues that are as integral to contemporary discussions of ethics than the one we are about to talk about. And it's funny because in the context of David Hume's work...it really was a small point...maybe even a throwaway point...and it's one of these things that's going on around you all the time, but you never really notice it....and then once you hear David Hume say it...you start to see it everywhere around you...you know ...you start to see when people make weak arguments all the time: What I'm referring to is David Hume's problem of is vs ought. Let me explain what I mean with an example. You ever walk into a 7-11 and you grab your Gatorade and funjuns and get to talking to the guy behind the counter? Maybe this guy is particularly social-able...maybe you ask him his thoughts on something from the news of the day and you guys get talking about the state of affairs in the world. Maybe the guy behind the counter decides that he's going to tell you about his own personal

philosophy that he lives by. For example, what if this guy said: Look at the world. Filled with violence and destruction. Just look at the perpetual state of war that we're in...just look at the genocide that's committed on a regular basis...look at the terrorist attacks! What if this guy behind the counter said that it's obvious to him that the reason people are doing all these terrible things is because they just didn't have parents or friends that loved them enough. So, because of that, his personal philosophy is to live each day spreading as much love as he can...giving as much love as he can to each person that comes through his 7-11 buying their Doritos and Mountain Dew. Well let's dissect this a little bit...what is this guy doing at the core of his statement? Well on one hand why would you ever question his statement? I mean wow! What a great guy! He just wants to spread as much love as he possibly can until he kicks the bucket one day! But on the other hand...what he is doing here...is taking some observation that he has made about the way that the world is...and then using only that observation as a basis...he's making a blind inference about how he OUGHT to be acting because of it. Now many of you are probably saying...well who cares? Why don't you give the guy a break! He's not hurting anybody...he just wants to love people! And that's true...and in this example there is probably no harm that is going to come from him making this kind of assertion...but David Hume looked around him during his time period and noticed that people make these sorts of inferences ALL THE TIME! And as sweet and innocent as this one example of it is...David Hume would say that when you honestly take a look at it...its really based on absolutely nothing and people use it all the time to justify doing terrible things. For example...I look out into the field and I see that there are people that look completely different from me, they are far more physically capable than I am and can't hold a conversation about math or science....therefore they OUGHT to be my chattel slave. Or another example, women are born with the ability to grow a child inside of them and are great nurtures and are emotionally intelligent...therefore they OUGHT to just spend their time pumping out kids because things like business and politics probably don't interest them very much. Do you see how fast this can go downhill? The problem is the difference between descriptive and prescriptive statements about the world. And people weren't

just drawing ethical conclusions from these observations during David Hume's time...you know they weren't just using this to justify "loving" people or to justify the role someone "ought" to be playing in society...people were doing it with chemistry, medicine...this faulty argument had been used in practically every field of inquiry and David Hume saw this clearly. People were even doing it when it came to nature, itself. They would point to some way that the universe CURRENTLY is and make a judgement about how it OUGHT to be from that observation. Same logic applies...just because the world is some way right now, does that mean we should be mad at the universe if sent an asteroid our way and destroyed the earth? No. That's ridiculous. There's a famous line from his work: Of the will and direct passions where he says: "Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. `Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me." Now let's keep in mind what David Hume is getting at here...he's not saying that we shouldn't care about the destruction of the world...he's attacking a dishonest inference that people sometimes make by looking at the way the world is and then pretending that the way things ought to be naturally follows from it. People do this...all the time and like I said before just keep your eyes open around you and you'll see just how often people talk about how they ought to act and found it in a statement about what the world is. And again, like in the case of the guy from 7-11, there may be good conclusions that come from this mistake in thinking...but David Hume wants us to acknowledge they are in no way true beyond any criticism...and we owe it to ourselves to be mindful when we make this is/ought judgement. But if you're still wondering why this matters to you. If you're still wondering how this is/ought distinction is relevant to discussions that we have with each other in modern times, just consider for a second that in today's world...right now at this very moment...there is an entire community of people dedicated to the task of acquiring a progressively more and more accurate view of what the universe is. This community is very well-funded...we're all very familiar with this community because it's substantially improved the lives of people over the course of the last couple hundred years...children

go to school for decades dreaming of one day being a member of this community. You may have heard of this community before...it's called science. Through unbiased, falsifiable experiments attempting to arrive at empirical evidence...science aims to understand what is. So any further distinction you could make...No! Science is about how things work! No! Science is about causes and relationships in the natural world... all of these distinctions are ultimately just science FULLY understanding what the universe is. Now, if we look at that fact through the lens of Hume's is/ought distinction...then that leaves science with certain limitations that we have to accept. Now you say that word, "limitations" and typically as humans we see a negative connotation associated with that word. To talk about the limitations of something is to put that thing on blast...as the kids say. But just think of how ridiculous that is! Everything has limitations. If something didn't have limitations you wouldn't be able to distinguish it from anything else...it's the limitations of something that give it meaning at all! So what are these limitations that I'm talking about? Well there's tons of philosophy dedicated to this but how about this for a start...no matter how extensive science gets...even if science understood nearly everything there was to know about what the universe IS...it can never tell us what we OUGHT to do with all of this highly valuable information that it's given us. Now, whenever you talk about the limitations of science...I've noticed that often times you're met with this bizarre hostility from people that are proponents of science...and they're nice people with good intentions but where does that hostility come from really? I think that hostility is a byproduct of the time period we live in...I think it's a defense mechanism because of the culture we live in. You know, I've said it on this show multiple times, but I think people are born into the world and they think that they have a choice between two things. You can believe in monotheistic religion, you know the answer to any question you could ever possibly raise is written down in this book that is the codified word of the creator of the universe....or you can believe in science. But the problem with that is that science never claimed to do everything that religion claimed to do. In fact I think that's a huge flaw in religion...in that it was so ambitious in what questions it claimed to have answers to. Why is it fair to project that expectation on to

science? Look, if science was a person...if you could walk up to science and shake their hand and say, hey! I really like the work you're doing! I love all these experiments you're conducting that they're giving me a more accurate, rich and full sense of this incredible place that I live in called the universe...but if I had one criticism for you...I gave you 4 out of 5 stars on iTunes because...although you're doing such a great job when it comes to telling me about what the universe is...you never tell me what I ought to do once I have all this information! If you told this to science...she would look at you and say...I know! Look, man I never claimed to be the moral arbiter of the cosmos...I'm good at giving you the information...what you do with that information is not what I'm concerned with! In fact, to be concerned with it, might affect my ability to perform unbiased science. Science is fantastic at telling us what the universe is...it's the best thing we got so far...but any inference you make about how we should act in light of that information or how the universe ought to be because of that information...is exactly that: a HUMAN inference, and therefore subject to flaws. This is actually an argument in favor of science. Understanding the limitations of science, helps us do better science. This is why people have taken their scrutiny of science so seriously over the years...science is the baby of truth seekers. And sometimes we need to change the diaper of that baby...or it starts to cry. Anyway, so this begs the question: if the limitations of science precludes it from telling us about ethics...what should fill in that gap? Well it seems very clear that David Hume thought it was philosophy's job to fill that void...and he has in my opinion a highly underrated work on ethics that we'll probably be spending an entire episode on, but I guess the important point here is that David Hume didn't think that this responsibility fell onto the shoulders of religion. He was a huge critic of the religion of his time, primarily Christianity he has a very illuminating part of his work where he says that: "Generally speaking, the errors in religion are dangerous; those in philosophy only ridiculous." And what he means when he says this is that because of the nature of religion...you know...when you have 1500 pages of cryptically worded sentences that claim to be an inerrant moral doctrine for humans to follow...and that comes with certain consequences, you can take two sentences here and arrive at a beautiful conclusion about

how you should treat your fellow people with love and compassion...but then you can take these two sentences over here and justify the Spanish Inquisition. What he's talking about is that when theologians or religions make a mistake in the realm of ethics...it can be dangerous...but when a philosopher arrives at a wrong conclusion...well he just gets proven wrong and people laugh at him a couple centuries later. There's not much congruity with this episode and I apologize for that, but I want to spend the rest of this episode talking about one of these criticisms that Hume had of religion that was so unsettling...the echoes still are ringing to this day. No theologian since has adequately addressed his criticisms and now a whole sub-branch of philosophy exists because of it. So we've all heard someone be asked whether they believe in God. If their answer is yes...they're commonly asked WHY they believe in God. One common answer to this question is some variant of the statement: I look around me, I see what exists and I can't imagine this all springing into existence out of nothing. I think about before the universe existed...and these people say that nothing was there. Then poof! Magically something was. How do you explain that? Something can't come from nothing! $0+0$ doesn't equal one. It equals zero. Something must have brought all of this into existence. Well whenever someone makes this argument, they're doing it from a place where they're making several assumptions...most notably...a very easy assumption to make about causality. We know where they're coming from...we've talked about it on the show before! I needed a cause to come into existence. You needed a cause to come into existence. My parents and your parents needed a cause to come into existence. Every rock, tree, squirrel, moose, every blade of grass...uh...Oprah! We all needed a cause and you can follow that "causal chain" that we talked about...all the way back to the very beginning and you can say well, if everything INSIDE the universe needs a cause...why should the universe itself not abide by the same rules? Shouldn't IT need a cause as well? Both Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle both had a similar line of reasoning...Aristotle talking about a Prime Mover behind it all. Why is everything in the universe moving? If nothing ever moved it then matter would just be standing still! So who moved it? Oh, it must be some initial unmoved Mover! Just as it must be some un-caused cause at the

origin of the universe. His name is God and boy do you have a lot of explaining to do. For us to understand what David Hume is arguing against, we have to understand the way philosophers had been largely thinking about the cause of the universe for 2000 years before he lived. We find this in Aristotle. So as we know, when Aristotle talked about the "cause" of something, he wasn't using that word in the same way we use it in today's world...whenever HE talked about the cause of something, he was talking about four different causes that explain any one thing. The material cause, what the things made of...the formal cause, the form or internal makeup of the thing...the efficient cause, the initiator of the thing and the final cause...the goal of that thing. Well when Aristotle arrived at this method and he looked around him at the things in nature, he realized something. Whenever something comes from nature, three of those causes are always pretty much the same thing. All of them but the material cause. The formal, efficient and final causes are always the same. Take one of those white wispy seeds of a dandelion floating through the air in the summertime. A dandelion is from nature, so it should abide by this rule. What is the efficient cause, or initiator of the dandelion seed? Oh...it was a dandelion. Okay, what is the formal cause, or the internal makeup of that seed? Well, within that seed lies the potentiality to become the form of a dandelion. Alright, what is the final cause or function of that seed? To become a dandelion. People over the years looked around them in nature...tried this with enough examples and eventually believed in the rule so much that they started using it to work backwards. You know...it was believed for some time that if something came from nature and you only knew the formal cause of that thing...you could assume that the efficient and the final cause were the same. To know something, using this line of reasoning is to know the formal cause. By knowing the formal cause, we can infer the efficient cause. In other words...by knowing the effect of something in the natural world, we can infer the cause. Well this was fine when it came to most things...but as we enter the age of enlightenment...we're heading into an entirely different world. This is the age of Newtonian Physics. Times are changin'! Aristotle's argument about the Unmoved mover? It's only necessary if the primary state of matter is to be stationary, but in Newton's physics...it was to be in

motion. Aristotle's idea of things having four causes? The only cause in this Newtonian world is comparable to the efficient cause of Aristotle...much closer to the way WE use the word cause in modern times. David Hume living in this world makes it very obvious in his work that he's looking at the universe in terms of Newton's worldview: "[A]ll causes are of the same kind, and that in particular there is no foundation for that distinction, which we sometimes make betwixt efficient causes, and formal, and material ... and final causes" So this whole period is a hotbed for advancements in philosophy, the natural sciences...it's only fitting that David Hume would apply a skeptical eye to this common assumption that people were making that we can look at an effect that we see in the natural world...and assume certain things about the cause. This assumption ran deep...even when it comes to the most seemingly obvious causes you could imagine. He uses the example of billiard balls. Let's say you had pool ball one sitting on one side of a pool table... and a second ball...let's call it pool ball 2 sitting on the other side of the pool table. You hit pool ball one across the table...it hits...the second one and pool ball two is launched forward. Well David Hume says that it seems really obvious to us that pool ball one...CAUSED...pool ball two to be launched forward. And it's very human of us isn't it? I mean we're born into a world with all of this different stuff swirling around us everywhere...how can we make sense of it all? The way we make sense of it and make what otherwise would be a chaotic mess of unrelated phenomena happening all around us and make it into an ordered universe that we can comprehend...is by looking for causal connections between things. We see the pool ball hit the other pool ball and we assume that the first caused the other one to move. We see the squirrel jump out of the tree, attach itself to our face and ravage your eyes and forehead...and we assume the squirrel caused that damage. But what Hume would say is that when you really think about the relationship between the pool balls honestly, you realize something. You realize that causality is not something you can see. You may say that the movement of pool ball one causes the movement of pool ball two, but in reality, all you know for certain is that the movement of pool ball two FOLLOWED pool ball one. Like, you can't look in between the two balls when they hit each other and SEE the causal connection

between them. How could you? You don't see some spark of light in between them or something. And you could be saying, well who cares? One OBVIOUSLY followed the other, let's just assume that they caused each other. Hume would say...you can't do that! For example, day always FOLLOWS night...but night doesn't CAUSE day! So on one hand, we have this idea of cause that is an extremely important thing to us that we want to hang onto because it's truly one of the only ways we can make sense of the world, but then on the other hand...it can't REALLY be validated beyond a shadow of a doubt by experience or reason. In other words, probably not the most solid idea... to look at an effect in the world and say that we can assume any number of things about the cause of that effect. But nevertheless, when people argue for the existence of God as a creator of the universe, this is exactly what they're doing. David Hume makes a lot of arguments against this way of thinking...the first and most obvious of which is that there's no reason to assume that the universe had a beginning at all and that just because it doesn't make sense to you that something can't come from nothing, how arrogant and lazy of you to project your humanity onto the universe as a whole. Not to mention most of the people making this argument have no problem conceiving of an un-caused being that exists eternally...you know it seems just as difficult to fathom the idea of a being never dying! Anyway....There are more interesting arguments by David Hume when he's arguing against the Teleological argument or the Cosmological argument. The basis for the cosmological argument as you guys know is that something must have created the universe...we'll call that creative mechanism God...and this God must have certain qualities A. Non-physical because if it was physical you could break it into reliant parts and ask what created those parts. B. Eternal...again this God NEEDS to be outside the bounds of time and space or else you could ask what happened a day before God was created...C. God needs to be un-caused or necessary because to be caused raises the question of who caused God. Again, operating from the premise that the universe HAD to have been created...philosophers through the middle ages were deducing what qualities this "thing" that created the universe must have. Non physical, eternal, necessary, un-caused...and then from here they started tacking on all sorts of things like

God is infinite and wise...and then from there its just a short jump to applying human characteristics to God...you know God is good and just...and from there, it's not too far away from saying that this is the God of the Old Testament. Well, what are people doing when they make these assumptions about what the "cause" of the universe must be and they found it in an observation about what the universe is? They are looking at an effect in the natural world (the universe) ... and they are assuming things about the CAUSE of that effect (that this god must exist and that he must have these qualities). When people were thinking like this back in David Hume's time, it was grounded in Aristotle's four causes...by knowing the formal cause of the universe...we can assume certain things about the efficient cause of the universe. So, in other words, like causes produce like effects. But David Hume argues that even if we grant that we can make inferences about the cause of an effect by only looking at the effect...even if we realize how tumultuous that whole process is...we gotta be really certain we don't overstay our welcome here. After all, if like causes produce like effects, then aren't we still assuming a lot about what this God has to be? For example, Hume would say...a basketball hoop is a finite creation...it was created by a finite creator, after all. Like causes produce like effects, right? Well, if the God of the cosmological argument exists, then the universe is finite...there has to be a place where God ends and the universe begins...so shouldn't we assume that the cause of that effect is finite as well? You could do this with most qualities people assign to the creator of the universe. The point is...there's a big difference between saying that some thing created the universe...and saying that that thing also is infinite, wise, good, you know anything you want to tack onto it...that it loves you...that it knows you by your first name...that it wrote a book of rules for you to follow...that it wants you to get the job you just applied for...if you've listened to the show, you've heard this all before. But David Hume, once again, brilliantly shows in another area of human thought, if you're not careful, just how many assumptions you can make that are completely unqualified. You know he gives an example like this: If I went to McDonald's and I sat down and ordered a hamburger...I can assume certain things about the creator of that hamburger. I can assume that they're really good at making hamburgers...I can assume

that they're being paid to make that hamburger...but I can't assume things like: this person made this hamburger with me in mind...or that this person has red hair...or that this person is a fan of disco music. All of those things would be unqualified assumptions that it is MY job to validate. Problem is, in the case of the McDonald's worker, I can just go back and shake the guys hand and get to know him. In the case of the creator of the universe...well he's playing hard to get. A good place to end today is this: in David Hume's eyes we were making a myriad of assumptions about the origins of the universe. Maybe the universe is eternal, maybe it spontaneously arose by chance...maybe it didn't need a cause...but either way his larger point is that we owe it to ourselves to think critically about this and not project our own humanity onto the universe. Whether you're religious or not, you believe that a LOT of people throughout history have gotten the answer to this question wrong because they hastily assumed things, right? It may seem intuitive that something can't come from nothing, because we look around us and see evidence of that in everything that exists in this macro level of existence...but then again, our flawed human minds, our minds that one day when we were young just arrived at this confident opinion about how it doesn't make sense that something can't come from nothing...case closed! Our imperfect human minds...may not be the most qualified things to make suppositions about the causality of the universe. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

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David Hume part 2

Episode #052

This is a transcript of episode #052 on David Hume. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Just think for a second about what happened on the last episode of the show. We all learned about David Hume, right? Here's this guy...Scottish philosopher...the foreman of what's known as the Scottish Enlightenment...living in the 1700's...calling into question all kinds of stuff...the cosmological argument for God's existence...the Teleological argument for God's existence...Aristotle's four causes which was *scandalous* at the time that he did it...he even called into question causality itself...I mean what was wrong with this guy? Was he abused as a child, does he have some sort of bum leg that makes him angry at the world like Dr. House? Why is this guy ruining the party? No, David Hume wasn't any of this stuff...but if there was one thing he was, it was a skeptic. There's this weird way that people look at skeptics sometimes. They think that there's some sort of relationship between skepticism and misery...the more skeptical you are, the more miserable you are. But this is not the case! Skeptics can enjoy a good novel! Skeptics aren't less capable of being happy or something. A long, long time ago...I remember being 9 years old and watching a movie with a group of people...semi circle of couches...looking at a TV...the movie was Star Wars. Don't remember exactly which episode it was...but you get the point...space laser beams, space ships flying through the air...and yes space explosions. Now...let me just say...before you people start judging me: I was a humble 9 years old in this story...OK? My intentions weren't bad...I was innocent! There was a genuine curiosity I had! So, I'm looking at the giant space battle unfolding and I notice something: Why do all these explosions look like they're out of an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie? Shouldn't the lack of gravity be affecting these? Shouldn't the

oxygen levels or something be affecting them? Why do these explosions look just like the explosions within the atmosphere of Earth? So I decide to pose the question to the group...big mistake. This guy that was like 35 years old turns and looks at me and says: thanks a lot! you just ruined the entire movie for me. and I look around the room and all the rest of the kids are like scowling at me now! you know, there's this mentality that ignorance is bliss...and any skepticism about anything just makes you progressively less happy. But then I think there's a level above that where you realize how completely out of your control everything outside of your mind is and you can become even more happy than the ignorant person, but few people embody this spirit more than David Hume. Like if you were to sit and have a conversation with the guy, you would see what all of his friends and colleagues unanimously talk about whenever they write something about him: the guy was cheerful, witty, brilliant, happy, jolly...he was like a big skeptical Santa Claus. Even towards the end of his life when he was terribly sick and dying...I mean just put yourself in that situation for a second...it's easy to imagine wallowing in your own misery...even then he remains with this really skeptical, wise cheerfulness. The great Scottish economist Adam Smith that we talked about...a good friend of Hume during his lifetime said:"Poor David Hume is dying fast, but with more real cheerfulness and good humor and with more real resignation to the necessary course of things, than any whining Christian ever died with pretended resignation to the will of God."You hear the testimony of people that knew the guy and so many of them talk about having these sorts of deep intellectual conversations with him and he is just brilliant and funny and cordial...And he LOVED having these conversations with people. Now, one of the main recurring conversations that he was going to be having during his lifetime was on the subject of whether God exists and if it does... what qualities we can ascribe to that God. He would've gotten these questions mostly from religious people that understandably felt very criticized by his thinking...and what we're going to talk about next is one of the most common arguments he would have fielded in one of these lively discussions...this would have been one of the most common arguments for God's existence during his time period...recently it's lost a lot of steam just because of the concept of Natural Selection,

it's lost a lot of its bargaining power...yet nonetheless, people still use this argument ALL THE TIME in today's world...so how fortunate for us that we can think about David Hume's rebuttals to the argument and have it help us not only practically speaking in a conversation setting, but also help us with our own personal development. The argument is sometimes called the Teleological Argument...even though there are multiple teleological arguments... sometimes called the argument from design. the argument from analogy is in here...the watchmaker Argument...just call it whichever one you like the best. So if someone was sitting down having a conversation with David Hume and making this argument for God's existence one of the ways they may have started out is by painting you a picture in your mind's eye. They'd say, imagine you're walking down a beach. Sand beneath your toes. The ocean roaring on one side of you. Little birdies chirping in the distance. You look down in the sand and you come across a watch. You pick up this watch and your intelligence recognizes something. You look at the cogs and levers and numbers and hands and you know that these parts weren't just arranged by happenstance or randomness...no you recognize a design when you see one. You may not know WHO created the watch, or WHY they created the watch or anything like that, but one thing is for certain: this is not a byproduct of RANDOMNESS. This watch was designed. The argument then takes this point and applies it to the universe: Look at how well suited everything is for the purpose it serves! Look at how I breathe oxygen and oxygen happens to be all around me! Look at how I eat plants and animals and they happen to be all around me constantly reproducing so I can persist! How convenient that I live essentially in a Terrarium that's been perfectly designed for my existence? This extends beyond human life, by the way... just look at how the universe OBVIOUSLY has order! Look at the law of gravity, look at the laws of motion, look at the laws of thermodynamics or any constant in the universe that creates this order...those things OBVIOUSLY aren't just RANDOM right? So they must be intelligently designed. Now I put that last sentence the way I did purposefully, for you to recognize the real statement that the argument is making here. The only alternative to the world being a chaotic, un-ordered random mess...which would be the natural state of things if it truly WERE

random...the only alternative is that things were designed by some higher intelligence. Take a look at the human eye, for instance. If the human eye was truly just a random configuration of particles...it would look like a chicken liver. It would be this bloody, mangled mess laying on a table...completely useless when it comes to seeing the world. How convenient, that you look at the human eye and it is so elegantly put together, that there is a retina and a cornea and complex systems regulating eye pressure and all the things that go into making just your eye work so well to do what it does. How can any right thinking person call that randomness? You criticize ME for having beliefs based on a leap of faith...you'd have to be Evil Kineval to make that leap of faith...to look at the human eye and believe that it just randomly came together somehow? We have two choices and which one is more reasonable to you: that something intelligently designed all of this stuff or that this is the byproduct of unbridled randomness with no direction at all? Well, before we continue, just take a second to revel in the understanding of how difficult this would have been to argue against in the 1700's. I mean, I've said it on this show before, if I lived pre-Natural Selection, I NEVER would have questioned whether this place was designed...it would have seemed so obvious to me. Consider for a second that David Hume DID question it. Real quick I just want to clear something up because I feel like there might be a few people out there that are saying hey, what so you just blindly accept that natural selection is the way that it happened? Don't you think that's a little dogmatic Stephen West? Just assuming that it's the truth? Well I agree that would be presumptuous if that's what I was doing, but that's the beauty of Natural Selection when it comes to this argument. It's not that Natural Selection has to be true beyond any shadow of a doubt...it's that the linchpin of the Watchmaker Argument is that you have two choices: which is more likely? a highly convenient collection of unbridled random particles...or that something intelligent designed it this way? What Natural Selection offers, whether it's true or not, is an alternative explanation! An explanation for how things may seemingly be intelligently designed for this environment, but in reality some random mutations corresponded with the environment better than others...this gave those creatures a severe reproductive advantage over the rest of their

species...and it's not that we were designed so that we perfectly correspond with the climate and living conditions on this planet...it's that all the other billions upon billions of creatures over eons that DIDN'T fit nicely into these conditions died off long ago...Again the profundity of Natural Selection in the context of this argument is not that it is true beyond a shadow of a doubt..but simply by virtue of it existing as a theory it destroys this false dichotomy that people were operating from during the 1700's. That it's either designed...or completely random. Here's a way that randomness can seem designed if its directed by the climate of a planet over billions of years. And another thing, does this really DISPROVE the existence of this designer?Well we'll talk all about that, but let's talk about David Hume. When David Hume heard this argument he would have had a lot to say. So let's break down the core of the argument: there are things from nature that appear to be designed...like eyeballsand there are things that are man made that appear to be designed...like watchesthese two things share some quality: people interchange what that quality is all the time...they say complexity...symmetry...that both things are in some way a means to some end...whatever you want to put there, the argument is the same: they share certain qualities...a certain "intelligence" between them. Well, we know...in the case of the watch that those qualities were put there by an intelligent designer...a human. Well if we accept the premise that similar effects typically have similar causes...knowing that, it seems pretty likely when we see those qualities in nature...THEY TOO were put there by an intelligent designer. His name is God, buy his book at the Barnes and Noble near you. Now David Hume attacks this argument at basically every...single...point in the argument. I mean, if you wanted him to do the thought experiment we just did of him walking along a beach...there wouldn't be many sentences in that analogy that he wouldn't be able to say: now hold on! I think you're making several assumptions there now aren't you? I'm going to go over them all eventually, but let me start with the most general: David Hume just thinks it's a terrible analogy. He says that one thing he's noticed over the years...over the course of his life...is that whenever you're making an analogy...the further away two things are from each other...the less effective of an analogy it's going to be. Like...comparing Tangerines to

Oranges is going to be a much better analogy than comparing a horse to a house cat...just because they have four legs. Hume would say...look we're pretending as though this majesty of Nature is comparable to a watch...but is it REALLY that similar? Think of all the massive differences! Nature is primarily alive...a watch...or things designed by a human...are never alive. Nature has a quality of self-sufficiency...it regulates and maintains itself...human artifacts need constant maintenance. Hume would say if you just look at the universe there are a lot of things it resembles a lot more than some intelligently designed human artifact...so why stop there? Hume would say, this is a poor analogy...but let's continue. I mean I could sit here all day and argue about your analogy, but for the sake of argument let's just move forward so that I can break down the next sentence in your thought experiment. That there is some resemblance between eye balls and watches...some resemblance between things in nature and things intelligently designed by human beings...that is ONLY explainable by there being an intelligent designer of the universe. After all, these people are claiming to PROVE the existence of God right? The onus is on them here. Well when you put it in these blunt terms, it doesn't seem that difficult to refute...I mean...all David Hume needs to do is come up with an alternative explanation...ANY alternative explanation that corresponds with this example and he's done his work. For the record, David Hume gives several. He says maybe everything arose by chance...maybe there are an infinite number of universes where every possibility is actualized and we just got really lucky. Keep in mind, a lot of people using this argument in the time of Hume would have been arguing this as a QED, mathematical PROOF of God's existence. This specific point by Hume is not supposed to be some revolutionary argument...it's just supposed to cut the legs out from under someone that there is literally no other explanation for why things appear to be designed. If you find one of those people...make a YouTube video...you've found a rare Pokemon. In reality...this is not a revolutionary argument by David Hume here...alright...most people making this argument are reasonable and they aren't saying that this PROVES the existence of God beyond a shadow of a doubt...they're just saying which is more likely...intelligent designer or that everything arose by chance. So let's do a

quick recap of Hume's rebuttal so far. First, the analogy is a terrible one in the first place, there are so many fundamental differences between things in nature and things that humans create that to pretend as though things necessarily follow from this comparison is just plain irresponsible. But let's say the analogy works: Hume says an intelligent designer STILL isn't the only explanation for the resemblance you see...maybe its chance...maybe there's an infinite number of universes and we got lucky...he definitely would've included Natural Selection in the mix here and probably several other theories after 300 years of human thought...but EVEN if we ignore this and we tap out...EVEN if we accept that you have now proven that there is an intelligent designer behind the origins of the universe...Hume then argues...what have you proven the existence of? Let's be real, this argument isn't used by philosophers to argue to other philosophers that there MAY have been a cause behind the origins of the universe...philosophers realize this is a possibility...barring some exceptions philosophers are some of the LEAST arrogant people you'll ever meet just because of the process they engage in...but the reality is: the people who are typically making this argument want to prove the existence of what? The God of the Abrahamic religions. Just like in the case of the Cosmological Argument...David Hume is going to argue that the people who use this argument are using it to prove the existence of an intelligent designer...and then they're assuming hundreds of things ABOUT this intelligent designer that there is no mention of in the thought experiment and there is no justifiable basis for believing. Again, EVEN IF WE ACCEPT...the existence of an intelligent designer of the universe, what have we just proven the existence of? Think about it: all we know about this designer for certain is that it was CAPABLE of designing the universe...nothing more! Hume would ask...does this designer that we're talking about HAVE to be Omniscient? No, not necessarily. Okay, does it have to be Omnipotent? Does this thing have to be all powerful for it to have created the universe? Well, no. It just needed to be powerful enough to create the universe. Hume would say: yeah this God is powerful, but ALL Powerful? Yeah this God is knowledgeable...but all knowing? .Let's not even talk about the hundreds and hundreds of assumptions we're making on top of this...about whether this God made all

this for us...or whether this God cares about whether you're mentioning its name too close to a forbidden word or not...can we even ascribe omniscience and omnipotence to it? David Hume would say no. And he'd keep taking you down this path. He'd say, you know since I'm granting that this intelligent designer exists...let's get to the bottom of exactly what we can know about this designer. How bout this one: people often would say...God is perfect. Well, can we assume that this intelligent designer is perfect? After all, we're likening the design of the universe with the design of a watch lying on the beach designed by an EXTREMELY imperfect human intelligence. Can we assume that it took a PERFECT being to create this universe? Hume would say: how about this...can we even assume that it's one designer? Why should we after all? Did one human being design and create that watch? No, typically when things are designed it is an entire TEAM of designers to execute one thing...why shouldn't we assume there was a TEAM of Gods designing the universe? Also, Hume would argue that to claim that human intelligence needed a designer is to imply that something that is supposedly analogous to human intelligence ALSO needed a designer...so who designed the intelligent designer? We're left with an infinite regress. Hume also brings up how if we're being honest about the evidence at our disposal and not just ignoring stuff that doesn't correspond with what we already believe...it's easy to find elements of nature that make it seem NOT intelligently designed. For example, that recurrent laryngeal nerve that seems INCREDIBLY counter-intuitive if you're intelligently designing something...uh...the appendix we don't need...you know Hume would say something like the process of rain makes sense as part of an intelligent design, but why would there be devastating floods or winds if this was an intelligently designed system...etc. These sorts of imperfections are things that we could point to, using the same logic as the argument by design and say that the universe is obviously NOT designed. Maybe the best argument referred to by Hume is the idea that if you're walking along a beach and find a watch in the sand that stands apart from everything else and some part of you intuitively KNOWS it is intelligently designed, then if that implies a grand designer of nature, then the ocean is a watch. Every grain of sand on that beach is a watch. The snack shack made out of palm trees where you buy your

disgusting paper tray of nachos is a watch. Yet, you know the watch is intelligently designed because it stands out from what...everything around you that is ALSO intelligently designed? Let's get something straight here: none of these arguments by David Hume proves that there ISN'T an intelligent designer that cares about human behavior. For example, what if the universe was intelligently designed and God just took a very inefficient path to get to where we are now. But in fairness to Hume...in keeping with his cheerful skepticism that you no doubt would have been welcomed with in one of these conversations...I think his real intention is to get us to see how many unfounded logical leaps we are capable of making when we have a dog in the fight. A great lesson to take from Hume as you continue growing throughout your life. So as you can probably imagine...saying the stuff David Hume did about religion and all of the assumptions they were making wasn't the best way to stay under the radar. In fact, historically it's been a great way to find out whether you're right about all this stuff you're talking about if you know what I mean. But I want to make sure we understand who David Hume was: David Hume was not a militant anti-religious person...David Hume was not a Richard Dawkins...flying spaghetti monster.

No...During his life, David Hume was more like one of those Apache Helicopters...flying on the horizon...you can't even see them but they can shoot you and when they do...you lose a leg... And the reason I say that is because there was no way he was going to publish this stuff during his lifetime...he knew it was a hot potato. He went up to his friend Adam Smith and said please, please do me one favor when I die...make sure this work gets published! Adam Smith said forget that. Find someone else man.

So selfishly, I kind of wish he DID come out with all this stuff just to see the backlash that would have happened to him, but on the other hand...being at arms length from that kind of hostility gave him opportunities that he otherwise wouldn't have had...a sort of freedom in his work. You know...he recognized that not everybody that believes in this God of the Abrahamic religions founded their beliefs in philosophical proofs. The reality is...if you asked most people who have a belief in God WHY they believe in God they're probably not going to stop, look you in the eye...and evoke the Cosmological argument.

You know...people base these beliefs on a lot of different things and David Hume in many of his shorter works addresses some of these things that people cite as reasons why they believe. For historians of philosophy...this is typically regarded as making a distinction between Hume's critique of Natural Religion vs Revelation.

So, this wasn't an unpublished work..this was a highly controversial essay released in his famous Enquiry of human understanding. One of the topics David Hume dedicates an entire essay to is the concept of miracles. You know, in today's day and age...you don't have to look past your Facebook feed to find news stories where...you know..a baby is saved from a fire...or a single person survives a train wreck...and people leave comments. And if you think your Facebook feed is the only time and place in history you're going to find people calling these events miracles...or the providential hand of God intervening and sparing their life for a few more years...well you're wrong. The 1700's were rife with this sort of thinking...and why shouldn't they have been honestly? I mean, if you believe in God why shouldn't these things reinforce your belief. Think about the fiery train wreck that the one person survived. Why did they survive when so many others perished? They should have died! How convenient! Mere coincidence? Or the creator of the universe intervening?

Well one big thing David Hume would want us to do when we look at events like these is make a distinction between miracles...and extraordinary events. Because in his mind...there is a HUGE difference in the implications here. Was that person surviving the train wreck unscathed a miracle? Or just a highly unlikely extraordinary event?

HE would say it was an extraordinary event. See, to David Hume... a miracle is something that only an all powerful God would be capable of. A miracle is a temporary suspension of the laws of nature. A miracle is when someone is levitating off the floor. A miracle is when someone is raised from the dead. The train wreck...well that could have been coincidence right? He gives his rule of thumb when it comes to miracles here:

“When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened.”

And what he's saying here is which is more likely? That the laws of nature were suspended in your favor by a supernatural God? Or that someone may have been deceived. Many of the Abrahamic religions are mutually exclusive in the claims they are making in this regard...they believe in the legitimacy of their religion because of the miracles performed and the fulfillment of prophecy...yet they're more than willing to turn a blind eye to the miracles that the other religions use as the basis for their beliefs. David Hume's just saying lets make a distinction between miracles and extraordinary events...and when it comes to miracles...not that it proves they didn't happen, but which is more likely...that the laws of the universe were suspended in your favor or that the miracles you believe in are the same as the countless other miracles that you're skeptical about.

When it comes to extraordinary events...David Hume would have said well what do you expect? With as many moving parts and as complex as the world is...we can just expect a certain number of crazy coincidences. By the way, what's the alternative...that in a completely random world NOT governed by a creator that there wouldn't be any random coincidences? No one would ever survive a train wreck? In that completely random world as soon as you're on a train and it goes off the rails...you're dead? Randomness is that predictable?

Another topic that David Hume discusses that is going to segue nicely into our next episode is another thing that people often use to justify their belief in some higher power: the concept of an incorporeal soul. Maybe we have no basis for believing a lot of things, but there seems to be something about humans that is different right? There's something more to these bodies than just flesh, bone and chemicals. What about the soul? Well, we'll pick up here next time when we get to the bottom of the way Hume believed humans understand the world. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

David Hume pt. 3

Episode #053

This is a transcript of episode #053 on David Hume. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So it would be very tempting to take what we've learned about David Hume so far and label him a big fat cheerful dude that spent his life bagging on religion. A Jesus hater. But David Hume wasn't a Jesus hater...he didn't even know the guy! But if we want to understand David Hume...it's important to understand what David Hume was trying to do during his lifetime... what questions was he trying to answer? I want to begin the show today with one of the most iconic and provocative quotes that ever left the mouth of David Hume. Now, this episode will look at this quote and what it means from multiple different angles, but I want to say it once now just as a bookend to the episode because I think it is very illuminating of the aims of David Hume and how ultimately he set his sights on something much, much larger than just religion in his work: "If we take in our hand any volume; of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." Now it sounds like old Humey is getting a little extreme here? Isn't He? Well, don't worry if you didn't catch exactly what he said about the two things you look for before you throw something in the fireplace and deem it to be sophistry and illusion...trust me...what he was trying to do with all of this will make sense at the end of this episode. So with that...as promised let's talk about the soul. I...am not a hamster running around a wheel at Petco. Alright? I'm more than that. Look into the eyes of the hamster...is anything going on in there? No. Ah but look into my eyes and what a difference! Ask me what kind of music I like, ask me

what kind of poetry I like. Ask me to tell you how I'm feeling today...ask me to tell you about my favorites memories or my goals and I can relay to you all kinds of thoughts that a hamster could never even dream of. What is the hamster thinking at Petco? He's not thinking anything...he's thinking wow, this is a really long wheel. The point is, there's an obvious difference between us human beings and the rest of the animals..people have all kinds of different ways of defining exactly what this difference is...but whatever qualities you use...there must be SOME explanation. And how about THIS explanation, there is an incorporeal soul that is responsible for it. Now this word, soul, has been hijacked all throughout history... and it's been used to mean a wide variety of different things. In fact, it's often that way by design...it's a tactic used to avoid criticism. The concept itself is so mysterious and transient and it's been used to mean so many different things throughout history...that to even leverage a criticism against the concept of a soul existing always leaves the believer in the soul with an out, right? Oh, you're not talking about what I mean when I say soul. Yeah those Greeks were obviously primitive in their understanding of a soul and didn't know what they're talking about, but my soul...mine's different! For anyone thinking about these things in 2015 like we are...for anyone that wants to be fair to other people's beliefs and really open-minded to all the possibilities out there...you can start to feel a little weird and frustrated when you're having these conversations. Do you know what I'm talking about? Like, how do you get to the bottom of something that's so illusive? How do you criticize something with such a fleeting definition attached to it? This tactic isn't just something used throughout history when it comes to the soul...there are a lot of pseudo intellectual scientists that do this in today's world...you know they'll just say the word consciousness 185 times without ever defining terms and it just makes for a climate where it's very difficult to lob a complaint against them because it's difficult to know what you're even criticizing. I don't even think HE knows what you're criticizing...and he can always side step and do the Heisman trophy stiff-arm away from weak aspects of his definition. Now this game that people like this play was something that David Hume even in the 1700's realized was going on. The reason why I say this is because even though David Hume WAS skeptical about the

notion of us having a soul, in keeping with the general skepticism that surrounded EVERYTHING we think we know if you're David Hume...he doesn't spend much of his time refuting the possibility of us having a soul...most of his time is spent refuting individual characteristics that people attach to this soul. This... looks familiar right? Not denouncing the idea of a God existing at all, but pointing out all the unfounded assumptions we're making about that God once we've assented to the belief. Not denouncing the idea of there being an intelligent designer, but pointing out all the unfounded assumptions we're making about what that designer must be like once we believe in it. Although we should remain skeptical about ALL of this, Hume spends most of his time attacking the qualities that he thinks we lazily attach on to this soul: "Matter, therefore, and spirit, are at bottom equally unknown, and we cannot determine what qualities inhere in the one or in the other." So what he's doing in this quote is addressing the typical Platonic Dualism that we've talked about before...you know that we have things like thoughts that obviously aren't made of matter, so we cant ONLY be made of matter, we're made of a mixture of matter and our soul...and just because our physical bodies die doesn't mean our souls die...no they go on and do whatever souls do...you know it was this idea from Plato that made it so easy to make Platonism compatible with Judaism, Christianity and Islam throughout the middle ages. What Hume's saying though... is that even if this soul exists...what is matter? what is spirit? We can't even answer questions about what these things are, let alone be making grandiose assumptions about what attributes they must have. And one of the most common attributes people attach to their definition of the soul is that it is immortal. They say things like I can't imagine NOT existing after I die. They say that the soul is sewn from a different cloth, one not bound by the same limitations that matter and other things in the universe are beholden to that causes them to perish. The soul, that explains these qualities about my personality...is immortal! Hume in very Humian fashion by the way...willing to concede all kinds of unfounded points so that he cant point out FURTHER assumptions that this person is making...Hume is even willing in his response to grant that we have an immortal soul: "The soul therefore if immortal, existed

before our birth; and if the former existence no ways concerned us, neither will the latter." What he's saying is: OK you got me. We have an immortal soul. But why should we assume that that souls' existence concerns us in the slightest bit after we're dead? I mean after all, the matter that makes up our bodies existed before we were born doing other things right? Like, the atoms that made up your body at one point belonged to a cow... until your mom ate that cow when she was pregnant and a little piece of that cow became you in her womb. Now on that same note, the atoms that make up your body continue to exist after you're dead right? When our physical bodies die they get put in the ground...we get eaten by worms...the worms poop us out..we fertilize the ground...someone grows some beets there a thousand years later, we get consumed by the beet plant and become a little piece of this reddish vegetable that nobody likes! Now this is a very colorful, exciting narrative about what happens to our bodies after we die, but you get the point. After we die...the matter that makes up our bodies continues to live on... and it doesn't concern us at all when it does that. Yet, when we assume that the soul is immortal...and that we had nothing to do with it before we were born, why should we assume that we have anything to do with it after we die? What if souls are recycled...when your life is over it finds another life form to attach itself to. But for most people living in Hume's time and many people living today actually they wouldn't see this as an adequate explanation. Their unique definition of the soul that they've arrived at is not something that's... separate from you...it IS you. You know...I have a friend that believes this...when you ask him what he is...he says he is a spiritual being. He doesn't HAVE a soul...he IS a soul that's inhabiting this physical body...he's sort of behind his eyes looking out into the world. Now what my friend is doing when he says this is something that was very prevalent in thought during the Middle Ages, like we talked about. He's conflating the idea of a soul with the idea of a self. But David Hume is even skeptical about the idea of a "self" existing. What is this thing that we call our self...does it even exist? It's actually very eastern of him...there's a whole group of people today that think that many of the ideas of David Hume may have been influenced by Buddhism...there's a really interesting episode of the podcast Philosophy Bites with Nigel

Warburton about this very idea. They point to the similarities between David Hume's idea of what this "self" thing is...to the famous Buddhist dialogues between King Milinda and Nagasena...you know the King looks at her and says look obviously the self exists because we're talking right now and there are obviously two sides to this conversation...If you don't have a self, who am I talking to really? And Nagasena says, well how did you come to court today? How did you get into this room so that you could have a conversation with me...and the King goes...well I rode on my chariot. And Nagasena says...okay well what is that chariot? Besides just a collection of wheels and axles and a seat and pieces of wood...is that chariot something more than just the collection of those ingredients? And the King says No, I guess it's not. Why should we assume that we are more than just a collection of fleeting thoughts and emotions and experiences? What David Hume is really doing here is refuting Descartes! Remember Descartes Cogito Ergo Sum...I think therefore I am... The reason Descartes is even saying this is as a rebuttal to radical skepticism...he thinks this is one of the only things you CAN say that no one can disagree with. But leave it to David Hume to find a way to disagree and the thing he takes issue with is the idea of us knowing that there is an "I" EYE think therefore EYE am. When Descartes asks his readers to look within themselves and obviously they will find that there is a self present there...David Hume says no. What happens when HE looks within himself is that he just sees a bunch of thoughts and associations and ideas seemingly bundled together. Why is there necessarily some sort of continuity there, some self that possesses these things? There it is again! That same skepticism that Hume has brought to all of these different discussions we've talked about over the last couple episodes. There it is again...what's known as Hume's Fork...the idea that if someone makes a claim and it isn't instantly demonstrable or capable of being verified that we should "commit it to the flames for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion." And when you think about that maxim for a second...that doesn't leave...very much stuff to work with. But we want to know the truth...we're human beings...where does that leave us in that quest? Can we even know simple things...like if anything exists at all? For many people, Hume is the end of a long stint of inquiry by the continental rationalists

and British empiricists...Descartes says I think therefore I am and then uses the fact that he exists as a foundation to create an entire rationalist system skyscraper on top of that foundation of things we must know if that is true. John Locke comes after him and questions that skyscraper...you know we are born with a Tabula Rasa...a blank slate...we don't have any innate ideas and that ultimately any knowledge we claim to have is derived at least in some capacity by experience...Berkeley comes along and says if knowledge is ultimately based on experience, how do we know the universe exists when we're not experiencing it?...lucky for us... God is always experiencing it...all David Hume does is just take this line of thinking one step further. David Hume would say: We can't be certain that anything exists, but once you realize that...who really cares anyway? This is when we find out what he was getting at with all this skepticism. David Hume would say that once we get to this point where we acknowledge that we can't have certain knowledge about anything, we still find ourselves living in the world, right? I mean, sure love what you're doing Mr. Hume, I think it's lovely that you can be so skeptical about things ad infinitum, great. But we're still alive...right? I still gotta drive to work on Monday. You know, I still gotta pick my kids up from the pool when they're done swimming...we as a species still have to find the best way that we can to find connections and relationships between things in the natural world, the benefits of doing so are undeniable even if we can't know these things for certain. David Hume would have agreed with this wholeheartedly. He would have said look all this skepticism is not for the sake of being extreme or annoying or standoffish...there are good intentions behind it. What it is...is an advocacy for open-mindedness. The rigorous skepticism is just a means of making us never complacent...never willing to deem our thoughts on any matter an evolutionary endpoint....no further progress is capable of being made in this field...we're done. So once we've positioned ourselves atop this honest foundation that Hume lays out, how do we make sense of the world? David Hume would say: Custom is the great guide of human life. We may not be able to say with unquestionable certainty that pool ball one caused the movement of pool ball two, but the fact that we've observed it happening 100 times out of a hundred...the fact that it customarily happens...allows us

to be pretty sure that pool ball one is causing the movement of pool ball two. NOT CERTAIN! We shouldn't attach our egos to our ideas...we should always be willing and excited about being proven wrong about pool ball one causing the movement of pool ball two, but in our quest as human beings to make sense of this maelstrom of seemingly random phenomena happening all around us...custom should be our guide. David Hume says: "A wise man always proportions his belief to the evidence." Now hearing this maxim...it's obvious David Hume was a huge proponent of science. I mean, Richard Dawkins would read that quote and just start nodding emphatically to himself. When you watch the four horsemen of the Atheist apocalypse in a debate setting...they quote David Hume all the time, but the main difference between these guys and David Hume is that Hume didn't have as much of an agenda to promote science as THE means to arrive at understanding about the world. Now, I'm not saying these guys wouldn't be open-minded to a better way of arriving at understanding...and I'm not saying David Hume wouldn't have agreed with them if he lived today, what I'm saying is that in the 1700's when David Hume was alive, he wouldn't have had the same need or desire to deem science to be the absolute CORRECT answer as much as these people do in a debate setting, 300 years later where no better alternative has come forward yet. David Hume saw science and religion as two things that aimed to do the same thing. That doesn't make them both equally valid...he obviously would have seen science as a more reliable means, but he would have seen these two things as just two possibilities of the potentially millions of different systems we might use to arrive at understanding about the world around us. You know, Hume would say...say what you want about the verifiability of religion, but it does give you a perceived understanding of your place within the natural world. If you're born into the world with a blank slate and you quickly find yourself with a strong aversion to dying...and lions and lightning bolts and tons of volatile phenomena all around you that potentially threaten your existence...being told that the lightning bolt was just Zeus punishing a cockroach or just a means to an end of some God that loves you...that can bring you a lot of comfort in that setting. The same way that sciences perceived understanding of the world in the 1800's gave us comfort in

that setting...and was ultimately proven wrong. Again, Hume definitely would have seen science as a more useful means of gleaning this understanding, but he would have had a strong caveat attached to it that, look these are only two possibilities of arriving at understanding...let's always be open minded to arriving at something better. This was the optimistic...pioneering spirit that pervaded the thinking of this time period. For the first time in really, ever...Newtonian Physics are offering a way of understanding the order in the universe that doesn't necessarily involve a God constantly maintaining it. For the first time we're starting to have ways to explain the experiences human beings have when interacting with the world that don't have anything to do with having an immortal soul. This is the world David Hume is living in: a new frontier! This really is the linchpin of his entire anthology of work: to find the most reliable means of arriving at human understanding about the world around us...we've been led down a dark path in the past...and to make sure that never happens again let's be ruthlessly skeptical, open-minded to new possibilities and let's proportion our belief to the evidence...wherever it leads. Custom is the great guide of human life. The more predictable and repeatable that custom is...the more sure we can be of how valid it is. Short term variance may allow an experiment to be done once and it might produce a strange result and we might believe something incorrect for a period of time, but eventually you do the experiment enough times and custom WILL shine through. Now silly me I'm always looking for some sort of practical takeaway from these things and pardon me if this seems like I'm taking too much liberty with Hume's ideas here, but I think in addition to the point he's making about finding the most reliable means of arriving at understanding as a species, I think it is analogous to our personal lives as well. Think about what he's saying when he says custom is the great guide of human life. The more experiences that we have, the more honest, reliable, full and rich our understanding of the universe becomes. It would be very easy for a scientist to do one experiment and then spend the rest of his life trying to validate what he already thinks he knows. It would be very easy for a scientist to restrict herself to one tiny little subsection of science and never understanding anything about the world but daffodils or something.

But wouldn't some of that information about the rest of the world potentially allow the scientist to do their job better? On that same note, I have a friend whose in school to become a graphic designer. Now this guy is ambitious, alright? He has dreams of becoming one of the best illustrators of all time...he has dreams of creating these elaborate, highly creative posters depicting these incredible scenes. This is what he wants to do for the rest of his life. Now in this dedicated pursuit...he's decided to close himself off from the rest of the world. He doesn't want to learn about history or economics or anything new really, he doesn't want to go out and experience new things, he doesn't want to travel and see other cultures...he just wants to work on his illustrations and every once in a while look at what a couple other illustrators have created recently to draw off of. Now he's not the only guy that does this by any means...people do it all the time with other stuff...they close themselves off to anything outside of their small town...or from anything that is different than the collection of social conventions they were born into...but what's wrong with this insular approach to understanding the world if you want to do anything creative? Whenever you create anything...where does that come from? Does it come from somebody else's brain somehow? No, it comes from yours...and when you're coming up with an idea for a creative, visionary illustration that you're working on...the only ideas you could EVER possibly have are derived from the experiences you've had. Going outside of the box that you live in and broadening your horizons or experiencing new things...if you're a creative person...why wouldn't you want as many experiences to pull from as you possibly could? And in that same way, in the vein of David Hume, if you're trying to arrive at the most accurate and three dimensional understanding of the cause of the movement of pool ball two in this crazy world that we live in, wouldn't our understanding of it be more full and more honest and more rich, the more experiences we have with it? Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

David Hume pt. 4 - Art

Episode #054

This is a transcript of episode #054 on David Hume. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

I'd like to begin the show today by asking everyone to take out their Shakespeare bibles to the book of Macbeth, act 5 scene 5...just want to read a little excerpt: Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing. Now I'd like to read another excerpt that's equally as good as that by Shel Silverstein from his magnum opus *Where the Sidewalk Ends*:

Who wants a pancake, Sweet and piping hot? Good little Grace looks up and says, "I'll take the one on top." Who else wants a pancake, Fresh off the griddle? Terrible Theresa smiles and says, "I'll take the one in the middle."

What's the difference between *Macbeth* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* really? Both Literary Masterpieces that captivated the people of the time period they were released in. I mean, how can you really say that one is better than the other? Ask most people this question on your Facebook wall...what separates good art from bad art...or what separates good art from great art and they'll most likely retreat to a little protective cocoon of radical subjectivism, right? No art is better or worse than any other art on a cosmic level...it's purely personal preference. When a five year old says the cat in the hat is the greatest book ever written...there's nothing wrong with saying that and his opinion is no more or less valid than a some lady whose 65 years old and has spent every waking second of her life reading and critiquing books. There is no better or worse...just different. Consider the flip side of this...if every piece of art is good...then NOTHING is good. You know, I've been learning Moonlight Sonata on the piano lately and I was really

into the song and my friend was over and I wanted him to listen to it and have him see just how beautifully this song paints a picture in your mind's eye...so I pulled up a YouTube video and played him the song and he just...sat there. Nothing. Like, it looked like he was part of an experiment like a scientist removed the section of his brain where he comprehends that music is playing...he just looked up at me with the eyes of a herd of livestock...like, what? Yeah, you played the music and nothing happened. This is the same guy that will look you dead in the eyes and he's serious when he says it...he's not joking...he will look you dead in the eyes and say that Dubstep is the greatest music that has ever been composed on this planet. Let me tell you something...when a computer that is trying to log onto the internet in the 90's loves a woman...sometimes things happen. I'm just kidding I actually like dubstep music...but in keeping with our radical subjectivism from before...I have to have reverence for his opinion. You guys all know what I'm talking about you've all had a conversation with someone over the course of your life that liked a movie or a song or a painting and you KNEW unquestionably they were morons, but you couldn't say anything because...well there is no better or worse when it comes to art. Just different.

But is this really where this conversation ends? Is there really nothing more to discuss here? Honestly most of the people that take this position that no art is better or worse just different are probably just assenting to that belief lazily...they're probably just tired of thinking about it...but that doesn't mean they haven't landed on something philosophically respectable by accident. David Hume would have agreed with them strongly...but he would have thought they gave up too early when thinking about it...they stopped short of thinking about the REAL conversation that they should be having. David Hume would say Beauty's in the eye of the beholder. This is the layman's way of expressing the philosophical concept that there is no objective, cosmically defined, a priori beauty out there that we can somehow relate to. Contrary to people like Plato who would say there is an objective form of beauty that through rational inquiry and looking at beautiful things we can connect with it and understand...Hume would stick to his subjectivist guns and say that...no, there is no art that is necessarily better or

worse than any other art...after all custom, human experience is the great guide of human life. But just because there isn't a ideal form of beauty or good art for us to arrive at, that doesn't mean that everyone's opinion about what good art is is equally valid. See, what David Hume points out is that whenever we have these discussions with our friends about what a good song is or a bad song is...we're actually talking about multiple different things and then pretending as though we're only having one conversation. We pretend as though we're only merely discussing whether this song conforms with some form of beauty out there in the universe...and then when we think about it and realize that there is no obvious, objective form of good art that we can point to...we get frustrated and jump to the conclusion that there's nothing left to talk about...everyone's opinion is equally valid. But again, David Hume would point out that someone's opinion about what good music is...and whether good music is something objective are two different conversations to be having. After all, we may not be able to say definitively that the cat in the hat is worse than Macbeth...but is the five year old kid that reads his first book called The Cat in the Hat and proclaims from a mountain top that it's the greatest book ever written...is his opinion equally as valid as the passionate fan that's been reading and critiquing books for decades? David Hume would say no. This is actually something very common of this time period...thinkers were turning away from focusing on the cosmic or objective form of things and focusing more on the experience that individuals have when trying to connect with these things. David Hume is presenting a way not to judge the art itself, (which is a lost cause in his mind) but to judge our ability to judge, (which is possible). So at first glance...this may seem like a departure from the Hume we've been discussing the last few episodes, but it's actually remarkably similar! We may not be able to objectively define what Good or Bad art is, but look...we're still here right? We're still listening to Miley Cyrus...we're still listening to Justin Bieber...despite how willing everyone is to concede the point that everything is subjective...you still have that hateful, vitriolic burning sensation within you when you look someone in the eyes and they say that they like Friday by Rebecca Black. You still have that feeling that they are sadly, sadly mistaken. Where does that come from?It

reminds me of skeptical ideas we've talked about in the past on the show: you know...ask anyone if they think they know everything there is to know in the entire world...and they will invariably say...no. That's ridiculous, of course I don't know everything there is to know. Yet, so many people that would answer no to this question spend their lives desperately trying to validate what they already think they know. Now, In that same way...most people if you asked them about art would say that they think that art is entirely a matter of personal preference, yet we can all think of a person that fancies themselves a connoisseur of fine art or music or movies...and they never even HESITATE...to castigate someone else whose reasons for liking something are not as good as theirs are. Here's my point: We may say that what good art is is entirely subjective, but we're still making judgement about how good or bad art is all the time and we point to very specific things about the art to justify our claims. The perspective of the painting is incredible...the composition of the piece is great...the symbology the symmetry...people come up with all kinds of criteria for determining what something good is. Hume would ask the question: Are some of these criteria better than others?He would say...yes. In fact, he has five qualities that you should cultivate if you want to consider yourself a TRUE critic of any kind of art. Hume would say, look...what do we do whenever we have a disagreement about something scientific? Well, you consult an expert...you go and ask a scientist. That scientist garnered a specific set of skills over years of training that make him uniquely qualified to answer your question. Why is it crazy, to think we might be able to do the same thing when it comes to judging art? To spend years of your life judging art...cultivating a set of skills that renders us a master critic, or a "tastemaker" as Hume would put it. In tune with the standard of taste. This episode will talk about what it takes to look at art as it truly is, rather than at the mercy of your own prejudices and biases. But first, before we talk about Hume's correspondence course of how to become a proper critic of art, I want to talk about a few misconceptions here. There's kind of a speed bump here for a lot of people...I personally was guilty of making this mistake for many years of my life...and that mistake is that some people just think they've done it. I know what good art TRULY is. Silly humans...so confused about it

for centuries upon centuries...I've arrived at the promised land. Have you ever met that person who thinks their music is just better than everyone else's music and you're stupid if you don't realize it? Well, without exception, when you press those people on the reasons why they like the music they do, they point to one of these specific faulty criteria that Hume talks about that are truly founded on nothing. We're going to talk about a few of the most common ones here. They'll be good as references later on in the episode, but I guess the cool thing here is that: Don't just think about this episode as a look at Hume's Essay Of the Standard of Taste...don't just think of it like I would because I'm a masochistic person that likes to look at my own beliefs and find flaws in them and feel like I'm growing...no...these criteria that Hume talks out for what a proper critic is can also be used to reverse engineer the terrible arguments by angry people that need to cling on to their "refined" taste in something as a means of asserting themselves as superior to you. Take it from me, these criteria that Hume talks out are an incredibly useful tool if you want to quickly identify what assumptions people are making about what Good art is. That's the beauty of this essay in my opinion is that what we're talking about can be used both defensively AND offensively. So one of the things people commonly point to when they're asked why their music is so much better than everybody else's is nostalgia. Their music evokes a certain emotional state much better than any other music out there...and in that way it is superior. You know, you ask a million people what their favorite music is or what they think the greatest album ever written is...and what a coincidence that the vast majority of them would point to the music they listened to when they were a senior in high school, or the music they listened to during a point in their life when memorable stuff was going on. You see this reasoning from people all the time...and by the way it doesn't make you a bad person...I am horrendously guilty of this. Judge Judy would convict me in about eight seconds. You know...what otherwise would have been my senior year in high school for a long time I was homeless. I had a job but I wasn't old enough old enough to sign a lease for an apartment...slept in the back of my friend's car, slept on my friend's couches, rented a room from someone as long as I could, but these sleeping situations weren't always conveniently located when it came to the

work and school obligations I had on the other side of town. Miles away. So there was this giant street where I lived at the time called Meridian where I would wake up at 0 dark hundred...4am sometimes and I would start my two hour long walk down this street...buses didn't run that early. And as I was making this walk everyday I'd listen to the same two CD's over and over again. This was before the age of iPods with 10,000 songs at your fingertips...I had one of those non-skip CD players and I would just cycle in between these two CDs...I'd listen to them five, six times a day sometimes. And how convenient...that for the next several years whenever someone asked me what my FAVORITE music or what I thought the greatest music ever written was, I would point to these two albums. Now, this doesn't make me a bad person if I do this, but David Hume would want me to realize that this is a very unfair prejudice that I'm bringing to the table here...a prejudice that clouds my ability to be an expert at critiquing art. You could swap my body out with someone else...they could have had the exact same experiences that I did while instead listening to Britney Spears, and they'd have the exact same nostalgic emotions stirred up whenever Oops I did it again! came on the radio. But how well a piece of art evokes these subjective emotional experiences in you has nothing to do with how Good or Bad the art is necessarily. Another criteria that people use to justify why their taste in art is better than everyone else's is novelty...but its almost always not actually novel...they just THINK it's novel. This is another prejudice Hume would want us to leave at home if we're going to be the kind of "tastemaker" that he talks about in his famous essay. People do this all the time. Like, for example...my friend who thinks that Dubstep is the greatest music that's ever been written in the history of the world...he also thinks that SpongeBob Squarepants is the greatest TV show that has ever been created....like he thinks in 500 years people will look back on this time period and see it as...oh that was Spongebob season 12...and when you ask him why...there was one time he came over and I looked at him when he came in and I could tell there was amazement in his eyes.. and he goes alright Stephen last night I was watching Spongebob and there was this moment in the show that hit me like a semi-truck...like a spiritual semi-truck it just floored me...do you want to see it? Well, of course I do...so he pulled it up on

YouTube and this sponge-man that lives at the bottom of the sea I gather..he says something...I think it was that he referred to a city as a concrete jungle...and my friend stops the video and just stares at me. Did you hear that? He referred to it as a concrete jungle. I mean come on...you're just a hater if you don't recognize the poetic wordsmithing that is going on right before your eyes. You just don't want to admit that a cartoon is the pioneer of culture...concrete jungle? That is a profound metaphor on the level of the greatest poets from history. I couldn't bring myself to tell the guy that concrete jungle is a common phrase that people use...it's practically a cliché...but what an awesome example of this prejudice of false novelty that we often times bring to the table when critiquing art. I'm sure parents see this all the time when they're talking to their kids about their favorite music. You know...their kids...having never heard a 1-5-4 chord progression before might be listening to Miley Cyrus thinking wow this is the greatest song I've ever heard in my life...this is groundbreaking...what a talented gal. Their parents, aren't as impressed because it's just not new to them. They've seen decade after decade of the same formulaic, template song created because the industry knows there's a market for it. I've been guilty of this many times in the past...so now whenever I hear a song and say wow that's a really unique scale to use for that guitar solo or wow to switch the time signature there was a really novel idea...I try to think of David Hume. I try to take David Hume's advice and reserve judgement about it being better music simply because there is some ostensible novelty that I see. Maybe I haven't seen every piece of art ever created. One more common thing that people use to justify why their art is better than yours is complexity. The thinking is that something that is more complex than something else took more skill to execute and therefore is better in some way. People that think like this will look at a band like AC/DC and think they're terrible. You know...they're so simple and basic...I like music like Yngwie Malmsteen or Dream Theater where there's dozens of complex layers in every song. Other people would say it's the simplicity of AC/DC that makes them so brilliant...you know there's the saying perfection is not when nothing more can be added, it's when nothing more can be taken away. I've done this one too...I've thought that just because something takes more

mechanical skill to execute that it necessarily makes it better than something more simple. But take that thinking to it's natural conclusion! You can think of tons of music more complex than hair metal bands from the 80's...this person would have to recognize the utter superiority of things like Icelandic banjo picking and stuff like that. As long as a painting is more complex than another painting...it's instantly better? These are the kinds of questions to ask this person. So here they are: the five skills David Hume thinks are absolutely necessary if you want to consider yourself an honest, true critic of art in tune with the standard of taste: "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character" This might be the most dense sentence that Hume wrote in the entire essay, so let's break it down one piece at a time. So first, Hume thinks if you're going to be a critic of any kind of art...one thing you need is delicate taste...or to be perceptive of delicate sentiment. The idea here is that if you're going to be one of David Hume's ideal critics of art...you should at least be able to look at something and actually SEE the entire work that you're judging...including all of the finer details and choices that were made that makes the piece of art what it is. The thinking is if you look at a piece of art and someone asks you immediately after what you thought about this detail over here or how these two things work together over there...and you have no idea what they're even talking about..well you probably aren't paying close enough attention. The best example of this I can think of that we can all relate to is that not everyone hears a song the exact same way, have you experienced that before. Like often times when someone has never studied or written music or even if they're just not a hardcore fan of music that listens to it all the time or tries to break it down into it's individual parts...often times they listen to a song and they don't differentiate between the pieces of the song...they just listen to it as one whole. So someone will ask this person...what did you think of that syncopated drum part in the chorus and they will go...I didn't even notice it! I had no idea that was even there...I don't think of this song as all of these little details and layers coming together, I think of it as one sound that I'm listening to. Now this doesn't make this person dumb...and it doesn't make them incapable of ever being

able to see details like that, but David Hume would say that to be one of what he considers the ideal critics of art...they would need to spend time cultivating this eye for detail. Again, he's not saying that art with more details is necessarily better than art with less details...he's just saying that it seems pretty reasonable that one requisite before you call yourself an ideal art critic should be that you are actually looking at everything the artist put out there...not just a surface level, sensory experience of the art where you believe you see all the details. You can imagine how difficult this must be, just this first criteria by Hume. After all, when you look at a piece of art and you are trying as hard as you can to have an eye for detail, how can you be sure that you're actually seeing all the details as opposed to just BELIEVING that you're seeing all the details? What if you go the other direction? What if you read too far into something...what if an artist makes a painting and then over the years as it sits in his basement and his kids are playing down there one day and put a big scratch in the side of it...and now 200 years later you're reading into that line as the artists depiction of the progress of mankind? This truly is a delicate sentiment. The second thing David Hume says you need if you're going to be a true critic of art is pretty uncontroversial...practice. It makes sense...the more you practice something, the better you get at it. The more you practice judging art, the better you become at judging art. The funny thing here is that most people that consider themselves critics of art in today's world don't think of every new experience they have with art as an opportunity to develop their skills and become better...they think of it as an opportunity to see if this thing measures up to my refined set of expectations for it. Just an interesting difference in attitude. The third thing David Hume thinks we need to properly appreciate art is...to compare it to other art! This ones also pretty straight forward. There's a certain context that you garner from looking not just at your generation of art...or art that your friends recommend to you in your particular social circle...Hume thinks you should compare all kinds of art...don't just limit yourself to one kind! If the only movie you've ever seen is Fight Club, how could you possibly know whether it is a good movie or a mediocre movie or whether any details about the movie are noteworthy at all? The thinking is, you are a better critic of art when you understand

the piece of art you're judging within its proper context. David Hume thought this practice of comparison was incredibly important. The next quality you got to have if you're going to be an ideal critic in the eyes of David Hume is that you must be completely free of prejudice. Or...at least as free from prejudice as is possible. We've already talked about a couple of these that might be a problem...whatever personally brings you nostalgia or mistaking things to be novel when they really aren't, but what about removing the prejudice you carry because you like or dislike the person that made the piece of artwork? Think of how tempting it would be to hate a TV show produced by a member of the KKK? Or a painting by Hitler? On the other side...think of how tempting it would be to say that you absolutely LOVE a painting simply because you just spent two million dollars on it? Or because your step dad painted it while going through his mid-life crisis? Hume would say this.. is... a CRUCIAL skill to have if you're going to be critiquing art...you have to be able to separate yourself from these kind of things. The last one that predicates all the rest of these skills, and in many ways is the most important one of all is that you need a strong sense. To put it simply, you need to be able to see or hear or just be present to be able to experience the actual art that you're judging. I mean, a deaf guy is probably not going to be the best judge of music...you're probably not going to find the next siskel and ebert by interviewing people in the hospital that are in a coma...To be an ideal critic we need "Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, that alone entitles critics to this valuable character. What is Hume getting at here? Sure, we may not be able to say that this piece of art is objectively better than that piece of art, but is everyone's ability to judge things accurately the same? Can we say that some people are better judges of art than others? David Hume would say yes. It's really interesting how so many of these things that he tells us we need if we're going to be an ideal critic are really just us removing the clouds from the world that prevent us from seeing art as it truly is, rather than just how it relates to this narrow framework we've set up so far in life so that we can make sense of things. One of the most profound points in the entire essay to me is his idea that as subjective of a matter as art seems to be on the surface, there's definitely

something consistent about great art. A consistency that you don't see in other areas of inquiry where things seem more set in stone. The greatest scientist of our generation will probably not be the greatest scientist of the next generation. The philosopher we recognize as the best today will probably change as the centuries go on. But the Davincis the Homers the Shakespeares...the brilliance of these people is oddly timeless. I mean, how crazy is it that we can read a poem written thousands of years ago and still recognize it as greatness. What are we connecting with there? This discussion is far from over, but next episode we're going to look at it through the lens of a very different idea of beauty is and to borrow a pun from a guy on Twitter: I Kant wait to tell you about it. Thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 2 - The Introduction

Episode #057

This is a transcript of episode #054 on David Hume. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

One interesting thing to consider about even the most brilliant people that have ever lived is that many of them spend years and years of their lives in a state of complete confusion... about what would eventually become their area of expertise. It's funny, you think back to someone like Immanuel Kant...an Albert Einstein...a Sir Isaac Newton and it's easy to project onto these people an air of invincibility. It's easy to think of Kant as some sort of philosophical prodigy...you know...somehow he was just born with an incredible ability to revolutionize thinking, but in reality even someone like Kant spent many years of his life in a state of limbo...baffled about how to move forward with anything. I want to take you back in time to the earlier years of Kant's career...when he was but a young man from a poor family living in Prussia who was very much interested in philosophy. He had read a bunch of it. Was putting out work on it...he spent much of his early life writing on various things in the realms of science and philosophy, but if you read what he was writing during this period in his life...something was missing from it. He was kinda all over the place when it came to his fundamentals. Like, if you read his earlier stuff you'll see that it all feels very Kantian at its core. The stuff is filled with all kinds of foreshadowing to ideas that he talks about later in his more influential works, but whenever he starts talking even for a moment about epistemology...depending on which work you're reading the guy switches back and forth between a couple three different ideas. He was confused...But then something happened. He tells a story to explain what happened. Nobody knows how literally we should take the anecdote by Kant. Nobody knows whether this actually happened, or whether it was a metaphor or a parable...but then again if you're Immanuel Kant and you're going to make up a story

about yourself...I think you'd make up something a little more cool than this. you know its like saying your dad invented Toaster Strudel...why would you ever make that up? You'd make up something way cooler than that. And what Immanuel Kant says is that one day as he was in this state of confusion early on in his life...he was searching for answers...searching for clarity and he was re-reading David Hume and he was struck by something. Intellectually...he wasn't physically struck with a rolling pin...he said famously that something came over him in that moment...that he was: "I freely admit that it was the remembrance of David Hume which, many years ago, first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction." Keep in mind as you hear this that Kant is RE-READING David Hume when he has this eureka moment. He had already read Hume, gotten whatever he could from him the first time around and was STILL confused. It was only after going back and reading him again that he had this insight that would change everything...the way that HE looked at the world...the direction of his future thinking...and as it turns out...it changed philosophy itself. You know, there's something to take from this anecdote. If you're someone that feels stuck on a particular subject you've been thinking about for years...if you're someone who feels like you've exhausted every resource that's available to you when educating yourself on something...and you're STILL confused about it...this is a good lesson to take from Kant. Sometimes the answer may be behind you. Sometimes you may want to go back...sometime you may want to re-read things that you've already read in the past because who knows...for whatever reason when you first read it you weren't in the right frame of mind to receive it. maybe you weren't feeling well the day that you read it...Which brings me to the point of this episode and really the point of this entire podcast...I want to tell you about a man named Jesus Christ. Just Kidding. But in all seriousness, what if Kant had never gone back and re-read Hume? See, Hume's commentary on causality and all these assumptions we make about things that we see interacting in the world...this was a game changer for Kant. Because it was by reading that that he realized that even the great David Hume...the great skeptic himself...he was like Siri if you wanted to find assumptions in

arguments...Kant realized that EVEN DAVID HUME had been making a massive assumption all along. What was that assumption? Well let's talk for a second about the divide we're all aware of that existed prior to Immanuel Kant between rationalism and empiricism. Let's talk about it. For hundreds of years there was this scandalous and kind of complicated relationship between people when it came to how we arrive at knowledge. A schism between the rationalists and empiricists. They didn't always get along. In fact, sometimes they hated each other. Sometimes they all just started snapping and made really weird eye contact with each other and broke into one of those dance fight scenes like in West Side Story. They didn't agree on some stuff, but the point is that like the rival factions in West Side Story aside from all their territorial differences...they were actually remarkably similar in a lot of ways! I'm sure you guys have either had this thought or heard someone have this thought when you're talking to them about this great divide between rationalism and empiricism. Why does it need to be one or the other? Why can't we all just get along? Why can't it be a combination of the two? Rationalism AND Empiricism. And it's a good question. But the reality is, basically none of these people on either side of the argument really thought the other guys were COMPLETELY wrong. Like, if you were an empiricist you understood the value of reason when it came to drawing conclusions about the world...and vice versa. The question was: which is more imperative? Which was more important as a requisite to knowledge? You know, of course there are more extreme viewpoints on either side and you guys know I'm not aiming to define every rationalist with a single sentence, but the arguments are ones that we've heard throughout the history of this podcast. You got more extreme rationalists on one side like Plato for instance who talk about total knowledge of the universe being innate. He talks about how the process that we think of as learning is REALLY just a process of remembering things that we already know by virtue of them being programmed into us. Remember the story we talked about with Socrates and the slave boy that he teaches the basic ideas of geometry? The slave hadn't ever experienced geometry before. He hadn't ever seen or smelled or touched the things that Socrates was showing him, yet somehow he was able to use reason and arrive at the correct answer...as

if he already knew it. Socrates wasn't teaching him new ideas...he was delivering new ideas like a midwife delivers a baby. To someone like Plato, it was obvious that REASON was a much more important tool when it came to arriving at knowledge, and you know the story, Plato is seen as a rationalist. But then you got people like Hume right? Custom is the great guide of human life. Reason in his work takes a subservient role. Yes, he acknowledges people use their ability to reason and it IS very important, but ultimately all knowledge at least initially comes from experience. You can't just magically conjure up new ideas with this mysterious thing called "reason". They would argue that the slave boy from the story isn't REALLY unearthing new ideas when Socrates is drawing squares in the dirt...you know just through his life as a slave he's encountered concepts like addition and subtraction and the number four and all the other tools he'd need to reason to the correct answer...and he's just using these tools that he initially gained through experience on a new project...i.e. the squares Socrates is drawing in the dirt. Hume's not arguing that he isn't USING reason...he's arguing that at least initially, his knowledge was borne of experience. Now, the common argument back from rationalists in this case would be...well if everything is truly derived from some experience that I've had...then how come I can imagine things that I've never seen before? I can imagine a chair made entirely out of kittens! This idea obviously isn't something I've experienced...how do you explain that? The common argument back to that is that you HAVE experienced it. You've experienced kittens and you've experienced chairs and you're just creating a complex idea by combining two concepts you've experienced in the past. The more serious implications of this is that: When Descartes or Spinoza or Leibniz arrive at some fundamental truth about the nature of the universe...and then from there construct an ENTIRE SYSTEM on top of it using this thing they have called reason that they've used to arrive at these "new" ideas, that HAVE to be true...it's very tempting to think that they've arrived at something true there...but what the empiricists would say is that they aren't actually arriving at anything completely foreign to their experiences. This system that they've created is just a creative conglomeration of things they've experienced in the past. Which explains why many of the things they talk about are mutually

exclusive. Anyway, this argument can go back and forth all day. And it did. For many days. For many years. The point is, none of these people were extremists...they all understood the merits of the other side of the argument...they just thought that either reason or experience was MORE important than the other. And again if you're someone on the Empiricist side of things like David Hume...imagine how tempting it would be to feel like empiricism is the answer to arriving at knowledge...considering this scientific revolution and the very REAL improvements in the lives of the average citizen came from a method that used empirical observation...a far cry from the centuries of speculation that came before. But then along came Kant. See, one day in the 1700's Kant was sitting down thinking about this very topic that we're talking about right now!...and he realized a giant assumption that even the great skeptic David Hume had been making. I can just imagine this conversation happening...I can just imagine Kant talking to David Hume if he ever left his basement: Listen Dave...help me with something real quick...i think I'm confused...as far as I can remember...there's no seminar that we all went to right after we're born, right? There's no Tony Robbins weekend extravaganza on the nature of space and time that we all attended right after we left the womb that I missed, right? So isn't it interesting that you think that all knowledge is ultimately derived from experience, yet you talk about causality and this chaotic mess of phenomena all interacting with each other as though you're appealing to something exterior to yourself. But...where did THAT come from Mr. Hume? When did you experience something that taught you about the existence of space? How could you even know to expect to have a concept of I...or a concept of something being "exterior" to you at all? If all knowledge is derived from experience...where did you learn to make that distinction? In fact, when you think about it, Kant says...how is it even POSSIBLE to make that distinction? For someone to arrive at knowledge about ANYTHING in the external world...they would first need to know that it was outside of them to begin with. But how can you even identify where you end and the outside world begins without already knowing about the concept of you and the concept of the outside world? In this way, Kant thinks there is no explanation other than the fact that the concept of "space" is something that we as humans are familiar with

prior to experience of ANY kind. Or in cool philosophical language, apriori. It's here that we can see what we were talking about before...it's here we can begin to see this nexus between rationalism and empiricism right? Kant looks at how we arrive at knowledge and he largely agrees with Hume...he definitely thinks experience is an important element when it comes to arriving at knowledge, but is it everything? Kant makes the argument that it CAN'T be everything...it has to be a combination of experience and certain Apriori intuitions of the mind like the concept of space. Now, what does this mean? Well, aside from him finding an assumption that David Hume was making after dedicating so much of his time to finding assumptions...which is kind of funny if you think about it...the philosophical implications are what you guys wanna hear about. Think of what this means people. The concept of space...this fundamental aspect of the way we perceive the world...as fundamental as anything really...whenever we perceive our house or our dog or a tree or anything for that matter, we attach to this tree this property of it having space...we understand that tree at least partially in terms of the space that tree occupies...but the property of space is NOT something that we're receiving through our senses when we look at that tree...the tree isn't giving us it's property of space....No, what we're getting when we look at a tree is a flurry of raw information. Billions of bits of data flying into our eyes and ears and nose and all this information... at this level makes no sense to us! Think about it...have you ever seen a snow flurry? Before all the crazy living situations in California...I lived in Alabama for a while and we would have these snow flurries...big, thick snowflakes densely pouring down with winds coming from all directions...and these snowflakes would just spiral around and twist and tornado through the air and there's no rhyme or reason to any of it. There's no way to make sense of it. It's just pure madness dancing through the air. This is what the world would be if we lived in the world of David Hume...where all knowledge is derived from experience! What Kant is saying is that no, that's NOT true...we have certain apriori principles of thought, things that we didn't gain from experience, that make it possible for us to make sense of anything in the exterior world. When we look at a tree...we aren't seeing the world as it truly is...we're seeing the map of the world that

our mind creates after imposing those apriori organizing faculties onto what we are sensing. I want you to think of it this way...because this is how Kant explicitly talks about it. There are two worlds: our bodies and the external world. And what he means by that is that you will never experience the world as it TRULY is...you'll never experience the things in themselves that exist OUT THERE somewhere outside of our experience of the world. Now, don't just take this at face value...this goes beyond the veil of perception problem that we were talking about in the John Locke episodes..I'll say it again..there are two worlds...one of them you're never gonna see because it's OUT THERE somewhere...you know things in themselves...and the other one is the way that your mind depicts that world OUT THERE to make sense of it. The flurry of raw information gathered through the senses transmuted into something sensible by your mind. Kant doesn't care about what that true world is...well that's actually an overstatement...he spend any time with needless speculation about what that true world out there is like...leave that for people like Hegel and Schopenhauer....two people that are yet to come that were heavily influenced by Kant...but what he DOES do is make an important point... to a human species that had been agonizing for quite a while about finding the best way to KNOW things about the world...and that point is this:Anything that we say we "know" about the world...is really just us understanding some measurable facet regarding how our minds DEPICT the world....not the world itself. Not things-in-themselves. So think about the gravity of this...people talk all the time about how important science or other things are as a means of arriving at more knowledge about the world...but Kant I think very rightly points out that if that knowledge that we're striving for is even possible...ONE THING IS FOR CERTAIN...that knowledge is going to be intrinsically connected to how our minds work. How our minds make sense of everything. So once you arrive at that conclusion...it seems pretty obvious what to do next...find out as much as you can about how the mind works. How do we think? How do we know things at all? Are there any other apriori intuitions our minds have?Do you understand? This is why you see the names of his major works as things like the "Critique of Pure Reason" or the "Critique of Judgement". He's writing entire treatises

describing different faculties of our mind...because he believed it was through understanding the mind itself that we could understand things around us. But there's more! Think of how HUGE this is! Think of the other side of Kant's idea that the concept of space is one method that our mind uses to make sense of everything around us...the other big thing that this implies is that things in themselves...may not have space at all. Just because I look at a tree and I see it as three dimensional and I see it as something that takes up space...DOES NOT Necessarily MEAN that that thing that exists in the external world that my mind is projecting as a tree ACTUALLY takes up space. That would be an assumption. That would be me projecting the way my human mind perceives the world...(the world in my body) ONTO things in themselves (the external world). He doesn't say these things DON'T have the property of space...he just points out that to apply characteristics to things in themselves...to something beyond anything we can ever experience...is just assuming way too much. Now that's pretty freaky right? We aren't looking at the things in themselves, but just some depiction of the things in themselves that our mind creates that is useful to us. We don't even know if the things in themselves have the property of space. And if you haven't already guessed...when it comes to these apriori things that our brains come with right off the factory floor...being able to perceive space or that something outside of us exists...is not the only thing that our brains come with! What are some other things that we magically know from birth that can't be derived from experience? What other things didn't we learn from a weekend seminar before we experienced anything? Well, Time...yes we talked very briefly about that one last time...but how bout a more fun one. How about causality? When we go about our lives in the world...we are CONSTANTLY thinking of things in terms of cause and effect. You wake up in the morning you have a crick in your neck...you look for a cause. You get a tummy ache...you look for a cause. Sure, you may eat something bad and get a stomach ache multiple times and eventually arrive at the idea..oh my stomach hurts...there must be a cause...maybe I ate something bad. But, where do you get the notion of assuming causality to begin with? In other words...yeah you may through tons of experiences arrive at the idea that certain things commonly cause other things...but

where did you get the notion that phenomena are caused by other phenomena...to even think to find an association between two things? Where did you get that? This is yet another category of the mind...a pre-programmed way that the mind makes sense of the otherwise insensible world. This is yet again...something that our mind uses to make sense of things...and it would be a mistake to project this quality onto the things in themselves. Things in the external world. So think about the implications of that! If the idea of cause and effect is just a way that our minds make sense of things in the world...then much like things having the property of space...things in themselves may not have the property of causality. Things in themselves may not have a cause. To assume that they DO have a cause is to project the way our minds make sense of the world onto the external world. But this is ludicrous to someone like Kant...cause and effect exist as a part of human experience. This external world that we know nothing about is BY DEFINITION BEYOND human experience! You can imagine how Kant must have felt about everyone's favorite cause to contemplate. Or can you? One thing for sure, as we move forward into the next few episodes...we're treading through some murky water. And the most baffling thing to me...even now knowing what the next few episodes will be is that there can be so much more to talk about with so little that we can know at all. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 3 - Deontology vs. Consequentialism

Episode #058

This is a transcript of episode #058 on Kant. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So in very Philosophize This! fashion I wanna start out the episode today by putting you through a ridiculous thought experiment. I want you to imagine you're sitting at home on a Sunday afternoon...relaxing...drinking some lemonade...maybe a little Netflix...you're laughing at something on the TV and all of a sudden someone rings the doorbell. That's odd...you think to yourself...I'm not expecting anyone. You like how I'm telling this like I'm an author? Like it matters what the heck you're thinking when the person knocks at the door? Anyway...enough of that. You answer the door and standing before you is a really scary looking gentleman wielding an ax of some sort. Somethings off with this guy..You can't put your finger on exactly what it is...maybe its the dirt caked clothes...maybe its the greasy long hair with unsightly split ends...but you get this vibe that the guy has taken a human life before. And if there was any doubt left inside of you...he removes it by saying: hey, tell me where your kids are...I want to kill them with this ax that I'm dragging around!Well instantly your stomach drops because you realize you're faced with quite a dilemma. Not because some strange man wants to kill your kids with an ax, but because you pride yourself on being an honest person! Don't you? This man came to your door...he asked you nicely to tell him where your kids are...you're faced with a tough decision! You can tell the man where your kids are and risk him disemboweling them before your very eyes...or you can lie to him and be a dishonest person! What do you do? This is a very difficult decision isn't it? Well, if you're anything like me or the hundreds of people I've asked this question to...it's not difficult...no in fact it's a very easy decision...you tell the guy your kids are down the street, lock the door and call the cops. But what if I told you that Immanuel Kant thought that if you made that decision in that moment that you had thereby acted immorally...you ought-ta be

ashamed of yourself and that he had very good reasons for feeling that way? Well by the end of the episode you'll understand WHY Kant felt that way...let this be a little teaser for you. But to start us off on the proper trajectory that will eventually land us there at the end of the episode...just to get our minds going in that direction...I want to ask you a question about morality in general right now. What do you think morality should be based on? Who or what determines what is moral or immoral? You know so many people think of morality as this codified set of behaviors that you hang on the wall of 9th grade health class...like patience is a virtue! honesty is the best policy! These things are moral behaviors...if you want to know how to be a more moral person you just go to the dictionary and look up this list that we've all collectively arrived at as a species. Well, yes these are traits that are commonly defined to be virtuous by people, but as we've talked about on this show many times the question of morality is much more complex than that. Who came up with the idea that patience was a definite virtue? Who determines what right or wrong is? Who is capable of determining what right or wrong is? Here's a better way to think of it: who would you trust to determine for YOU what right or wrong is? Now that starts to get to the root of the issue right? We're all very familiar with the concept of SUBJECTIVE morality. We're all familiar with the idea of arriving at our own personal moral code about things. Like, every one of us has contemplated this at some level before. We've all asked ourselves the question what does my ideal life look like? And then you picture it in your head...you see how that life would look and then when you snap back to reality if there's any disconnect between the way that life looked in your head and the way your life looks right now...action needs to be taken right? Usually the next step once you get to THAT place is to create a plan...find some set of behaviors that will take you from where you are now...to where you want to be and execute them, right? This is our own little personalized, subjective moral code that we've arrived at...aimed at producing the life that we've determined to be good. But for some people this is too shaky of a moral foundation. For some people...who are YOU to arrive at the proper way to behave day to day to achieve the best life possible? What did YOU do to earn that distinction? You know, you wouldn't get operated on by a surgeon who didn't go to school

for it! You wouldn't fly in a plane piloted by someone that hadn't spent thousands of hours in the sky! How many hours have you really spent contemplating morality? Weighing the pros and cons of different actions...really taking them to task...really trying to get to the bottom of which specific behaviors yield specific outcomes in your life? Many of these people say no, you're NOT an expert. This "subjective morality" you have is probably just a disparate collection of social conventions you've gathered throughout your life from your parents and teachers or other authority figures. Many of these people say to put this enormous burden of arriving at a system of morality on a single human being with such a limited collection of experiences to draw from while creating it...is a recipe for disaster! These people say that we may need to be willing to accept that we aren't the most qualified people to arrive at a system of morality for ourselves, if for no other reason aside from the ones we've already talked about, than because far too often we are slaves to whatever fleeting emotional state we're in, in any given moment. When you're the judge, jury and executioner for what "right" action is in your life...often times we're far too willing to make exceptions for ourselves out of convenience in the moment, right? "Typically stealing would be wrong, but in THIS case it's okay because the guy's really rich and technically I'm only stealing ones and zeros...I'm not stealing a physical CD!" "Typically eating until I feel sick to my stomach...folding over a large pizza like a giant taco...typically that would be a lack of temperance I shouldn't stand for...but my friends are in town. It's a celebration!" "No, these people say this is far too slippery of a moral foundation...there needs to be something more solid...there needs to be something more objective. So how do we get there? Well what do we typically do when we have a job to do that we aren't willing to do or capable of doing? Well, you do what every great company ever since WW2 has done. You outsource to the Chinese! Just kidding...the Chinese didn't do it...although let's be real they probably would have done it in a heartbeat for pennies on the dollar...but people DID outsource this task of arriving at a moral code and they usually did so by assigning that burden to some overseer. Sometimes it was a deity. Creator of the universe arrives at a way it wants humans to behave...so it finds one lucky human and channels

this wisdom into them...they chisel it into some stone tablets and now we have a moral foundation that isn't laid out by one person...it's laid out by the creator of the universe! As God, I hereby decree that you follow this set of behaviors and if you don't, bad things will happen to you! Sometimes it was a monarch. You know, as king I hereby decree that you follow this set of behaviors, and if you don't you will be drawn and quartered. As a citizen of this kingdom it is your duty to follow these rules. Well, on one hand Immanuel Kant agreed: there needs to be a more solid foundation for our ethics, but he thought there was a serious problem with these ways of outsourcing the task to someone or something else. The problem is: that in the case of the deity or the monarch...you can never say that you're fully to blame for your behavior. Remember when we talked about slavery in our episodes about Rousseau? Rousseau thought that if a master ordered his slave to kill someone else, that it would be wrong for us to hold the slave morally culpable...because they are not making this decision based entirely on their own volition...no the master owns them and is directing them on how to behave...the slave becomes like a hung jury when rendering a verdict about what action to take. Well in the same way, Kant thinks that when some monarch decrees a system of behavior for you to follow...you are never TOTALLY behind an action that you choose to take...that AT LEAST in some small way that monarch is inhibiting your ability to make a different decision. He is affecting your behavior in some way and ultimately isn't morality connected to us having a choice in the matter? I mean think about it: you don't think a lion is bad when it kills a gazelle on the Serengeti. No, that lion is just responding to impulses in its body. The lion doesn't sit there and reason about its decisions... perhaps I shouldn't kill the gazelle...perhaps it has a family...no it sees something moving and bites it until it stops moving. It's very simple! We start to hold people and things accountable for their actions when we believe they had a different choice that they could have made. You know this is the reason most people advocate a reduced sentence in our justice system for people who commit crimes who are mentally ill...they weren't in their right mind...they weren't making a fully autonomous choice between alternatives when they did this terrible thing. Now it's because of this fact that Kant believes that the ONLY

way something can be said to be truly a free decision is if it is based on our own reason. This ability to reason is the foundation for everything that will come after in Kantian ethics. This capacity to reason is Kant's way of arriving not at what he sees as some flimsy subjective morality...but moral principles. And these principles would prove to be very important to him. In the same way we can use rational thought to eventually arrive at a conception about an objective reality...like we talked about last episode. Kant believes it's possible to use rational thought to eventually arrive at a conception of moral principles. Think about how awesome this is! In the event you're the kind of person whose like Immanuel Kant...In the event you want something more than just subjective morality...you know maybe you're not satisfied with just believing in whatever you arbitrarily landed on in your culture and your time period...if you don't like that AND you also don't like the idea of just conceding to the will of some Monarch that tells you what good and bad is...once you're in that place...you have a very difficult question to answer: how should we judge human action? Where do we get a more solid foundation for what right or wrong is? Can we get a more solid foundation? Is it even possible? Is it worth thinking about? Like just think about that for a second...if there was a satisfying answer to this question...just think of how LIFE CHANGING that would be. Think of how much more we'd get from every experience! Think about how much more we'd understand about ourselves if we more intimately understood how we judge human action in our own minds! To me...its this exciting feeling of what's possible...it's that that sets the stage for every time I ever even think about ethics. Anyway I'll get off my nerd soapbox. Now that said, I want us to all take a moment, lay out your prayer rugs, face the nearest library and thank your lucky stars that we always have the luxury of looking at Kant in a historical perspective. You know...there's two good ways to bring clarity to a given subject...point out the differences between it and something or point out the similarities. Well, a good way for us to understand Kant's ethics better is to look at where he falls into two sides of an age old ethical disagreement...that's right! I'm talking about the disagreement between deontologists and consequentialists. Now those are two words we've never said on the podcast before, so rather than obviously continuing and telling

myself that everyone in the whole world knows exactly what they mean so that I can fall asleep at night...let's discuss what they mean. Deontology and Consequentialism are two very broad general, competing categories for how we should look at whether human action is right or wrong. Simply put, deontologists believe that whether an action is right or wrong should be determined by looking at certain things about the action itself and weighing them up against pre-established moral principles...Consequentialists believe that no, whether something's ethical doesn't lie in the action itself...it's the CONSEQUENCES of the action that determine whether it is right or wrong. Before we continue...please understand what I'm trying to do here. I'm not trying to outline every deontologist or consequentialist who has ever lived. If you fancy yourself one of these two titles...understand that I understand that there are many variants and qualifications and corrections by later thinkers that deal with the weaknesses I'm going to cite for each one of these. And we'll talk about them in due time...keep in mind there are MANY episodes of this podcast to come! But right now I'm just introducing the concepts...and one thing we all need to know right off the bat, and something you'll agree with the more and more we learn about the two sides of this debate...deontology and consequentialism...is that people very rarely strongly identify with one side or the other. Most people fall somewhere in between these two camps...neither of them are perfect. There are strengths and weaknesses on either side. Now that said, let's start with deontology. If you just type define: deontology into Google it says "the study of the nature of duty and obligation". And the reason it says that is because at the core of the system of any deontologist worth their salt is that the "right" thing to do in any situation... has at its core an adherence to duty. Duty to what you may ask? To moral principles that have been arrived at in some way. Now we can talk all day about what method we use to arrive at those moral principles, or what they are or how we prioritize them, but the ultimate point is that when trying to decide whether something is right or wrong or good or bad...a deontologist is going to look at the actions themselves rather than the consequences of those actions. Because of this...the intention that someone had behind an action usually plays a key role in how a deontologist perceives the action. For

example, if your mom asks you to clean your room...there's a big difference between a kid who cleaned their room out of a sense of duty to what the "right" thing their mom asked them to do is....and a kid who did it just because their mom said she'd buy them an ice cream cone if they did it. See, in both cases the consequence is that the room got cleaned, but are both people equally moral? I think most of us would say no! If someone does something just to get a "thank you" or just to get a special prize for having done that thing...it doesn't matter how moral their actions APPEAR to be...it cheapens it a bit. It seems clear that the intentions behind actions matter! Now because the whole thing revolves around a sense of duty to moral principles...from here...historically... it's never been a far jump away from moral absolutism. The idea that no matter WHAT the consequences of an action are...no matter how seemingly bad they may be...regardless of context...certain actions are just right or wrong. Simple as that. Moral absolutism. It wouldn't be uncommon for a moral absolutist to say things like murder is just wrong, stealing is unquestionably wrong...lying is always wrong. Doesn't matter how good of a reason YOU think you have, these things can NEVER be justified. But if you still want some clarifying as to what it takes to be a good moral absolutist...take it from my good friend Cardinal John Henry Newman...19th century moral absolutist...whenever I stay up really late at night with a flashlight under the covers thinking about moral absolutism and how terrifying it is...this exact passage always flashes through my mind. He said:"it were better for sun and moon to drop from heaven, for the earth to fail, and for all the many millions who are upon it to die of starvation in extremest agony, so far as temporal affliction goes, than that one soul, I will not say, should be lost, but should commit one single venial sin, should tell one wilful untruth, though it harmed no one, or steal one poor farthing without excuse" So what this guy is saying is that in his humble opinion...or he's speaking for the church in this passage...Lying is wrong...plain and simple...it would be better for the sun and moon to drop from heaven...for millions of people to die in agony than for one person to tell a single lie that harmed no one. Now if this sounds a little emo from Cardinal Newman...you gotta admire the guys conviction, right? Who would've thought Exodus 20:16 could get so painful for all of God's children?

And if this sounds a little inflexible to you for a way to approach morality...well you're absolutely right. It is VERY inflexible. And this is a good lesson to take from our discussion here...there are strengths and weaknesses to both deontology and consequentialism...this moral absolutism that we're talking about being only one type of deontology...but the same criticism is leveraged against most deontology and it is this: whenever your approach to morality involves arriving at these hard and fast moral principles that you have a duty to adhere to regardless of what the consequences might be...you always run the risk of being called a little inflexible. Take the ax murderer example from the beginning of the episode. A deontologist who is a moral absolutist that believes lying is wrong would have to answer their door...look the ax murderer dead in the eyes and tell him exactly where their kids are. If this guy was offered a billion dollars to any charity to tell one lie...he would have to say no. If this guy could save a billion innocent human lives if he just lied about his weight while getting his drivers license...he would have to respectfully decline.

Now I wanna make this clear: deontology is not synonymous with moral absolutism...there are many deontologists we will talk about that have answers to these criticisms, but the point here today is: Deontology has many strengths. For one thing...whenever you're faced with an ethical dilemma...when you're in that awkward place...it does provide COMPLETE certainty about what the correct decision is in a given instance. Also, it takes into consideration people's intentions behind WHY they do an action, that seems to be part of it. Its also good because it removes human discretion from the equation so there's no chance of us letting ourselves off the moral hook in the moment...these are ALL strengths...But these strengths come in coalition with weaknesses...a key weakness being that it is tremendously inflexible and if we're being honest...probably a little oversimplified because of it. Now, a consequentialist on the other hand would look at the ax murderer example completely differently! A common phrase that people use to describe the fundamental idea behind consequentialism is something we've all heard before..."the ends justify the means". What makes something

right or wrong is not necessarily the act itself...but the consequences that act produces. For example...in the ax murderer thought experiment...it wouldn't be uncommon for a consequentialist to say that it is perfectly OK to lie to the ax murderers face! Yeah, the consequentialist may not advocate lying in some situations...they may not advocate lying in 99.9% of all situations...but in THIS PARTICULAR situation...lying to the ax murderer about where your kids are preserves human life. Lying may TYPICALLY be wrong...but the ends justify the means. Most philosophy 101 professors use the example of Anne Frank. Imagine you're living in the apartment during WW2 where Anne Frank and her family were hiding in the attic...some Nazi soldiers came to your door and they ask you "Is there is a family hiding in the attic of the house"...to a consequentialist...knowing that if they tell the soldiers the truth...people almost certainly WILL die as a result of it...to a consequentialist...even if they typically WOULDN'T advocate lying...it is morally justifiable to LIE to the soldiers...because the consequences of doing so are good. So let's think about this. On one hand this approach is very flexible, right? I mean hypothetically...you could even justify murder with a consequentialist approach. What if we could somehow go back in time before WW2 and murder Hitler before he comes to power. A consequentialist might say that killing Hitler to save the subsequent tens of millions of people who died as a result of his decisions...that murder...in this very specific case...would be morally justifiable. Interesting. And very flexible. But, although this approach IS incredibly flexible...it certainly comes with it's weaknesses as well right? Not the least of which is illustrated perfectly by our previous example. If we could go back in time and kill Hitler...wait...we CAN'T go back in time. We don't know the future. The problem with basing the moral worth of our actions only on the consequences that the actions produce is that...you can't always know what the consequences of your actions will be! Even if you make your best guess and you predict the outcome pretty well in the short term...you can just imagine the ripple effect you may have caused and who are we, as feeble humans, to try to understand the long term repercussions of our actions decades later? It just seems very difficult. For example...what if we shift the Anne Frank thought experiment just a little bit? What if when the Nazi soldiers come to your door...

asking if a family lives in the attic...what if they told you that if they don't find this family while they're making their rounds today...they are going to be executed. Now, no matter what decision you make...human life will be lost! If you're a consequentialist...how do you make your decision? What criteria do you use to determine what the best outcome will be? You may say...well I'm just going to err on the side of the least human suffering! The highest good for the greatest number! You may look at the situation and see that there are four guards at your front door...and five people living in the attic of the apartment. Seems like an easy decision...the guards die...there's four of them and five people in the attack...simple as that! But how about this? What if one of those guards if they weren't executed would eventually go on to find the cure for cancer. Obviously you could have never known that in the moment...but if you're being judged solely on the consequences of your actions...you know this very extreme, rudimentary version of consequentialism that we're talking about...if you're being judged on that you have just committed a terrible moral atrocity. So in deontology there are these principles we have a duty to adhere to that can sometimes run us into problems...and while consequentialism is good in that it allows for a lot of flexibility there...it also comes with some problems itself. The fact that the ends justify the means...even if it goes against basic human rights. The fact that it is based on consequences, but when you think about it...it is very difficult if not impossible to predict what the true consequences of our actions will be...the fact that it DOESN'T consider the intentions behind why people do things. The end of the show kind of snuck up on me this time. You know...when I started recording this I planned on getting a lot further in a half an hour, But I don't regret it and here's why: This conversation that we just had about morality in general and the differences between these two different approaches...deontology and consequentialism...you will remember this conversation. When we talk about these subjects in the future...you will remember what these concepts mean as opposed to them just being two more words that end in "ism" that are meaningless. And that is what this show is about...it's about wanting to know more today than you did yesterday. Not just feeling like you know more...actually knowing more. So what did we learn? There are very real strengths and weaknesses to

both of these systems...people much smarter than me in both camps came afterwards and tried to correct some of the weaknesses..next we will talk more about them...you'll find out whether you consider yourself a deontologist, a consequentialist, somewhere in between. And who knows? Maybe there's more than just these two to choose from! Thank you for listening...I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 4 - Categorical Trolley Cars

Episode #059

This is a transcript of episode #059 on Kant. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So if you've been listening to the show for a decent amount of time you've probably noticed something by this point about philosophers in general: these people just love their thought experiments don't they? Thought experiments are an important part of philosophy...see as you know philosophy often times tries to get us to think about ourselves and the world in a slightly different way than we typically would...the goal being that hopefully we can hack past the absolute jungle of social conventions and prejudices and all these things that've been meticulously programmed into us since birth...to hopefully get a more honest depiction of reality...not just one with our culture's stamp of approval. And whenever someone asks us to consider ourselves in the middle of one of these thought experiments...it's so easy to be dismissive of the entire process, isn't it? It's so easy to not take a thought experiment seriously...because well, it's not real! This is something I've encountered a surprising number of times when I try to talk to people about ethical dilemmas in particular...like the ax murderer example from last episode or the kind of things we're going to be thinking about today...you know...they'll say things like "what's the point of considering these things?" "what's the point of being whisked away in your little fantasy world?" I got both my feet on the ground here. Look, I don't need to understand the fundamental reasons behind WHY I make the moral judgments I do...I live my life...I take all the information available to me in the moment and I just use common sense. But in the words of the great Abraham Lincoln...common sense is just a collection of prejudices you've arrived at before the age of 18. Fact is: people make decisions for specific reasons...not because they're appealing to this elusive thing called "common sense" that is just simply the right answer in any situation. No, when you cite "common sense" or "sound moral reasoning" as the justification for why you made a

decision you did...you STILL may be making a decision based on deontology or consequentialism or anything for that matter...you're just using this term "common sense" as a catch-all euphemism. You know that's the other side of this. Last episode I went on a bit of a nerd tangent where I talked about the perks of arriving at a satisfying definition for all of this...I talked about the potential fruits of laboring away in these ethical dilemmas and how you might over time arrive at some clarity about why you personally deem certain things to be right or wrong...but be warned...the exact opposite might be true as well. If you're anything like me...I mean I started out thinking that I had a pretty ironclad understanding of what makes something right or wrong...But what ended up happening is the more I read and the more I started thinking about all the contingencies...all the different individual circumstances...instead of gaining clarity...I started questioning myself more! I started finding exceptions to my so-called ironclad rules. I started to get confused. I started to realize...that this thing we call morality...this process we call ethics...not as cut and dry as I once thought. Sometimes things are not as simple as just...this decision was right and this decision was wrong. It's sometimes not as simple as...this person was a saint for doing what they did...and this person was a monster for doing what they did. In fact... and it was a very unexpected byproduct of this whole process when it happened...after thinking about these things long enough...for some reason I stopped thinking of people as monsters and saints altogether. And it was weird...it felt like the same sort of mental graduation that a four year old would make when they stopped believing in monsters under their bed...I felt like I stopped believing in monsters. Maybe this is why I take issue with the people that talk about morality as though it's this definitive collection of adjectives that you can hang on the wall. Those people have not been through the baptism by fire...it's just so obvious when you talk to them...these people have not run their beliefs through the rigors of these ethical dilemmas...these people are not confused enough. And I guess to tie this together if there's one thing philosophy has taught me over the years it's that confusion on a given subject is not always a step backwards. Point is: even if you're one of these people that are super confident about why you make the moral judgments you do...often times you

learn a lot about yourself when putting yourself through these ethical dilemmas...often times you quickly realize that just by asking a few very simple questions that whatever this thing is that you use to make moral judgments...whatever this thing is that you're super confident in...it can be very difficult to define. Now that said, if you consider yourself a fan of philosophy...there are certain infamous thought experiments you've just heard before. If you're at some sort of hoity-toity philosophy party and you walk up to the guy with the monocle and you bring them up in a conversation, that guy's going to know what you're talking about...and let's continue to learn more about ourselves and where we stand ethically by putting ourselves through one of the most famous of ALL the famous thought experiments of philosophy....it's known as the trolley car problem. I want you to imagine you're the conductor of a trolley car. Now hold on...before you go getting all excited about your new prestigious career as a trolley car conductor...I want you to imagine you're the conductor of a broken trolley car. That's right...back down a couple pegs...Anyway..you're conducting this thing down the tracks one day and the brakes stop working. It's a runaway trolley car! Now to make matters worse you look ahead of you a few hundred feet and you see five people standing on the tracks completely unaware that this runaway trolley car is hurling towards them at 60 mph. It seems like there's nothing you can do! You can't STOP the trolley car...it seems like it's going to run into the five people...kill them all...what a horrible tragedy it will be. But then you realize something! You realize that you can switch the trolley car onto a different track...an adjacent track! You know those little junctions switches that they have on train tracks...you can pull the lever and the train switches tracks? You can pull one of those! But just as soon as you realize you can switch tracks...you realize that on that new track...is just one person who is completely unaware of what's going on and will inevitably get turned into a trolley pancake if you so decide to switch the tracks. What do you do? Do you allow the trolley to kill the five people...or do you switch the tracks and kill the one person? What decision would you make in that moment? Well, I have no doubt given just the type of people who listen to this show...there are a lot of creative answers out there about what to do here...but if we're speaking just statistically

here...most people say that in this moment what they would do is pull the lever...switch the tracks and favor killing the one person over the five. And this is a totally understandable decision. In fact, come to think of it...I can get on board with this. I would pull that lever. I'm not confused about morality anymore. I'm not afraid anymore! After all, one person dying is a much better outcome than five people dying, right? I mean, to me this seems REALLY straightforward...if you had the opportunity to, why wouldn't you save the five? I'm sure you remember from last episode, what I'm doing here is I'm looking at the situation through the eyes of a consequentialist. If you wanted to go further I might be looking at it through the eyes of a utilitarian. Utilitarianism is a specific type of consequentialism developed by a guy named Jeremy Bentham...refined by a guy named John Stuart Mill...but the fundamental idea at it's core is something we've talked about on this podcast going all the way back to the Hellenistic period with the Epicureans. The idea being that what is right or what is good is always the action where the consequences of that action maximizes utility. Hence the name: utilitarianism. What is utility you may ask. Utility can be a lot of different things from emotional well-being, economic well-being, limitation of suffering...but most of the time people just define it as pleasure. This is a very simple idea that sounds absolutely incredible on the surface...Jeremy Bentham looked at nature...much like the Epicureans and he realized that "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters: pain and pleasure. Human action can be distilled down into an avoidance of pain and the pursuit of pleasure" To a utilitarian, the right decision in any situation is the one where the consequences insure the greatest amount of utility to the greatest number of people. The right thing to do is the thing that maximizes happiness for the greatest number of people! So back to the trolley car example...sounds like I'm a utilitarian right? After all, it seems very straightforward what the right decision is...I would pull the lever to kill the one person in favor of killing the five people...if we're judging the right or wrong decision in terms of it bringing the greatest utility to the greatest number of people...then killing one to save five is a no brainer! I gotta be honest with you guys...it feels good being confident in where I stand morally. It's kinda nice just being able to pull levers and kill

people with impunity...Finally I have a group to attach myself to! It's been so many years of searching....finally I can buy a T-shirt and be a member of a team! But then inevitably philosophy throws us a monkey wrench. Then the trolley car problem takes a turn and asks you to consider a slightly different scenario. This time, imagine you're still in the general vicinity of the trolley tracks but now you're up on a bridge...a bridge that overlooks the tracks. While looking down and observing you notice a very similar situation unfolding except this time there's only one track. There's five oblivious people a couple hundred feet away from a runaway trolley and it seems in the moment like there's nothing you can do to save the five people from certain death...when all of a sudden you look over to your right and you notice something. There's a fat guy standing next to you leaning over the side of the bridge to get a look at what's going on. Now I realize this may seem slightly ridiculous...but in the thought experiment we're supposed to imagine that this guy is not just your run of the mill fat guy...but grotesquely fat...so fat that you could push him over the bridge...he would fall to his death...but his sheer size would produce a shock-wave on the ground...which would alert the five people on the track and slow down the train enough for them to get out of the way and the five people would be saved. Do you push the fat man over the bridge to save the five? Well I gotta be honest...now I'm starting to not have as much fun going through the process of this thought experiment...I mean I recently converted to utilitarianism and now I'm starting to have a crisis of faith. As a good utilitarian...if I'm just looking at the consequences of my actions and whether they bring the greatest amount of utility to the greatest number of people...well the answer seems cut and dry here as well. Without question the answer is to push my size-able friend over to my right...over the bridge and kill him to save the five. But it just feels wrong. Statistically speaking, most people after being advocates of pulling the lever in the first scenario would never even think of pushing the fat guy over the bridge....and I seem to fall into the same category. Why do I feel different about this scenario? What, really, is the difference between the two situations. Now obviously there ARE differences between the two or you couldn't ask the question what's the difference between these two things, but really let's think about it...in both cases... your behavior remains remarkably

similar...you are actively sentencing one innocent person to death in the name of saving five innocent people. Now it's tempting to give all sorts of rebuttals here...yeah I was down for pulling the lever before...when my actions only involved only people who were already on the tracks to begin with...these people were in harms way...to push the guy over the bridge is to put an innocent bystander in harms way just so that I can save five people...that's not fair! But is that true? In the original example...was the one person that you opted to kill in harms way BEFORE you pulled the lever? They had no reason to assume the train would take an unexpected diversion at the last second onto their track that was otherwise completely safe...they were completely OUT of harms way until you decided to pull the lever and PUT them into harms way. If it weren't for your decision to pull the lever...that track was as benign as standing on a bridge overlooking the tracks. Another rebuttal might be...well pushing someone over the side of a bridge is much different than merely pulling a lever! In one case you're just pulling a lever and something happens after you pull that lever...in the other case...you're physically putting your hands on the guy and forcing him over the side of a bridge. That physical contact makes it MUCH different! But is it really the physical contact that makes it different? I would argue that it's not. What if instead of pushing the guy over the side you could pull a lever that would launch him out of some sort of medieval trebuchet and the same thing would happen...he'd go onto the tracks...would you feel morally justified to do that? Personally, I wouldn't and I think if this illustrates anything its that there must be something else at work here...something other than just the physical contact that makes us think this is wrong. I think most people would say that regardless of the consequences...there is something unique about pushing the fat guy over the bridge that is "just wrong"...something that isn't present in the lever pulling example. Now the really fascinating thing here that we should all take from this is not that we make different decisions in different individual situations...that's obvious. The interesting thing is that I started out pretty confident in my decision making about pulling the lever...I cited very clear reasons for WHY what I did was okay in that situation...and then with just a few minor tweaks to the circumstances...I started to revise my entire moral foundation. I

started giving different reasons...which either makes me ignorant...a liar...a hypocrite...or more likely...it implies that the reason I gave for why I made the FIRST decision to pull the lever was not the REAL reason why I did it. There's something more complicated at work here. What is that thing? There have been many attempts to answer this question over the years. As we talked about last time...a deontologist would say that regardless of what the consequences of our actions will be...or inaction in this case...although the consequences are bad...some things are just wrong. Like, for instance, pushing an innocent fat guy over the side of a bridge. Let's get one thing clear..in both scenarios...if we do nothing...five people die. There's no getting around that. And just you knowing the certain outcome in either situation instantly implicates you... and it leaves you in a place where you need to make a choice. Doing nothing does not absolve you from any guilt. Consequentialists would say that the ends justify the means...but a Deontologist...someone like Immanuel Kant would say that you should never use people as means to some end. When you push the innocent fat man over the side of the bridge...you are using that guy as a means to some end that you aim to achieve...and that is wrong. Immanuel Kant talks about the ideal society that we could live in as what he calls a "Kingdom of Ends"...where every person is viewed not as a means to some end...or a pawn in someone else's game that they're playing where they can say "the ends justify the means"...every person is an "end in themselves" as Kant says. Now we'll talk in a second more fully about why this point that Kant's making is important...but first let's talk about how he may have responded to the apparent contradiction between me thinking its okay to pull the lever to kill someone and save five people...vs me thinking its wrong to push the fat guy off the bridge to save five people. See Kant was smart. He recognized that it would be very easy... to mistake whatever cultural norms or traditions or circumstances you were born into... for a good, solid moral foundation. You know...not many people would think that chopping someones hands off would be a proper punishment for someone that stole a Snickers bar, but if Snickers bars existed in Babylonia you might find quite a few people that disagreed with you at the time. So to circumvent this transient, subjective moral trap that we might otherwise fall into...as we

talked about last episode...Kant thinks that just like our objective conception of reality itself is based on a priori concepts of reason...our morals too can be based on a priori concepts of reason. Now think about what this means for a second...this doesn't just mean that these moral principles need to be appropriate for every human in every time period and in every circumstance...but for these things to be TRULY valid...they need to be done purely from a place of being moral. For example...from the last episode the kid that only cleans his room because his mom told him he'd get an ice cream cone if he did so...that's not good enough for Kant. So given these criteria... that Kant's laid out for what a moral action can be...let's try to come up with a few. What are some moral principles that fit all of these criteria? Can you think of any? Cause I can't. I mean this is a pretty intense set of restrictions to put on the process...Kant's obviously taking these moral principles seriously. See Kant argues that if you're ever doing ANYTHING in this world...any action you take is going to be done at a particular place in time...yielding to a particular set of circumstances...considering a particular history given your own particular personality. Think about this point he's making...these elements of ANY ACTION WE TAKE are inescapable aspects of our existence. This is the reason why he looks to things that are "prior to experience"...you know prior to tradition...prior to circumstances...prior to your personality...it's for this reason that Kant says that the only things that would fit this rigorous set of criteria are a priori. The moral principles that I should adhere to when determining whether to push the fat guy over the bridge or not must be a priori in nature. Remember...moral action is determined by reason for Kant...reason is the same in all rational beings regardless of time period or culture...so because REASON is universal...morality TOO should be universal. So once you arrive here as Kant you still have a pretty difficult task ahead of you. Well where Kant goes from here...his solution to the problem is what he calls his "categorical imperative". Two really cool sounding words that if you break them down individually...actually do explain exactly what Kant's talking about with his categorical imperative. Categorical meaning explicit or applying across all categories...and Imperative meaning essential or necessary. An essential rule of morality that applies across every situation, culture, time period, set

of experiences...you name it. Now, Kant gives multiple formulations of his categorical imperative...but by far the most famous one is this: "There is ... only a single categorical imperative and it is this: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." What Kant's saying here is that before you do anything...consider something for a second...consider for a second what the world would be like if literally every other person in the entire world acted as you did in that situation. Really imagine it. And if that world is not something that you're willing to deal with or if it would be a direct contradiction for that world to exist or if that world would be filled with chaos...then you shouldn't do whatever it is you were considering doing. Let's think of a few examples of what he's talking about here. Someone cuts you off in traffic...what do you do...well if you decide to chase the guy down and kill him...Kant would want you to ask...how would the world look if every time someone got cut off in traffic...the person that got cut off chased the person down and killed them? The world would be absolute chaos...people would be terrified of driving...and heaven forbid you lose focus on the road for a couple seconds and accidentally cut someone off! But how about something less extreme. You're drinking a coke outside of a supermarket waiting for a ride somewhere...you finish your bottle and you decide instead of walking all the way to the trashcan...you're just gonna leave it on the ground by where you were standing. Someone will get it eventually, right? Well if we apply Kant's categorical imperative to this example...the world would be an ocean of coke bottles. Think if 7 billion people just left their trash wherever they were when they got done using it...just think of how that world would look. Aside from us existing in a perpetual revolving trashcan...think of the burden to the average taxpayer...including you! We'd have to spend millions and millions of your hard earned dollars on teams of people constantly patrolling around picking up people's trash...it would be madness! This is the sort of thinking behind why Kant thinks it's a bad idea to lie! It's just downright illogical. Because if we existed in a world where all anyone ever did was lie...then everyone would always know that they were being lied to. So they would never be deceived. But that's the point of a lie...to deceive people...so it logically would be pointless. Contrast that with a world when everyone always told the truth...and

nothing would be wrong with that world picture. So I want to tie all this together into a neat package. To Kant when considering whether to push the innocent fat guy off the bridge in order to save the five innocent people on the track...in fact when we want to consider whether moral principles of any kind hold water...he would want us to consider these five things. Number 1. Reason. Our actions need to be guided by our own reason, not our senses or our experiences or our cultural norms or anything like that. 2. It needs to be Autonomous. We need to be acting freely...and in order to be acting freely we need to not be enslaved to some overseer decreeing a moral law for us to follow or enslaved to some ice cream cone that we might get if we do something moral. 3. we need to treat ourselves and others as ends in themselves...not means to some end that we want to achieve. We can't manipulate people or lie to people because when we do that...we are, by definition withholding valuable information from them so that they will make a decision that they might not otherwise make if they had all the facts. In this way...you are ROBBING them of their ability to make a fully rational choice...and in a way...robbing them of some piece of their humanity. 4. we should act only in accordance with moral principles where we'd be satisfied if they were made into a universal maxim...i.e. if everyone did this thing, how would the world look? 5. we should strive to live in the kingdom of ends...which is too complicated for this 5 bullet point format I created on the fly, but it has to do with the political implications of all this stuff. So it's very easy to be dismissive of thought experiments or asking ourselves questions about why we make the moral judgments we do...but the advantages of putting yourself through these thought experiments are more than just understanding yourself better or living a more fulfilling life...these things inevitably extend to every decision we make as a society about what is right or wrong. See it's so tempting to say that "murder is wrong"...or "stealing is wrong"...or I'm just going to pull the lever and kill the one person instead of the five and that's just common sense...no need to consider any other alternatives...no need to understand what I base my moral judgments on. Well, maybe that's good enough for you...but the reality is that the world at large isn't always that black and white. See...things like murder trials and economic policy and whether to become involved in a

war or what a just war is at all or foreign policy or civil rights...the ethical decisions at the root of these massive issues...these aren't things that you can just adhere to moral commandments about...these things aren't as simple as just.. a guy steals an ox from his neighbor and we need to punish him let's consult our RULES...the world is filled with millions of nuanced grey areas that need to be accounted for. Yes... sometimes the only thing that's at stake is your time...Yes, sometimes it's just some stupid podcast asking you to be whisked away into a fantasy world...but in other cases...its only by considering these details and this minutia that we can get a more accurate understanding of what we really value as a species... to understand why we REALLY pulled that lever...it's for the times when literally millions of lives might hang in the balance including yours. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 5 - The Sublime

Episode #060

This is a transcript of episode #060 on The Sublime. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

I'm gonna be really straight forward with you guys...I have no idea what it is we're even talking about today. Really, it's something to marvel at...for the next 30 minutes I'm going to talk into this microphone right in front of me and I'm going to tell you a story that is impossible to tell. I'm going to tell you about a very mysterious thing...its a thing that has captivated generations...it's a thing that has consumed men much greater than myself for their entire lives. This is a mystery that I've been fascinated with for years...I've read entire books on the subject...I've read first hand testimonies...essays...eye witness accounts...and despite all of this...to be completely honest...I couldn't even tell you exactly what it is, I certainly have never EXPERIENCED it before...and if you just look at things statistically speaking I will probably die...I will probably be lowered into a hole in the ground in a pine box one day without a full understanding of what this thing actually is. But you wanna know what keeps me going people? It's the simple fact that I'm not the only one...You may say that I am stupid. But I'm not the only one. No, in fact I find solace in the fact... that the thing we're discussing today is so elusive, so profound and so incredibly subjective...that quite literally...there is no one who has ever lived... or will ever live that could EVER in audio podcast form...convey to you what this concept means fully. And that's because the thing we're talking about today is by definition ineffable. Now in case if you don't read the dictionary every night before you go to bed...Ineffable is fancy philosophical lingo to describe something that is so great, and so above comparison that the very construct of human language is not capable of describing it. And really this shouldn't be THAT controversial of a topic at this point in the show. We've talked about on the show time and time again about this imperfect thing called

language that we humans have created...we've talked about just terrible this thing is sometimes at describing even the most basic things. You know, it's good enough to do MOST things we do on a daily basis...it's good enough to convey basic things...asking the person across the table from you to please pass the salt...that's something it can do. It's good enough to convey feelings of basic emotional states of mind...you know I think you are a very beautiful girl you should go on a date with me...these are emotional states that we have in our head that language is pretty decent at conveying...it's good enough... to plant in the other person's head what we are feeling or experiencing in a given moment. It's good at doing some things, but is it that crazy to think that language can't describe everything there is out there? That maybe language not capable of describing certain things? That at least potentially there is something out there in the universe that is so great, so powerful, so immense that these things that we call nouns, adjectives and verbs are just not capable of conveying the greatness, power or immensity of that thing? Is that possible?

Now as you can probably guess, typically people assign this ineffability to the idea that they have of something like God, right? But we've seen it used in other areas on this podcast before. You know...Laozi and the Dao "The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao" ... Plotinus and his conception of "The One"... When Plotinus and Laozi were talking about these concepts, they prefaced all of it by saying... that to even try to categorize the essence of these things with words... would be a huge mistake. See, language is good at some things...but it has its limitations. To deny that fact would be hubris. To deny that fact would be human arrogance. Well, the thing we're talking about today is one of these ineffable things that is completely beyond human description...it has become known to history and the generations of people who have tried to come into contact with it as: the sublime. Now, we don't know much for sure about the sublime. We know that it exists. We know that people claim to come into contact with this thing whatever it is, we know that they typically come into contact with it when they are out in the wilderness somewhere...distantly secluded somewhere...usually when they feel like their life is imminently in danger...we know that people spanning across many different

cultures and time periods claim to have had similar sublime experiences...so what is this thing? Now at this point what's common for people to do that hear the words I just said is to try to simplify this concept down into things they're already familiar with, right? Like, they'll hear that this is some sort of unique, powerful, ineffable elusive experience and immediately jump to the conclusion "oh when people talk about having one of these sublime experiences...they're just talking about having some sort of run of the mill transcendent religious experience...they think they're communicating with God or something...No...that's not what this is. Some interpretations of sublime experiences do talk about feeling at one with nature or God or whatever you want to call it... but if one thing seems clear about these experiences that people have had over the generations it's that... that would only be one specific interpretation of a sublime experience. Now, I'm telling you a lot right now about what the sublime ISN'T...maybe the best way to begin telling you about what it is, is by talking about the conditions that people are in when they have these sublime experiences...maybe I should just give you an example. And I'm here to tell you that historically speaking...by far the most common thing that people have used to illustrate the sublime...a motif that's used time and time again across all generations and cultures...is a ship lost at sea hopelessly caught in a horrible storm in the ocean. Just imagine that scene real quick. See, I want you to picture it because there's a reason why these sublime experiences typically happen when people are out in the wilderness...the REASON why is because to produce one of these sublime experiences...you first need to perceive something powerful beyond measure. Greatness beyond anything you could ever possibly calculate. The reason these things typically happen in the wilderness is not because there's some magical connection between humans and nature...but because nature is typically the only thing we have ...capable... of producing something that is so beyond human thought or capability or familiarity to be able to produce this sort of intense emotional state. So knowing that, it's no wonder that from the very beginning, from the very first philosopher to ever reference the sublime...his name was Longinus he lived in the first century AD and it's no wonder that when he talks about the sublime... he uses the ocean... as an example of something that

has this level of magnitude that would be required to produce a sublime experience. He says: "Hence it is almost an instinct that we follow in giving our admiration, not to small streams, though they be pellucid and useful, but to the Nile and Danube, or Rhine, and far more to the Ocean" What Longinus is saying here in the first work EVER created on this subject of the sublime...is that how fitting that we look at a stream...or a lake or a babbling brook...and it's nice. They're pretty. You might sit down and have a picnic by one, or use one to travel down in a canoe. But man there's just a different feeling you get when you look at one of the giant rivers like the Nile right? The turbulent white rapids...the inertia of the water. Even more than that, Longinus says...what about the ocean? When you compare those feelings...when you compare the way you feel between when you look at a little stream flowing through the park...and the ocean! What a difference there is! I mean, the ocean is a great example of something that has this sort of greatness beyond calculation...that raw power! We don't marvel at lakes and streams. We marvel at oceans. For the sake of understanding why the ocean is such a great catalyst for having one of these sublime experiences...let's talk about the ocean real quick. I realize at this point it's a comedic bit that's been beaten into the ground, but the ocean is one of the most terrifying places you could ever possibly be. If someone paid me a billion dollars to write a horror genre book creating a world scarier than the ocean...I would still be eating top ramen. I could never do it. Just think about the monsters that fly around in there! A jellyfish can accidentally rub up against your leg and you're dead. You could stub your toe on the wrong coral reef and just be dead. There's something off-putting about the fact that a shark will rip you to pieces with that lifeless stare in its eyes and never even have a thought cross his mind about whether that was a morally acceptable thing to do or not. Your opposable thumbs do nothing in the ocean. You are at the bottom of the food chain. Whenever you decide to go on a visit to the ocean...you have to keep a portion of yourself above water at all times just so that you can breath and not be killed by the ocean! But aside from that...there's a certain eternal quality to the ocean isn't there? You can go to the beach and sit on the sidelines and just watch the ocean slam up against the rocks...over...and over and over. Endlessly. The waves never stop. The ocean doesn't

wake up in the morning and need a pep talk to motivate itself to do what it does...no it's moving and shifting because of a constant and necessary law of the universe...the law of gravity. Just consider that every second you're listening to this podcast...when you're graduating high school, when you're getting married, when you're playing video games, when you're checking the mail...when your mind is elsewhere the ocean is still there. Wave after wave relentlessly slamming against those jagged rocks with the weight of the ocean behind it. With the power to erode the earth away. Any one of those waves could kill you. Any one of those waves could suck you under never to be seen again. Consider in that moment if you were up against those rocks how futile your attempts would be to resist the ocean. Now for the sake of time I will stop...but I could honestly go on waxing poetic about the greatness of the ocean for probably about an hour before I got bored of myself talking. The point is: The ocean is without a doubt an incredible thing. For some reason...I really enjoy thinking about it... raw power, about how easily it could chew me up and spit me out without even batting an eyelash because it is that powerful. As morbid as it may be on the surface...It is truly awe inspiring. Even if you think the ocean is lame and boring...I'd hope that you can at least understand where my feelings are coming from...that considering and thinking about the sheer greatness of the ocean can at least potentially be a source of pleasure. So given all this enormous power of the ocean...this power beyond our ability to calculate its no surprise that its something Longinus suspected all the way back in the first century might have been at least one piece of the puzzle when it comes to having these elusive sublime experiences ...But it's not like in his work Longinus laid out exactly what the sublime was...there was still a great deal of mystery surrounding the whole concept. I mean, how can we even know for sure whether people were having these experiences? How can we know whether they're not just going crazy out in the wilderness...or if they're just vying for attention from the public claiming to have some special experience? Collectively as a species we were confused for a long time and what people started to do, is they got tired of being in this state of confusion and they tried to get to the bottom of it...and they used their own bodies as the petri dishes. What people started to do is head out into the wilderness not in spite of these

sublime experiences...but in SEARCH of them! People would just head out into the woods...into the mountains looking to have one of these sublime experiences. If and when they did...they would record their findings and shine at least a little beam of light on something that was largely a mystery up until this point. What a noble sacrifice! But if you're a miserable skeptic like me...the first thing you think when these people talk about doing this is well, never underestimate the mind's ability to think something true that it wants to be true. What I'm saying is, these people don't seem like the best neutral third parties to be conducting these unbiased experiments about the sublime. They WANT to be having sublime experiences...if you want to go into the woods and are looking to find big foot, your mind will inevitably find a way to justify and distort what you saw to reinforce that fact. If you WANT to look into the sky and see aliens flying around, it becomes much easier to find some mysterious light you can identify as extra terrestrial. Which is why to me...the most FASCINATING and persuasive of ALL the accounts of the sublime are the ones recorded by people that weren't going out with the intention of HAVING a sublime experience...they sort of accidentally stumbled upon a sublime experience. There are thousands of pages of diaries written by adventurers crossing the alps in the 17 and 1800s. Now, the alps, as far as a mountain range is concerned...just type "the alps" into google images and you'll see what I mean...you look at these mountains and they are absolutely beautiful beyond words but as you look at them... you can just picture yourself as a little speck on the side of one of these mountains and you can't help but notice how treacherous it must be trying to navigate up there, let alone in the 1700s. If... two of the ingredients in this recipe for a sublime experience are greatness beyond measure and a fear for your own life...well crossing the alps in the 1700's must have been like a hotbed for growing these sublime experiences. You read these accounts by the people that managed to catalog their emotions when crossing the alps...you begin to feel the emotions they felt...two of the most famous for their accounts of the sublime were John Dennis and Joseph Addison...and both of them when you read their diaries describe the EXACT same sort of feeling! Dennis talks about this psychological tightrope that he was walking the whole trip...torn between delight at the landscape but delight

that was "mingled with horrors, sometimes almost with despair." Addison talks about having the same seemingly paradoxical feelings as he's braving the alps...he famously said "The alps fill the mind with an agreeable kind of horror!" What are they talking about here? They seem to be taking pleasure in the landscape, but it's not all sunshine and rainbows in the Swiss Alps. It SEEMS counter intuitive! How can you be mingled with horror, but still somehow... be unquestionably deriving pleasure from the experience? What these diaries show us, if anything, is the beginning of what seems to be a completely different way of aesthetically judging the world, while getting pleasure from the experience, that has nothing to do with beauty. And this right here, is the exact reason why the sublime is such a fascinating concept to me personally, because when I first read about this and realized that we're talking about potentially a different way of aesthetically judging the world different from beauty...perhaps mutually exclusive from beauty, it just completely blew my mind. So just to be sure we don't gloss over this point, let me explain why this is such a big deal. See, as you know from this podcast aesthetically judging the world was nothing new at this point...it had been talked about ad nauseum in the past. Plato talks in the Symposium the Philebus...we can all relate to the experience of looking out at the world...finding something beautiful and it doesn't seem that controversial to say that the thing that differentiates something from being beautiful or not beautiful in my experience is that...oh when i look at this thing that's beautiful it brings me some kind of pleasure however marginal that makes me attracted to it. Now the natural conclusion to jump to there is that if seeing a beautiful thing brings me pleasure and that's part of the reason I am attracted to beautiful things...then the inverse must be true as well, right? Ugly things must bring me some small level of pain which is why I recoil from them. I kinda feel bad for "ugliness" if that's even a thing. Why did "ugliness" get such a bad rap in the world? People like St. Augustine went so far as to say that really ugliness doesn't even exist...see for him when we perceive something beautiful...what we're seeing is God's fingerprints on his creation and that when we call something ugly...really what we're seeing is just an ABSENCE of God's goodness, not a quality in itself. I'm sure you can see the striking similarities to Plotinus's theodicy. But

for me...this is a pretty awesome assumption that Edmund Burke's calling into question when he writes his work on the sublime...why is the inverse necessarily true? Why does ugliness necessarily have to be painful? Why does ugliness have to not exist at all? Once you start calling these things into question...it opens up a whole other barrel of monkeys...can we derive pleasure from looking at ugly things? Forget about ugliness for a second...can we derive pleasure from some OTHER type of aesthetic experience...from something OTHER than looking at beautiful things? The Sublime, to Edmund Burke is a very strange type of pleasure that we get from feeling as though our lives are in danger while coming into contact with these things like the ocean that are powerful beyond calculation...not too much in danger, you still have to be able to feel that strange delight! Burke says that too much danger just makes it into a terrible experience...no there's this Goldilocks zone of an attack on your instinct of self-preservation that when at the right place at the right time can bring you a sort of pleasurable distress. You're in imminent danger by this thing that is powerful beyond measure, but at some deep level you know that you're going to be fine...you know you're at arms length from this thing...and it brings you a weird kind of pleasure being in contact with that greatness. You can imagine being a ship caught in a storm. You can imagine being a traveler in the 1700's crossing the alps. The sublime to Burke is visceral. It's not based on some intellectual calculation that we're making...it's not like beauty where we look at some thing and weigh it up against all the other beautiful things we've seen in our life and make a judgement about whether it's beautiful and if we find it beautiful we just sit there and enjoy it for a while...you know the tastemaker that Hume talks about...where you use your mind to cultivate these skills of judging beautiful things.No the sublime is something different...it's something deep within us...it's a part of what makes us human...very different than beauty. Burke talks about beauty being something that brings the mind inaction...it doesn't stimulate the mind...you find beauty and you sit back and enjoy it. No, on the contrary Burke says that the mind SWELLS when it encounters the sublime. The Sublime to Burke is a much more real, much more important type of aesthetic judgement:

This idea of the sublime being a more real, non-intellectual, more natural version of aesthetically judging the world was a massively appealing concept during Burke's time. Remember, this is the enlightenment...there is this intense momentum moving in the direction of using reason as the guide for human progress...of using empirical observation and arriving at truths of fact. And in response to this there was a push back by people...they thought we were going to far with all this reason stuff...there was this populist uprising fueled by the ideas of Rousseau and many others called Romanticism that loved the idea of the Sublime. There are stories of dozens of ordinary people that had no business pretending to be a mountaineer...being led into the mountains trying to achieve one of these sublime experiences...and many of them ended up dying! The point is: you can see how attractive this idea of the Sublime was back then...there was a hysteria that people connected to it. It really was like the 1700's version of Beatle-mania. Artists everywhere during this time and artists ever since have tried to take this incredible, profound experience of sublimity...and encapsulate it in the form of a painting. Or of a poem. Or of a song. Artists for hundreds and hundreds of years have tried to use their art to not give people something BEAUTIFUL to feast their eyes on...but to evoke a sublime experience! This new type of aesthetic judgement! Check out the series of paintings The Horse and Lion by George Stubbs if you want to see an incredible example of someone attempting to evoke a sublime experience in the viewer...George Stubbs was actually a friend of Edmund Burke so he had an understanding of the concept that not many people were privy to at the time. So here's the question you've all been considering the whole time you've been listening to this...have you ever had a sublime experience in the way Edmund Burke describes? Well, as I said at the beginning of the show...I haven't. I have no idea what this guy's talking about...and when I say that I mean I can't relate FULLY to what this guy's talking about...because we can all relate to the idea of getting some sort of strange pleasure out of recounting ugly or life-threatening things from the past right? Like, my dad was in the military, first Gulf War. He was a good American. And it was interesting because when he got home it seemed like

whenever he came across anyone who had ever seen combat before like he had, they would sit down, have a beer and talk about what their units did...the sort of missions they went on...they'd sit there and recount intimate, gruesome details about the terrible things they'd seen in combat. I remember one time I was a fly on the wall to this whole process and this guy was telling a story...we were walking through the trees...this kid stepped on a bouncin' betty and all of a sudden I got this 17 yr old kid holding his detached leg in his hands saying what do I do sarge? I said, boy you know what to do...take off your bootlace...make yourself a tourniquet. This guy was telling this story in the most cavalier voice you'd ever heard...like he was standing in line at subway talking to his friend about his job. And my dad was sitting there nodding like he was just enjoying the story. Yes, I too remember the day I had to take off a bootlace and make a tourniquet out of it. Now of course people join support groups and they talk to each other and they find relief discussing the terrible things that they've witnessed in wartime, but this specific case was different and I don't think it's entirely uncommon. If you asked these guys what the most traumatic horrible things they'd ever seen were they would undoubtedly point to what they saw during their years in the military, yet they take advantage of every opportunity they get to relive those moments in their heads over and over again. It doesn't seem like they're talking about these things so that one day they can come to terms with them and never have to think about them again...it seems like there is some peace that it brings them, some strange pleasure that they get by recounting a horrible situation where their lives were in danger but knowing at some level that they are at arms length from it now. Could these horrible events be one of the rare exceptions of something not produced by nature that's powerful enough to produce one of these sublime experiences? One of the main points Edmund Burke makes about the Sublime in his work is the idea that the Sublime is not just a greater level of beauty that we can only find in nature. What I mean by that is that its not like I look at a beautiful flower...I look at a beautiful house...and when I look out at the ocean it's just SO incredibly beautiful that it evokes this sublime experience...No, to Edmund Burke...the beautiful and the sublime are mutually exclusive. The Sublime to Burke is a much more real, much more

important type of aesthetic judgement:"If Taste has no fixed principles, if the imagination is not affected according to some invariable and certain laws, our labour... must be judged an useless... undertaking.... to set up for a legislator of whims and fancies."See, to Burke it's not just enough to look out at a calm ocean...he actually says explicitly 'These waters must be troubled before they can exert their virtues'. Well this brings us to Immanuel Kant...who is in my opinion the second greatest commentator ever on the sublime. Second only to a man named Arthur Schopenhauer who were gonna be talking about soon...but now were brought up to speed on this idea of the Sublime. Oddly enough...we know how little we know about this thing called the sublime at this point in history....how mysterious it is...And I guess what I'm saying is that I have good news for you either way:If you hated this episode, then the good news: it's going to be about a dozen episodes until we talk about this concept of the sublime again.If you loved this episode or are as fascinated as I am by these elusive, mysterious, truly undefinable sublime experiences...then you got an absolutely EPIC episode to look forward to when we talk about Kant and Schopenhauer and how they changed the way I look at everything in the world. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 6 - What is Enlightenment?

Episode #061

This is a transcript of episode #061 on What is Enlightenment? Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

On a cold, dark, cloud covered night in the year 1783 a small handful of European revolutionaries gathered together in secret to discuss their future plans. They called themselves the Wednesday Society. Now I know what you're thinking: Wednesday society...not a very good name for an ominous, revolutionary secret society...well that's because there was nothing ominous going on at these secret meetings at all! Wednesday was just the day of the week that they met on. They also called themselves the "friends of the enlightenment!" It was friendly secret society...they gathered together every week in solidarity... in support of this enlightenment that was going on. They talked about the good the bad...potential mistakes to avoid. These people had the presence of mind to realize that they were immersed in the middle of a massive cultural movement. It was like a big pro-enlightenment support group that they were a part of.

In fact, two of the members of this secret society were editors and founders of a super pro-enlightenment magazine slash journal slash periodical collection of pro-enlightenment ideas. Like, do you guys ever wonder what the opinion section of the newspaper was like hundreds of years ago? I do. I read this stuff sometimes. It's so cool to see what kinds of questions the average person thought were worth asking back then...given where and when they lived in history. What did they think were the most pressing issues facing them during their time. What's even MORE fascinating most of the time is just how similar the things they worried about are to the things WE worry about...it's fascinating how many of the questions they asked...we still haven't resolved. This may be one of those questions.

Anyway, one of these two editors and founders of this magazine was named Johann

Biester...now Johann Biester in the year 1783 anonymously published an essay in this magazine of his... where the title of the essay was: Proposal not to engage the clergy any longer when marriages are conducted. Now...it's pretty obvious what the point of the essay was...and this kind of thinking was a hallmark of the enlightenment. See Biester's writing this essay and he's very self aware of where he fits in to the context of history. As I said before...these guys KNEW they were smack dab in the middle of the massive cultural shift. They were very aware of the momentum of society moving in the direction of more secular institutions...the church was no longer the moral authority of the world...the church was increasingly become less and less influential in terms of government...so what this article aimed to do is ask a very natural next question: what about marriage? Marriage certainly in the past has been an exclusively religious ceremony...you know...being bound together in holy matrimony under the eyes of our lord Jesus Christ and his partner in crime God, but why is marriage a religious ceremony? Why does the church have to have a monopoly over this...why can't it be a civil ceremony? Why can't it be something that the government does? After all, aside from the moral implications...aside from the belief that it's a moral thing to do to commit yourself to one person for the rest of your life...people getting married is actually a pretty good thing for a government too, right? I mean, a married person...is a stable person. It's a person that has something to lose. It's a person that probably, by and large, is going to be thinking about their family and because of that will probably become a stable, monogamous, productive tax-paying member of society...paying into the very tax pool that funds the government. If you're the government, why WOULDN'T you give someone a tax break to get married...marriage is a loss leader for you! Eventually you're getting your money back one way or another. The point is, and the point of Biester's essay was: why do clergy somehow have a monopoly over marriage...why can't marriage be something else...something that's say, a civil procedure...carried out by a judge...overseen by the state. Well, we all know who eventually won this argument, but that's not the point of the episode today. As you can imagine, at the time that the essay was released...not everyone agreed with removing this power from the hands of clergymen...many of them were of a

religious bent themselves...one of them in particular named Reverend Johann Zollner responded to this anonymously written essay with a question...a very good question. It was a question that was so good and so necessary to answer at the time that I don't think Reverend Zollner could've ever predicted the level of response he was going to get. See, Zollner was a proponent of the enlightenment himself...but he looked at THIS article in particular and he just thought it was going way too far. To Zollner...the enlightenment was definitely good thing for SOME things...you know we have our secret society meetings...this is a fun little game we're playing when it comes to a lot of things...but when it comes to the institution of marriage...now things are starting to get ridiculous, now you're starting to question the foundations of morality itself! Marriage is just way too important... to muddle it up with all these human created institutions...it's best left in the hands of the church. He said you guys better just think about what you're doing here...think about your actions before you "confuse the hearts and minds of the people in the name of the enlightenment." After all, he asks right after that: what is enlightenment anyway? We have these Wednesday society meetings where we talk about the enlightenment...but who ever decided what the end goal of enlightenment was? What IS enlightenment, because if it's gonna go THIS far then maybe I need a new definition! Maybe I need to start the Thursday society. Well it was one of those questions that was so obvious that no one had even thought to answer it yet. What IS enlightenment? We talk a lot on this podcast about the AGE of enlightenment...and I know for a fact you guys at this point in the show the first thing you do whenever someone says a term is try to define terms...I have no doubt at home listening to this podcast as I've been talking about the so called "Age of enlightenment" you guys have been asking yourself...well what is enlightenment? By saying that, aren't we making a lot of assumptions ourselves? Look at you...you're turning into philosophers! Anyway when Zollner posed this question...it was like a circus...EVERYONE wanted to respond...dozens and dozens...flocks of respected intellectuals gave their two cents but no one's response was more famous or more influential than a almost a year after he asked this question when an answer was given by none other than the man we've been talking about lately Mr. Immanuel Kant. See

Immanuel Kant had a very unique perspective in all this...he's not just gonna sit back and let this little diversion tactic that Zollner does slide. No doubt this is a valid question Zollner brings to the table...what is enlightenment...but that could also be something else right? That could also be someone's primary argument having no merit, so they ask an unanswerable question to try to leave the conversation at a stalemate. That way they don't need to address the fact that their argument sucks. Like if your girlfriend comes to you and says, John, John we've been together three months and I'm just not happy! OK, hold on there...but answer me this: what is happiness? Can you answer me that? Because if you cant then I'm afraid we cant have his conversation! No, Kant's having none of that and he wastes no time and takes Zollner's question head on in the very first sentence of his response...what is enlightenment? Kant says:"Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." Well what does he mean by that? It seems like he's saying...and I don't want to come off like I'm putting words in Kant's mouth here...but it seems to ME like he's saying that if you're an unenlightened person...you are walking around your life constantly with a self-imposed state of immaturity. Why would he say that? Well to understand fully where he's coming from, we need to understand some historical context...we need to understand something about what it meant to be one of these people that would go to a place like the Wenesday society...you know one of these people living in the 1700's that's FULLY AWARE that they're in the middle of a massive cultural movement that's going on. Now to be one of these people...a common question that you would ask to yourself...or at least BE asked by other people at the time is: have we arrived at our destination? Have we done it? Are we now an enlightened people? I mean just look at what we've accomplished! Look at the scientific method we've created! Look at these new systems of government that we have! Look at the progress that's being made on a daily basis, comparable to the darkness we lived in for a thousand years during the middle ages. Let's just call a spade a spade...we are enlightened now! We've earned the medals in the field of battle...now let's wear them across our chests and walk around with pride!Well Kant realized something: people love to wear the medals... they don't love to earn the medals. See when Kant was asked this question...Kant ALWAYS

said that during his time they didn't live in an "enlightened age"...no they lived in an "Age of enlightenment". We hadn't arrived at our destination yet...but we were on the right path to get there. Just think about that statement for a second though... it really begs the question of what we were as a species before we were in the age of enlightenment. It really almost seems like Kant saw human thought during his time in a state kind of like young adulthood...they still had a ton of work to do a ton of lessons to learn..they weren't quite an adult yet...but at least they weren't what they were before. A child. A passenger to whatever arbitrary superstitions and doctrines it decided to place value on. When you really think about it, and this is coming from me...so this is not a term I use lightly: that's deep. I mean, this is why the first line of his response to reverend Zollner's question is: "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." See, we all start out as children. We're born...and as we're eating rocket ships full a baby food and we realize very quickly that the nature of life itself is very finite, right? I mean, at BEST we only have two parents. Two parents with a very limited set of experiences themselves...most of the time the way they live their life...they're really just doing the best they can... they're not trying to cure cancer...they're just trying to make through another day at the factory without wanting to off themselves. As children, we don't have an infinite bookshelf spanning off into the horizon...no, we have a limited number of books to read, cartoons to watch, church services to attend, relatives to consult. One thing for sure, our childhood does not even consist of us as a five year old kid walking around the playground like Socrates...some immensely educated, wise enlightened person, right? But it shouldn't be that way anyway. I mean, on the other hand that's one of the the great things about being a kid. You have nothing to worry about! You ask so many adults to recount the greatest days of their life and how often do they cite a time in their life when they had zero obligations? How often do adults tell their kids...oh you think YOU got it bad as a kid...wait till you have the stresses of adulthood, the bills, the commitments, the people you're beholden to, enjoy being a kid while you can!" Not to mention the fact that when you're a kid your life is pretty stress free because whenever you have a problem...there is always a very clear solution of what the answer to the

problem is. You have at your disposal essentially two omniscient oracles that you go to with ANY problem and they instantly have a solution...their names are mom and dad. You get a boo boo on your foot...you come to them, show them the problem...they know exactly what to do about it. Someone's mean to you at school, you tell them about what they said...they know exactly how to handle that situation next time. There's comfort in having that resource. You know, on that same note, I've known people that have quit their job in the corporate world thinking that being their own boss would be their dream job, it'd be the best thing that could ever happen to them...but when something goes wrong and there's a problem to be solved...there's something comforting about not being the boss...there's something that feels good about having someone to go to and ask what the best course of action is so that you're not the one making the decision that might potentially fail! Well, when we become adults...bad stuff still might happen to you five minutes from now. You still may get a boo boo on your foot, except this time the boo boo on your foot may be that your house is getting foreclosed on...or that your liver is shutting down. It's still terrifying to not know the future, so what do we do about it? How can we be sure that none of this bad stuff is gonna happen to us? To Kant, what we do as children is we outsource different components of our life. We need to by means of necessity. But we become dependent on this process. We become dependent on not thinking for ourselves. It feels good. It feels so good, Kant says, that we extend this way of doing business into adulthood. I mean think about it, there's no rite of passage between childhood and adulthood or some ceremony that takes place where we go from "not capable of thinking for ourselves" to "capable of thinking for ourselves". No we just live one continuous existence. So at what point do we make that decision to start thinking for ourselves and not just do the best imitation of our parents and the people around us as possible? When Kant says "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity." What he's saying is that most people find so much comfort and ease in this lifestyle of outsourcing your thoughts on everything to the people around you during childhood that they just never stop doing it. They turn 18 and they find college professors to think for them. They turn 21 and they find charismatic radio personalities. They turn

forty and they find hacky cable news commentators. They live their lives seeing themselves as autonomous adults, but just think of what they're doing here...they're outsourcing their ENTIRE life to other people! Kant says: "It's so EASY to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, If only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me." Just listen to the first line of that: it's so EASY to be immature, right? It's so easy to find a single book on a subject...memorize a few taglines and insights from it and then whenever that topic comes up you just parrot whatever this author said and pass it off as your own thoughts. It's so easy to outsource your understanding. It's so easy to go to church on Sunday, memorize a few taglines and insights from what a pastor told you is the correct way to act and then whenever you're faced with a moral dilemma or a choice to make about what the right decision is...you just parrot whatever the pastor said and pass it off as your own decision. It's so easy to outsource your conscience. It's so easy to find some nutrition guru. Find some website that tells you everything you're doing wrong with your diet...they lay out exactly what you should eat and whenever someone asks you about what they should be eating you just parrot whatever the diet guru guy said on the internet. It's so easy to outsource every element of your life and allow someone else to think for you. Kant says people claim to love this idea of freedom. They love this idea of truly being able to exercise their ability to choose...to have a say in the matter. But how many of us just find someone else to outsource our thinking to and then wash our hands of the process of actually using our brains to think? Kant says people love to TALK about how much they love freedom...but this immaturity...this extension of their childhood...this looking to others for our own thoughts is a cage that we lock ourselves in. It's a self-imposed cage. It's a cage where you never think for yourself, where you're constantly at the mercy of whatever people you arbitrarily decided to believe...whatever book was next to you at Barnes and Noble...whatever website came up on your search results ...whatever church was closest to your house. It's a self incurred cage of immaturity. Now, the good news is...the key to that cage is hanging around your neck.

The key out of this cage is around everyone's neck...but they don't use it. And Kant says it's not a death sentence...we don't stay in this state of self incurred immaturity because we were somehow incapable of getting out of it. It's not that people are too stupid to get out of it. It's not a lack of understanding of HOW to get out of it...but Kant says the reason why they don't is always one of two things...the first one is that they're comfortable. Remember he said it in the first quote: it's so EASY to be immature. So what inevitably happens is people take the key from around their neck and they leave this cage for a few minutes and they can't handle it. Kant says...they start thinking for themselves for the first time and it's incredibly uncomfortable...they've never used this part of their brain before. It's like that scene out of the Matrix where Neo asks why do my eyes hurt? You've never used them before! Kant says what happens is people usually just out of laziness retreat back to letting other people think for them because it's so much more difficult to think for yourself. "It is because of laziness and cowardice that so great a part of humankind, after nature has long since emancipated them from other people's direction, nevertheless gladly remains minors for It is so comfortable to be a minor!" and "He has even grown fond of it." The second reason Kant gives for why people keep themselves in this self-imposed cage of immaturity, as you probably picked up in that quote I just read... is cowardice. They lack the courage to ever stand up and use their intellect. Now at first glance this seems strange...they lack the courage? Why would someone lack the courage to use their brain as much as they can? Why would it be scary to use your brain? Well think back to why we started this way of thinking in the first place...because we were kids! When you're a kid...it actually IS really scary to think for yourself. What if something bad happens...I've never been here before...I don't know anything! What Kant's saying is that that fear that you have doesn't just magically leave you the moment you throw your graduation hat up in the air. Think about it...it's scary to think for yourself! What if I'm wrong? What if that terrible thing happens to me that I'm always thinking about? What if I do this whole process of thinking for myself and then people reject me and call me an idiot! This is a big deal consider. I mean, just because you read books and listen to podcasts doesn't mean you love to think about stuff...you

could just be reading books to have thoughts to recite when someone asks you a question. That's not you loving to think about stuff..that's fueled by insecurity! Oh my god, what if someone asks me a question and I don't have an answer to it! But Kant says we cant let this fear of failure or negative judgement enslave us for our entire lives. There's far too much at stake. Kant has some words for someone in this place trying to muster the courage to take the leap he says:"the danger is not in fact so great, for by a few falls they would eventually learn to walk; but an example of this kind makes them timid and usually frightens them away from any further attempt" What Kant's saying is what if when you were a baby and you were trying to learn to walk you tried to stand up and fell over....you tried to stand up and fell over...what if you just gave up? What you're gonna ride around on one of those hover-rounds the rest of your life? NO! That's ridiculous...you keep trying until you learn the skills you need to walk! This is the same process as that...REMOVE yourself from your self-incurred immaturity...think for yourself...fail..fail..fail again and eventually you will learn to walk. Have the COURAGE to remove yourself from your self-incurred immaturity and not outsource your thinking to everyone around you. You know, Kant says this should be the trumpet that is sounded...the motto and slogan of the enlightenment...that we must DARE to be wise. To not cower in the corner terrified of what if we're wrong and we fall over a couple times...no! We will fall over, we will learn our lessons but one thing we will not do is be willing...to spend another thousand years outsourcing our thinking to whatever dogma arbitrarily lands on our lap. Now if this all sounds abrasive and engaging to you, keep in mind that this was occasionally Kant's style. It's been said about Kant that he didn't teach people philosophy...he taught them to philosophize. So, I hope you got some food for thought this week. That said, real briefly, the book I've been working on for about a year and a half is done now. I'll be releasing it within the next couple weeks...I'm really proud of what it is...I don't want to waste your time talking about it...but I hope you'll consider checking it out...I'll have more information the next time we meet. But until then...thank you for listening...I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 7 - Suicide

Episode #062

This is a transcript of episode #062 on Suicide Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Did you know that it's illegal to commit suicide? Seriously! Well, it's been taken off the books in some places because they realized how...just...hilarious of a law that is. Nonetheless to this day...and all throughout history...it was a felony under English Common Law...for most time periods and cultural climates it was ILLEGAL to commit suicide. Might be spoiling the ending here but suicide's an interesting thing in morality. Is it okay...is it not okay...it's incredibly controversial...certainly not a consensus on the matter. But given the time and place you were born into... you might think there was a clear cut answer. Like what do we do when someone brings up suicide in normal, everyday conversation? Like what do you do if someone comes up to you at work and says in passing in a conversation...my uncle committed suicide yesterday! Well in modern American society you instantly feel terrible, oh no! He committed suicide, that's horrible! Quiet, reverential tone to your voice. Things get awkward real quick. Completely different response than if they said, I had to take my uncle to the airport yesterday, he's going on a long trip. Well pardon me for asking this, I don't mean to offend anyone's longstanding beliefs on the nature of suicide, but after all this is a philosophy podcast in case you're new around here...this is all about questioning our beliefs about stuff...questioning why we think and act the way we do...so I apologize in advance if this is an easy question for you to answer...but why are we so quick to negatively judge suicide. Why are we so biased and judgmental toward suicide in particular? Why did suicide earn this reputation? Why can't it be that when someone tells you at work that their uncle committed suicide you say "Hey! Good for him! That's Great!" Maybe we should start here. Let me ask you something, can you at least imagine there ever being a situation where committing suicide is OK? Can you think of an

example where committing suicide would be an OK thing to do? Now most people in response to this question fall into one of two camps I'm not saying you're either of these but most people would say either: One is: No! Are you kidding me? Why would you even ask that? Are you stupid? It's NEVER okay to kill yourself...it's NEVER the right decision. There's always an alternative! The other is: Who cares? Not my problem? You want to kill yourself, kill yourself...I can't stop you. It's your body. Do what you want with it! The point I want to make here today is not which one of these is more correct, the question I want us to ask ourselves today is something kind of weird...where do these beliefs come from in the first place? Your beliefs that you hold right now about whether suicide is morally permissible...even if they're more nuanced than these two examples...where did those beliefs come from initially? You weren't born with them...you weren't a baby walking around with beliefs on suicide...you must have learned them somewhere...or reasoned to them somehow? Where do they come from? Here's an even better question: can you imagine a world...and this is COMPLETELY HYPOTHETICAL HERE...I REALIZE HOW CRAZY THIS SOUNDS...but can you imagine a world where committing suicide was actually considered a good thing? Where people waited their entire lives for their ultimate moment to commit suicide...where they trained every day in hopes of one day having the deterministic laws of the universe or the providential hand of God or whatever they believed in...GIVE THEM THE GLORIOUS OPPORTUNITY to commit suicide? Can you imagine a world where you tell someone that your uncle committed suicide at work and you were met with smiles? Because if you can, then you can imagine the world you actually live in...and that's a good place to start. The Spartans lived every day training, PRAYING for this sort of opportunity...to be met with a glorious situation of certain death on the battlefield where they may sacrifice themselves. Even in many cultures today it's seen as an honorable thing to do, to take your own life if you're nothing but a financial or emotional burden on your family. See, what I'm arguing is not that suicide is some great thing...but that the world is not as black and white as suicide is bad in every situation or suicide is perfectly okay in every situation...even just in the vacuum of modern America...a single culture...a single time period.... even then we keep two sets

of books when it comes to suicide. Hitler...notoriously seen as a suicide. The guy had it coming. The enemies were converging on Berlin and he killed himself. But what about Jesus? Ah! That's not a suicide...he was put to death by the Romans! I got news for you people...Jesus was God manifest on planet earth...this guy could walk on water...he could heal the blind. He could've summoned an army of freakin' unicorns to come down and kill the Romans but he chose not to. He facilitated his own death...he committed suicide in the name of your sins! It's very tempting to try to redefine these things so that we can reserve the word suicide for times when we facilitated our own death and I don't agree with it! For you more secular minded folks out there what about the suicide of Socrates in the name of philosophy? You're probably thinking, no! he was sentenced to death by the Athenians! But Socrates could've EASILY argued his way out of those charges...he chose not to! He wasn't going to be reduced to sophistry! He committed suicide in the name of a noble cause! Again, it's very tempting to try to redefine these things so that we can reserve the word suicide for times when we facilitated our own death and I don't agree with it!

When someone tells us at work that their uncle committed suicide over the weekend...we INSTANTLY assume that something must have been wrong with them when they made that decision. And there may have been mentally, but that doesn't change our assumptions that we make: Why would anyone commit suicide? I certainly wouldn't commit suicide! Death is something I'm trying to avoid at all costs! But therein lies the problem: you're conflating your own intentions behind why you make the choices you do with theirs..and it's all from the comfort of that armchair up in your head. Here's what I'm going to ask you to consider today: that maybe your thoughts on suicide are equally as conditioned into your head as the ones were into the heads of the Spartans during antiquity. Maybe your beliefs on suicide are more pliant or less black and white than they seem on the surface. We're going to look at suicide from a lot of different angles today...ultimately to Kant's views which I think are an incredibly interesting take on why suicide is NEVER okay...but let this episode serve as an extension of last episode. Let this episode be an example of how easy it is to outsource our beliefs to the people around

us...I mean, suicide doesn't seem very dynamic. It seems like something cut and dry enough...if conclusions about what is morally permissible are possible at all....suicide seems like one of those things where we'd be able to conclude some stuff on. Right? Now I know what you're saying right now: well look when someone at work tells me their uncle killed themselves I instantly assume somethings wrong with them because usually there was and I have a reverential tone in my voice because mental illness is a tragedy. I wholeheartedly agree. Mentally ill and depressed people do kill themselves. These people needed help that they didn't get...in fact if you want my opinion I think in 100 years people will look at how little we serve these people as a society and think we were barbarians. People also typically make an exception for suicide when it comes to the terminally ill...if someone's in a lot of pain...they think it's okay for them to go out on their own terms...again, not disagreeing. But that said, I would ask you to return to the original question: barring the exceptions of mentally or terminally ill people taking their own life, is suicide morally permissible to you? How much control do people have over their own bodies? Does an otherwise mentally sound, perfectly normal person have the right to take their own life? Would you say they were morally wrong for doing it? These are questions worth asking...and the mental illness exception to the rule is one that Plato recognized all the way back in the third century BC. Plato writes in his work *Phaedo* through the quintessentially wise character of Socrates aligning himself with something the Pythagoreans initially talked about...in one of Plato's more Pythagorean moments...he says that suicide is definitely wrong. It's wrong because it would be releasing ourselves from our duty that the gods put us here to do. He compares us like a guard at a guard post...it would be inappropriate if you were a guard manning a post to relieve yourself of your duty...no it's not YOUR choice when to leave your guard post...no you wait for your orders. Plato talks about how we've been placed here as sort of a punishment by the Gods...we're kind of like prisoners serving a sentence, although there's a pretty negative connotation you would attach to being a prisoner so its probably not the best example...but us committing suicide is wrong because its like we're a prisoner committing some sort of celestial jailbreak to Plato. It's not our job to decide

when our sentence is over. Plato does give exceptions to this rule...people who are struggling with mental illness and people whose character is so far gone it's a lost cause...these people get a free pass...but for everyone else...there is no excuse for committing suicide...it would be laziness or cowardice to relieve yourself of your duty...Plato even starts to sound emasculating at times like...what you can't handle the pressures of life? Man up ya sissy! So, I wanna talk about this theory...the idea that it would be morally wrong to relieve ourselves of our duty as guards placed at a guard post by the gods for a purpose. Now it's easy to look back and cloud this theory with medieval superstition, it's easy to say oh Plato with his hocus pocus about gods and goblins and witches...but keep in mind...Plato lived centuries before Jesus made it popular to be a monotheist. Plato's not talking about a singular God that has a personal relationship with you who has decreed a moral code for you to follow...and I think it opens up a lot of interesting conversations to be charitable to Plato here. Like, you can apply any number of different viewpoints across Plato's example and you might be able to appreciate his argument more. Like, let's do a modern example...let's apply some Saganism to Plato. Carl Sagan's famous quote we are a way for the cosmos to know itself. We are sentient life. We sense and perceive the world around us. Our purpose is to sense and perceive the world around us. So if you apply this idea across Plato's example metaphorically, the gods could just be the ordering principles of the universe...you know the laws of physics, the laws of thermodynamics, the progressive adaptation of life to acclimate to its environment...the things that make it possible for sentient life to exist...and our guard post that we're manning as guards...is just...to perceive the world around us. The universe has bestowed upon you sentient life...the incredible ability to be one tiny aspect of that totality and be a way for the cosmos to know itself. It has bestowed upon you a guard post and you committing suicide would be to cut that perceiving short...that duty that you have to help the cosmos know itself. Now again, this works with any number of examples, the constant in the argument is this: we have an obligation to some exterior thing...some purpose assigned to us by a third party that would make us killing ourselves immoral because it is us not meeting up to our end of the bargain. People do this with

government and society. They say...from the very moment you're born society and government are affording you a certain lifestyle...security, resources, even down to the roads...these things are serving you...and some people say that suicide is wrong because you owe it BACK to this society your production for as long as you possibly can. Again, from Gods, to virtue to society...the constant here is that it is wrong for you to kill yourself because you have an obligation to meet your end of some bargain that's been set up, often times without your explicit consent...which starts to be the REALLY twisted and funny part about this. But anyway you have the Stoics...Seneca...council to the emperor Nero as we talked about...one of the most famous suicides ever...it's the quality of life that matters not the quantity of life. But nothing was more influential on how the average modern American views suicide than Christianity. Now it should be said, in recent years, the Catholic church has been coming around...they see the writing on the wall...if they want to survive as being a moral authority in the world... they're going to have to lighten up in relation to the society that's growing morally around them...they've introduced new clauses that allow for mentally and terminally ill people to commit suicide and they're pretty sure Jesus is going to take that terrible disease he allowed them to get into consideration before damning them to hell-fire, but before about 15 years ago, the stance of Christianity on suicide was based on a conglomeration of the philosophy of St. Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Suicide was wrong. Absolutely wrong. No exceptions. Turns out God takes the ten commandments pretty seriously...and what Augustine notices about suicide...he writes in his famous work The City of God is that God makes his stance on suicide very clear. He says "Thou shalt not kill". Now, he also says Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor. So what Augustine says is: God very deliberately frames it this way. He could've easily chiseled into some stone tablets Thou shall not kill thy neighbor, but NO! He says thou shall not kill! That means EVERYTHING! Yourself included, future reader of this stone tablet. Makes it kind of interesting and confusing when you think about all the life coursing through the animals we supposedly have dominion over...and the fact that all of Christianity is contingent on a voluntary human sacrifice..but either way: God's will was clear. Suicide was wrong...no

matter what color you were....Black, white or yellow with jaundice. Thomas Aquinas completely agreed with Augustine. He defends the idea further throughout his philosophy and ultimately the end game of their philosophical suicide tag team is an idea that we, as mere humans, we didn't COMPLETELY...own...our bodies...we were limited to what they called usus...sorta like a rent to own program. We're merely in possession of these bodies...God owns them...we renting them as we're navigating this planet...but the deed is in his name. Now, the natural conclusion here is that if you commit suicide in the middle ages your body was desecrated, torn apart, mutilated...and all of your possessions and your family's possessions were seized. Wait, was that the natural conclusion...either way: it's how it went down. They didn't take suicide lightly in the Middle Ages, they just loved you way too much to watch you hurt yourself. Now this moral absolutist stance on suicide was the main way of thinking all the way until the enlightenment...it was unshakable. It was powerful. Consider this: even someone like a John Locke...even someone whose entire political philosophy...world changing political philosophy is predicated on the idea that we talked about on here: we as humans have the right to life, liberty and property...liberty over our body and what it produces...even John Locke says that one of the exceptions to that rule of liberty over our body is that...well, we can't kill ourselves. Why would he make that distinction? Why don't we have sovereignty over our body to the point we can destroy it if we want? Raises a lot of interesting questions about what suicide even is. Like couldn't you make the case that people that smoke or people that eat really bad or people that drink all the time, they're willingly destroying their body...but you wouldn't call that suicide. You wouldn't call it suicide if someone thought they were drinking Kool-aid but instead they were drinking bleach. So suicide can't be just any death that you cause yourself...what philosophers usually say from here is that suicide is when you INTENTIONALLY are bringing about death on yourself. It's somewhere in the intentions behind WHY you're doing something that suicide lies...not in what actually happens. Conversely, it's still suicidal behavior if you think you're taking an entire bottle of prescription meds when in reality they were Flintstones vitamins. But questions about what suicide is aside: philosophy's opinion on it took a giant shift in the

enlightenment thinkers that we've been talking about for the last dozen or so episodes. Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume...they all opposed the, as they saw it, radical idea that suicide is morally impermissible. Hume may be the most interesting of all these positions...mostly just because what he does is SO DAVID HUME. It's exactly what you'd expect from David Hume. He takes the argument that the church has been making for centuries about why suicide is wrong and he points out all the assumptions and contradictions in it and ultimately shows that it may be more complicated than they're leading on about. So their argument is that we don't own our bodies and that ultimately it's God's decision when and how we die and that by killing ourselves we are going against the "divine order" that god has set up for the universe. Again, we are beholden to some "divine order" that God has established...to take your own life is to violate that order. So Hume just starts there. What is this divine order that we're appealing to? Really let's get to the bottom of what this divine order is that we're beholden to...by divine order do you just mean the causal laws created by God? What he's saying is...are we never allowed to take any action for the sake of our own happiness for fear of going against this divine order? Well, obviously that's ridiculous...God wouldn't get mad at you for taking medication when you're sick or trying to get yourself better if you were dying. That can't be the divine order that we're talking about. If the divine order is just a set of behaviors that is intended to make us happy...then what if someone decides they'd be happier if they killed themselves? That wouldn't contradict the divine order if that's what it is. Is the divine order just whatever God consents to? Because in that case then God seems to be consenting to everything that we're doing. I mean after all, Hume says...an omnipotent God could always choose to intervene and change the course of history...he apparently does all the time...so at least we know we're not going against the divine order if THAT is the metric you're using. But what about society Hume? Maybe not God, but don't we have a moral obligation to stick around for society? Don't we owe it to our fellow countrymen to give and produce as much as we can for as long as we can given that we so willingly accepted the benefits of society for so long? Hume says that's all well and good, but it reaches a limit right? Eventually you get to be 60 years old, sometimes much

younger, and it just becomes extremely painful to work. Should that person continue working in abject suffering...working themselves into the ground just for the sake of this obligation they have to society? You would have to call them an immoral person if they didn't! Okay, Hume. I see what you're saying...but we can't actually live this way right? I mean, what's to stop the whole world from just killing themselves if we don't tell them it's unthinkable wrong? That's the slippery slope argument...I guess if I was Bill O'reilly I would feel like I really just made a good point...but the more sound argument from someone might be: I mean people that are young and stupid make rash, immoral decisions all the time. How many teenagers have stolen a candy bar from a 7/11...what if they make a similar rash, immoral decision but this time it isn't a snickers bar at stake...it's their life at stake! To that, Hume would say...what are we really worried about if we DARE TO SAY that suicide is a morally permissible thing? Look it's not like we are EVER going to go around being attracted to the idea of suicide. We have a natural aversion to death as humans...and what he says is that if a right thinking person ever got to a place where they just didn't want to live anymore, they got to that place and arrived at that mental conclusion in the face of that fear of death, in SPITE of that fear of death. They probably thought long and hard about the decision to even be able to transcend that natural wiring. Hume would say...this isn't something comparable to stealing a candy bar at 7/11. Suicide takes courage to Hume. Suicide takes clarity of mind for someone to do, obviously with the exceptions we've already talked about. Voltaire also talks about this inherent fear of death as being a safeguard against people just randomly killing themselves one night...oops! He has a really beautiful quote: "I have been a hundred times on the point of killing myself, but still was fond of life. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of our worst instincts. What can be more absurd than choosing to carry a burden that one really wants to throw to the ground? To detest, and yet to strive to preserve our existence? To caress the serpent that devours us, and hug him close to our bosoms till he has gnawed into our hearts?" He's saying how crazy is it that even in cases where people hate their life and I mean truly hate it...detest their very existence...they STILL have a desire to live. They STILL have that instinct to just persist...at all costs. It's

downright illogical, Voltaire's saying...it's like caressing the serpent that is eating us. Why would we go on like that? To take it one step further: why would we say that someone is immoral for wanting to end that? Why don't they have full control over what they do with their body? Let me ask you this question: if you knew someone who said that they truly hated their life and what they wanted more than anything else in this entire world...what would make them happy is to end it all...let's say you knew they were planning to do it on a specific night...would you want some sort of police force or governing body to step in and stop them from doing it? To restrain them? Do you believe that people not only have the right to take their own life if they so choose to...but they also have the right to not have people intervene and STOP them from doing it if they want to? There are a lot of people that feel this way. If what you want more than anything else is to kill yourself...these people say I don't think it's right for someone to be able to tie you up and force you to live. But the flip side is true as well...if you don't think someone should be able to intervene and STOP someone from committing suicide, then you need to be consistent and also not believe in doctors being able to intervene and ASSIST people with the act of committing suicide. Complicated national debate we've been having in this country for quite a while and I think this question of whether we should allow people to intervene on either side of the decision is one of the big things that stops progress...it's a tough question to answer. The point I think these enlightenment thinkers would want us to realize is that it's so easy for us to relegate this activity down into terms of: I think death is bad. Therefore, suicide must also be bad. But many cultures don't see it this way at all...sometimes the most dignified and best way you can die is on your own terms...maybe what you have a problem with is not the act of suicide itself as someone voluntarily facilitating their own death, but something else that lies at the root of the intentions behind suicide. Because not everyone commits suicide for the same reasons...some do it out of depression...some do it out of anger like I'm gonna really show you and commit suicide! like they're punishing someone, but other people do it in the name of glory. Other's do it out of a duty to their family and people around them. Others do it because they believe they are serving the creator of the universe...sacrificing

themselves in the name of the very thing that they believe gave them life in the first place. Well, Kant didn't see room for this sort of nuance. No, Kant thought it was very simple. Suicide is wrong. But what's interesting about Kant is that in part of his argument he gives an entirely SECULAR account of why suicide is always wrong. This separates him from many of the others that are appealing to what a God chiseled into stone on the top of a mountain several thousand years ago. Kant thinks that if you even try to commit suicide...not even succeed at it...but even just TRYING to commit suicide is tantamount to "discarding your humanity". You are now lower than the beasts to Kant. Lower than animals. He's not just throwing around a bunch of insults here cause he's having a bad day...No Kant REALLY thinks that if you try to commit suicide and survive...that we can treat you like an animal now. Like who's a good boy? Who's the best boy in the world? Kant says we should "treat him as a beast, as a thing, and to use him for our sport as we do a horse or a dog." Now where is Kant coming from here? Well, Kant says that by killing yourself, you're no longer treating yourself as a human being, but more of as a thing...nothing more...which to Kant has a lower status and apparently gets fed dog biscuits and used for sport: "Man can only dispose of things; beasts are things in this sense; but man is not a thing, not a beast. If he disposes of himself, he treats his value as that of a beast. He who so behaves, who has no respect for human behavior, makes a thing of himself." The other argument Kant gives I think is the REALLY interesting one and that is that: it just doesn't make sense that something could be a moral act...where the very act of doing it precludes moral acts from being able to take place at all. In other words, if you kill yourself, you're dead. That's it. You can't do moral things anymore. What Kant is saying is why would it be moral to "root out the existence of morality in the world." Why does that make sense? That something could be considered moral than prevents you from doing anything moral. By taking your own life you are robbing yourself of your rationality...of your ability to do your moral duty...you are robbing yourself of everything that distinguishes you as a human that makes free-thinking choices. This is the reason why Kant thinks it's not only morally WRONG to commit suicide, but by even trying to do so, you forfeit your human card. You know, this

whole conversation we're having...that we've been having over the Kant and Hume episodes is coming to a climax. This whole conversation is a micro to a larger macro that is going on in history...what Kant and Hume are doing here whether they realized it at the time or not is craft a way of looking at human life that is so beautiful and so freeing of the shackles of this burden that we willingly place on ourselves to KNOW so much all the time....You know what...I'll save that. The point of this episode is don't commit suicide. Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you next time.

Kant pt. 8 - Limitations of Knowledge

Episode #063

This is a transcript of Episode 63 - Kant pt. 8 - Limitations of Knowledge. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). I wanna start the episode today by simultaneously saying both the most controversial and least controversial thing I've ever said on this show. You are not built to have total knowledge of everything around you. I'm sorry. No matter how painful or unpainful this is for you to hear, you just were not designed to arrive at a full understanding of everything that exists out there. > There's this weird tightrope that we walk as human beings sometimes...on one hand we live our lives and we want to feel like everything is knowable...we want to feel like if we just keep philosophizing and conducting science experiments that eventually we'll get to some knowledge rest stop along the highway...to a place where we just know...everything. Or at least close to everything. But on the other hand...at some level...we know this is impossible. On the other hand we know just how incapable we are of knowing. > Many people simply by virtue of being the kind of person that listens to a podcast like this...there's a part of you that sees value in seeking knowledge, right? Understandable. I'm one of you. > But why do you do it? Why seek knowledge about the world as opposed to not seeking knowledge? You ever had someone ask you that? Why do you like to LEARN stuff...do you know what I like...NOT reading. That's my thing. Why would you ever read a book about something when you can just enjoy your life instead? Why would you ever watch a documentary on something and actively use your brain when you can be entertained... watching Honey boo boo? It's a valid question: why are you listening to this podcast when you could be listening to one of any number of hacky ex stand up comedians telling the same formulaic dick jokes week after week into a microphone? > How would you respond if someone asked you that? Well I would respond by saying that no matter how immediately ungratifying an educational experience may seem on the surface...it usually leads to my life being better in some way, right? Knowledge is power. I learn new things

and I create for myself a richer, fuller understanding of the universe. I can list off a thousand examples of how learning things makes me less ailed by ignorance... or clouded by superstition like some member of a pygmy tribe. > Knowledge brings opportunities that you wouldn't otherwise have..by that I mean that more opportunities present themselves to you in this world because of this knowledge that you have.You can look around at the world and appreciate things more than other people...in this way knowledge broadens our vision of what the universe is...it makes everything in this small very limited, community that you live in...bigger...more exciting...more interesting. > For example...let's say you watch a Netflix documentary on...I don't know...electrical boxes. When you're walking down the street...you look at that electrical box...you don't just see an electrical box...you see all the ingenuity behind it...how it powers the entire neighborhood...you think about how George C. Electric Box in 1843 made the first one and you consider the intricate web of wires and connectors...the billions of calculations that box is making every day...when you apply your knowledge to your perception of the world around you...you are for all intents and purposes seeing a completely different world than someone else who walks past that very same electrical box and just says. Meh. This things in my way. Knowledge makes the universe bigger and more interesting. > And lucky for people like us...knowledge is a respectable paradigm to strive for in our society. I think it's so respectable...many of us choose it and fall into the trap of failing to ask ourselves: what is my ultimate goal here? What's the endgame? What am I aiming towards with knowledge? What are we as a species aiming towards? Total knowledge of everything there is? Sure, why not? I mean why would we ever get to a stopping point? Can you really ever imagine scientists stopping? We could arrive at the most awesome piece of knowledge imaginable and would we really stop? Why would we? There's no stopping point when it comes to knowledge! > Or is there? > You know there's a way of thinking about our knowledge of the universe that seems pretty popular when I talk to people in today's world but it was actually being talked about all the way back in Kant's time...there was a famous mathematician named Pierre Laplace who was sort of the poster child for this way of thinking...the idea was that if we knew the

location...theoretically speaking...if we knew the location of every atom in the entire universe...and we knew exactly how to calculate these seemingly necessary, constant forces like gravity...that we could at least in theory simulate every cosmic event...every natural event...we could simulate or predict EVERYTHING that was going to happen...from there on out. > Now in modern times this usually takes more of the form of...look at what science has done so far! Look at how much we know compared to before! As long as these people in lab coats keep conducting these empirical experiments and concluding things and then building off of those experiments and making further conclusions that eventually...we will have arrived at TRUTH...we will have knowledge of everything there is in the entire universe! > There's a huge difference between truth and knowledge. What Immanuel Kant would want us to consider...and this is a very key distinction to make... is that even if we arrived at this rest stop on the knowledge highway...even if this was possible, at best all we could EVER have is not total knowledge of everything there is...but total knowledge of human experience. There's a big difference between the two. > Remember Kant talks about how there are two worlds...the world of things in themselves...the noumenal world...out there somewhere...out of our reach...and the world of appearances...that's the world we live in...the crude map of that more real world that our mind and senses produce so that we can navigate our existence. > We know this...we know at some level that everything we see all around us is not TRUE, fundamental reality...but only what our mind is depicting of that reality...yet just at a raw everyday existence level...very few of us make that distinction...we live our lives as though we are existing in some infallible, true depiction of the universe. It's almost like a defense mechanism. > This is why I said this is simultaneously the most and least controversial thing I've ever said on this show...people navigate their lives emphatically believing they are making judgments in the "real world" but they're never more than a couple well placed questions away from being talked down from that standpoint...from saying...ah yes well of course this isn't reality! > Like if you believe you are an agent of the Christian God's will navigating this planet, then you don't believe that God created your eyes, ears and mental faculties to necessarily comprehend the FULL extent of this

majestic, glorious tabernacle he's created for you...no he made you so your eyes and ears would work well enough...well enough to read the bible and treat other people around you nicely. > If you're a Godless, hedonistic monster, well you also have another way you look at the world. This hardware that you have to perceive the world is not necessarily designed to measure the fabric of reality itself...it's designed to pick bananas and live in these particular climatological conditions. And in that way, the hardware you have that is picking up this reality is completely arbitrary on a cosmic level right? This way that you perceive the world is really only a relevant skill-set on this little blue planet that we have during this very short time period, right? > Let me explain what I mean by this: right now you can see certain types of waves. You can see light waves, heat waves, etc...but you can't see other ones...like gamma rays, microwaves radio waves...but they still exist right? Just because you can't see them with the naked eye doesn't mean that they don't exist, but how did we get to a place where we needed these special instruments to see some waves but not others? Well again, if you're a Godless hatchet man of Satan then you probably believe that life forms with genetic mutations that could perceive things like light and heat waves had a reproductive advantage in some former world and that being able to see things like gamma rays or radio waves isn't impossible...it just wasn't that useful before the advent of the radio. > Let's use a modern example. Let's imagine some really bizarre post-apocalyptic scenario where there are disparate pockets of wi-fi signal still being transmitted and we have these devices that we carry around that pick up that wi-fi signal and it connects us to a network where we're told where to find fresh water and food. Now if that's the world you live in most of you listening to this show have a serious problem on your hands...you don't see wi-fi signal flying around when you walk into Starbucks, right? If you do you should probably get that checked out...you don't SEE the wifi signal, but it's still there. All around you. Because of that...your life in this post apocalyptic world would be VERY difficult...you'd be reduced to walking around randomly staring at your phone praying for bars to show up. You'd be hopeless. > Now here's the crazy thing...there probably are several people alive today that can sense when wifi signal is present. Either by seeing it or feeling it or hearing it...but either way...that

skill that person has that right now is practically useless...becomes very relevant in this bizarre post apocalyptic world that we're talking about. You essentially become a human dousing rod. I mean, talk about a survival advantage. You can sense where the disparate wifi connections are that lead to food and water! I want that guy on my team. > My point is: this guy goes on to reproduce and his kids inherit this gene...their kids inherit the gene and so on...this goes on enough generations and it's not crazy to think that the average human being eventually could be able to actually see wifi signals. Right? Now, my BIGGER point is that the fact you CAN'T see wifi signals and can see light rays...is equally as arbitrary. It's determined by whatever climatological conditions your ancestors were in. If survival was contingent on some OTHER skill set in the past...you wouldn't be here and if we want to pretend we would be here then it's not contrary to reason to say that the map our mind creates of reality...our experience of the world might be much different than it is now. > See what we are to Kant...this is very important for us to understand...is not a perceiver of the world of things in themselves...the ACTUAL world...no we should think of ourselves as an experience machine. A human apparatus that walks around experiencing stuff. That mind that you have that draws you a picture of reality...it's not necessarily showing you the world as it TRULY is...but just the information that's USEFUL to you. And that, as we just talked about could be any number of things... it could be God giving you eyes good that are just good enough to find the collection plate or your eyes just being good enough to get by on this very subjective, circumstantial, narrow set of climate conditions. > But think of what that means: if that is true...then human experience itself might be very subjective, circumstantial and narrow. What you're seeing right now could be nothing compared to what there actually is. There could be an infinity of parallel universes stacked on top of you right now that you have no idea are even there because it serves you no purpose to see them, that doesn't mean they're not there...no it just means God's love is not limited to one universe and why would he show you them if you're being morally judged in this one. There could be an infinite number of waves or vibrations or signals going all around you all the time that you don't sense...we don't have an instrument that READS these signals...that

doesn't mean they're not there...just that 100 million years ago it didn't give some mutated fish with a gimp leg a reproductive advantage to perceive them. > Now here's Kant's point: Kant loves the sciences. He thought Newton was definitely headed in the right direction when it comes to arriving at knowledge about this seemingly mechanistic universe that we live in, but what Kant would say is...what science is really good at doing is arriving at knowledge about HUMAN EXPERIENCE...not things as they are in themselves necessarily. Now that doesn't make ANY PART of the scientific body of knowledge not useful in Kant's eyes but it does make a very good point about human knowledge itself...that what we know...what we're organizing when we do science is only human experience... and that any inference we make about what that actual world looks like to Kant, is useless. What it also does is make the point that given how obviously flawed and narrow this human experience machine that we have at our disposal is...it begs another question: are there at least potentially things that we just CAN'T know? Knowing anything is always contingent on that human apparatus, right? So are there things out there... that ours are just not capable of knowing or perceiving regardless of how big of a microscope we make or how much philosophy we do? Both metaphorically and literally speaking: Are there signals out there that we just can't pick up simply because of the human apparatus we fell into by happenstance? > Kant thinks the answer is yes and he also thinks that dismissing things about what the world is based on this very narrow conception of reality that you have is just plain dumb. > Kant believed in God. Kant was not just a believer in God...but a believer in human souls...he believed that we actually have free will despite how that might seem contrary to the Newtonian Universe that was emerging...he believed all this stuff. > Now at first glance this may seem weird or inconsistent. In fact, it may seem inconsistent at second or third glance as well. In fact, you eventually get to a point where you just stop glancing at Kant and start glancing at the people that came after him...but there are some interesting discussions to be had in the mean time. > Kant's views on God would be very confusing to someone just getting into philosophy. Like does he like God or doesn't he? Because back there he was saying some really mean stuff about God but then I heard him say something about faith

and God existing...which seems like its different! I don't know! > Keep in mind...before you label Kant as a superstitious moron...that this is the same unparalleled genius Kant that we referenced back in our episode on St. Anselm. This is the same Kant to finally debunk Anselms proof of God's existence. You know, if God exists then he must be the greatest possible thing that can exist. God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived. I can imagine that thing in my head. Couple that with the fact that something actually existing has to be at least marginally greater than something not existing...therefore, the TRUE thing than which nothing greater can be conceived must exist. Therefore, God exists. > Now if you're rolling your eyes right now...this was a knockdown argument in philosophy before Kant. Consider the fact that Kant went OUT OF HIS WAY during his lifetime to debunk this thing. In fact, Kant goes out of his way to debunk a lot of stuff about how people have been thinking of God. Remember, Kant agrees with Hume in his rebuttal to the Cosmological argument or the prime mover argument that we are assuming that the universe needed to have a cause. Kant says sure, when navigating the world as one of these human experience machines it intuitively makes sense that this all needed a cause, but we can't say anything about things in themselves...which is what this all truly is. Cause and effect...space and time...these are ways that our minds make sense of the world...we know nothing about what things are like in themselves...just the human experience of these things. So all these arguments that use these intuitive approaches to what "HAS TO BE TRUE" because "IT JUST DOESN'T MAKE SENSE OTHERWISE" are nonsense to Kant. > Kant makes all these arguments and still believes in God. He still believes in human souls. He still believes in free will...and if you asked him about it...he wouldn't do what anselm did or Descartes did or Thomas Aquinas or any of these people that try to persuade you into thinking that God exists...you know give you an argument for how we "know" God exists. > Kant takes it another direction. He thinks these things were talking about here...god, free will, souls...these are beyond our capacity to know. If you asked Kant do you "know" if God exists? Or do you "know" that humans have free will? He would laugh and say of course not. Of course I don't KNOW whether God exists or any of these things...but these things

are by their very nature outside of what is possible for us to know with this very narrow, limited apparatus that we have to navigate the world. > Now you might be saying, Ok Kant but it seems like you're sidestepping the issue here. It seems like you're creating this alternative world that we can't know anything about...and I'm fully on board with that...I'm fully on board with the idea that we shouldn't be making assumptions about it or even speaking about the world of things in themselves because to do so would be using human language, words and phrases that we use to describe our human experience and even THAT is assuming too much about this world of things in themselves...I'm on board with all that...but it seems like...you...are now assuming quite a bit about this real world...like the fact that a God is a part of it. > But there's us walking that tightrope that I talked about at the beginning of the episode. We want to believe that if a God existed...we want to believe that come on...we'd at least be able to know that it exists, right? We want to believe that that's a piece of knowledge our mind could arrive at. But what if it's not? We know at some level...Isn't it possible that it's not? > What if to some other creature... looking at the world through a different apparatus than our human one it is perfectly obvious that a God exists or that humans have souls or any number of things? What if the existence of a God is as unknowable to us as the existence of some type of ray or particle or some parallel universe that we just don't have the ability to ever sense no matter how big of a microscope we build? > When you look at the world like Kant does...really makes the God of the Abrahamic religions start to seem pretty sadistic if you think about it. I mean to make part of the criterion of whether you get into heaven or not a belief in whether he exists...but then to give you hardware that makes it impossible for you to ever know. It's like the entire meaning of your life is to believe in something based on nothing. Like why doesn't God have a YouTube channel? I mean seriously people...weekly addresses...no more ambiguity...special segment...here's what I meant when I said that thing...that thing that you've interpreted to mean twelve different things. > Kant has a lot of slippery arguments about why he believes in all three of these things and they change all throughout his life depending on which particular work of his your reading at the time...understandable at one level...we're reading the intellectual development of a

human being that thought about stuff all the time...makes sense some things would change. He talks at times about how...it's an undeniable fact that most people have feelings about what is right or wrong...and they feel compelled to act in a certain way about them, but even by mentioning the ideas of right or wrong implies that we had some sort of choice in the matter, so although it appears to our human experience machine that we live in a mechanistic universe where we can predict everything that's going to happen including human behavior...in reality, even though we can't see it or sense it...there must be a moral realm out there that is responsible for all this. We must have what we think of as free will. Again these things change all throughout his career...reason is the basis for morality...reason is not an object of experience...point is we DON'T know what this other world is like...this is why he spends his career spending so much time trying to understand how we experience the world...because if we can understand this human experience machine fully...we can understand the limits of human knowledge. > See what we can glean from Kant here is a really interesting insight about the limits of that human knowledge. Kant would say that his belief in God is based on faith. No he doesn't know whether God exists...he thinks all these philosophers trying to PROVE to you that God exists are wasting their time which is why he spends so much of his destroying their arguments. No, this is beyond anything we can ever experience. He makes a really interesting point that the first time I read Kant I must have just glossed over...but he talks about be fair to me...because there are two different kinds of faith. > He says that if you have faith about something that is potentially knowable...then that is superstition...that is detestable...that is laziness...intellectually unacceptable. For example, the tribal people that look at the volcano and don't understand why it sometimes shoots lava out and sometimes doesn't shoot lava out...now, if you have faith that it's your act of throwing people into this volcano that's affecting it...that it's somehow appeasing the volcano Gods that honor human sacrifice and that's what you blame for the frequency or infrequency of volcanic eruptions...well that is superstitious, ridiculous faith to Kant. Reason being, because if you put in the leg work...if you conducted experiments and studied the volcano and geology and eventually plate

tectonics...if you did all that, you could arrive at knowledge about when and why the volcano erupts. Tide goes in, tide goes out right? > But Kant says having faith about something that's unknowable can never be a justification for laziness...there's nothing more you can do. If knowing whether God exists or not is unknowable to a human mind, then assenting to a faith based belief in it is less bad to Kant...and I think he would just want us to recognize that fact. What exists...is not just what we can measure and see existing in the narrow, crude, biased completely random apparatus that we've duct taped around our heads in the year 2015. And while not many of you still listening to this episode would disagree that knowledge is power, maybe knowledge isn't the paradigm. > Maybe it's not stockpile as much knowledge as I possibly can that's the paradigm. Maybe knowledge is a bridge to something else. Maybe the reason you're listening to this podcast as opposed to another one less abrasive to what you already think you know...is because maybe it's not the knowledge you want, but something else...something else that usually comes along with knowledge. But I guess that's the thing...I wouldn't know...would I? Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Hermaneutics

Episode #064

This is a transcript of episode #064 on Hermaneutics. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So I've been having this vision lately of someone sitting at home listening to the last few episodes of the podcast...angry...disappointed in the show. That's right folks...I have actually been having an argument with a hypothetical person in my head for several days now...and aside from this being a very obvious indicator as to why I'm such a miserable person...uh it's not entirely an indictment on me being a crazy person because this person that I'm arguing with in my head is emblematic of a type of person that actually exists...a person whose existence opens up a lot of interesting conversations when it comes to our episode today. For the SAKE of that conversation...let's call this person...Johnny. Johnny likes the Philosophize This podcast...he listens to it every week... and whenever he DOES listen to it he has learned that the show can typically be distilled down into two very distinct types of episodes. One is the kind of episode where we talk about things that are obviously useful in a practical sense. This could be any number of things...things like how our system of government should be implemented...things like what it means to live a "good" life...Johnny loves these episodes...but he can't help but notice that they're often offset sporadically by a second type of episode of the show...one where this Stephen West guy who looks like he's 13 years old is wasting Johnny's time with a bunch of unverifiable metaphysical speculation. These would be the episodes where we talk about metaphysical systems...anything from Spinoza, Leibniz, Plotinus, Plato... point is...Johnny thinks that when we're talking about all of THIS stuff...when we're talking about a near infinity of tiny monads flurrying around everywhere that we have no empirical basis for believing in...we're essentially just rambling about nonsense...nonsense that has been dismantled by science over the years. You can't really blame someone for feeling like their time is being wasted when they hear rampant metaphysical speculation! After all, we've talked

about a lot of it! If you just look at our history as a species, we come from a rich ancestral heritage of making these grandiose, unverifiable proclamations about the nature of existence, grandiose proclamations that have led us down some pretty dark roads...at least roads where progress in other fields has been inhibited. You can't really blame someone for being born into the late 80s early 90s into this scientific age and not having a ton of patience for theories like this. Look at what they've done for us in the past! We need some sort of different criteria that we use to determine what is worth believing...so enough with the nonsense...enough with all this speculation...let's use what is measurable and repeatable...let's use science to find the closest thing to truth we can and forget all these other theories that are based on one person's pontifications. But even if we could prove that the systems of Spinoza or Leibniz or whoever are entirely false...would it make the stuff that they're talking about completely useless to us? Should this hypothetical person, Johnny, skip over the episodes on Plato or Plotinus? Should he take out his earbuds and feel like his time is being wasted when he listens to those episodes? What I'm going to do on today's episode is make a case for why I think these episodes are NOT entirely useless and how ultimately the amount of value that you get out of ANY piece of information is usually determined by the amount of effort you're willing to expend when processing that information. I mean, think about it: Two people can have virtually the exact same information fed to them and have two completely different outcomes for how that information affects the lens that they view the world through. Picture two people from the same small town. They both load up all their belongings into their respective wagons...they get some extra wagon axles and oxen to ford the river with and they head off to the big city to go to the university and get an education. One of those two people studies really hard, they find ways to relate the information they're learning to schemas they had in their brain in the past...they're passionate about the subjects they're learning about...they cultivate social situations and meet a wide range of people... they go out and have the FULL COLLEGE EXPERIENCE. They could very easily return to that small town after four years and be almost an entirely different person! Now on the other hand, the other person could go to

school and do anything. They could lock themselves in their dorm for four years watching Netflix. They aren't passionate about their classes...maybe this person just studies for the test that's at the end of that particular week and then forgets everything...they cram the night before...if the test is on Friday, by Friday afternoon that information they're studying has gone in one ear and out the other...never really impacting them at all. Point is, this person could go back to their small town after four years and be almost unchanged by the experience! And in that sense, it's not the information so much that makes something interesting or useful in a practical sense, but the ways our brains process and relate that information to other things! If you read a book about Plato's Timaeus and think that it's boring and useless, then I'm going to go out on a limb and say that you probably have a pretty boring and useless way of looking at that information. Now that said: this same mentality could easily be conferred onto our episodes on Kant, right? I just...I see this guy Johnny sitting at home, saying...OK Kant so there's two worlds: the world of things in themselves and human experience OF that world...so if that is true...where does that leave me? I mean, on one hand, Kant's saying that to even try to infer things about the world of things in themselves is a waste of time...and when it comes to the world of human experience...well that leaves me sitting here with my earbuds in listening to some guy from the 17th century give his best interpretation of how the human mind experiences the world? What a giant waste of time! And what use is this distinction practically speaking anyway? After all what Hume said is still true! No matter how far you're willing to go down this reductionist continuum, we still need some sort of method of interacting with the world, right? Why not use science if you're born into the late 80's early 90's? Not saying that's a bad option if that's what you decide to base your beliefs on...that's perfectly fine...the question I'm asking is: Is Kant's point a boring or useless one? Is the idea that there are two worlds...the world as it actually is and the world of our biased, limited experience of that world...is that just a rambling of a 17th century Prussian monkey? Or maybe...is there something useful to us in our everyday lives that we can garner from the idea that our subjective lens that we view the world through is not infallible. This is a good question

that I want to come back to at the end of the show, but I want to give us some historical perspective on this and lucky for me...the enlightenment period we've been talking about for so long is not just a period of massive growth in a lot of different areas of human thought...it's also a period of massive growth in the field of something known as Hermeneutics. Now, if you've never heard the word Hermeneutics before, at first glance it's probably just a really weird, confusing sounding word. Like, what could this word be? Hermeneutics...sounds like something foreign...something far outside of my wheelhouse...where I keep all my wheels. But what if I told you that every single person listening to this podcast engages in Hermeneutics on a daily basis? What if I told you that you're actually extremely familiar with Hermeneutics...that you're actually doing it right now, as I'm saying this sentence. When people talk about someone who is engaging in Hermeneutics, most of the time they're referring to someone who is using methods and strategies to try to accurately interpret what was trying to be conveyed by people throughout history in books, scrolls, any historical document really. Typically Hermeneutics is someone doing Biblical exegesis, interpreting philosophy, etc. but it's actually much bigger than that! I like to think of Hermeneutics as the art of interpretation! Maybe the best way for us to understand why Hermeneutics is such a big deal is to think about how we personally interpret the world around us every day. Consider for a second...you are an interpretation machine. Just think about it: as you go about your day...every single day...Monday interpret...Tuesday interpret...everyday I'm interpreting. But what are you actually doing when you interpret things in the world? Well I wouldn't be so naive as to presume to tell you what you're doing when you're interpreting the world...all I can talk about is me...and what I do is look at everything around me in a very narrow context that I've arrived at after having the experiences that I've had thus far in my life. Like have you ever watched the season finale of Grey's Anatomy with your parents or friends? Doesn't have to be Grey's Anatomy...it could be any show that has some sort of ambiguous ending to it...have you ever watched a movie or a show with other people and you come away from it at the end with different interpretations of what the artist meant to convey when they wrote that movie? Yeah, so

have I, it happens a lot. Your dad thought THIS was the obvious meaning behind it...your mom says no, no I didn't get that when I watched it, I got this...Bruce Willis was dead the whole time! Whatever they say, the point is: where do these interpretations come from? Different people, with different sets of experiences can interpret the exact same information very differently! And while it's all fun and games when it's a movie or the season finale of Grey's Anatomy, you can imagine how serious this interpretive task needs to be taken when we're having a multi thousand year game of telephone and trying to understand what someone was trying to convey during their time. Consider for a second that whenever someone writes down what they think is a world changing idea...if I'm reading the thing...the way that my brain processes and interprets that information could really be the difference between whether this information is life changing, or whether I gloss over it like I read it on the back of a cereal box. The prejudices and biases and very narrow collection of experiences that I've had over just few decades on this planet...shade every thought that I have...they distort everything that I read that was written by anyone else...even in THIS culture and time period....let alone others!And when I say prejudices and biases, typically these words come with a negative connotation...like I'm telling you that because you hate black people you're not interpreting the world correctly...even though that's true, that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about biases that aren't so culturally charged, biases that you have every day of your life that are almost nothing but useful to you.For example, if I'm walking down the street and I see a guy in an orange shirt and he has neon green reflective flair all over him and he's wearing a hard hat using a big heavy rake and a hula hoe to till the soil and level it out...then obviously that guy is a construction worker that is prepping that area for some sort of construction project, right? But you see what I just did there? Obviously that's what he's doing! But really, there's nothing obvious about what he's doing at all. I may be right about what he's doing, but the only reason I was right in this one interpretation is because of my collection of experiences. All my experience having seen people in orange shirts and hardhats congregating around an unimproved plot of land.Imagine if an alien from a far off galaxy landed on that culdesac

and looked at that very same guy. Would it be obvious to that alien that he was prepping the area for construction? No, the alien would rightfully be confused...this guy could be doing any number of things. The alien might think he's exercising...like this is earth's greatest cardio routine. Maybe it would think he was doing some sort of interpretive dance. Maybe the alien would look at the obvious matching costumes of all the construction workers and assume that this is obviously some sort of cirque de soleil show going on. Now if that seems ridiculous, just imagine if you and I could get on a space ship and go to that alien's home planet. How arrogant and misguided would we be to look around and pretend that we know exactly what is going on in a world and culture that is completely unfamiliar to us. Even if we had time to stick around for a while and try to understand the way the aliens lived...everything about us would be looking at their world...and trying to understand their world better by trying to compare it to things in our world. We would be projecting these relics of our culture and time period onto their culture and place in the universe. Even down to the most basic things! Down to what motivates this alien race...even down to the questions these aliens even think are worth asking. But what can you do...this is what we are...interpretation machines, right? Constantly trying to make comparisons. When we look back 2,300 years and try to understand exactly what Plato meant when he wrote every word he wrote...when we read a translation of a translation of a translation and try to have a conversation using something that was etched into a scroll before Alexander the Great was even born...we are essentially travelling to an alien planet. Right around this time that we've been talking about there was a philosopher who is widely considered to be the first great philosopher of Hermeneutics in the modern era...his name was Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher points out like many people before him that one of the biggest challenges someone faces when trying to understand the intent of an author behind a piece of work is understanding the true meaning of the words they were using, which is enough of a headache in itself, but Schleiermacher points out that a big piece of that that is often overlooked is understanding even seemingly insignificant characteristics about the author themselves...even down to the character and personality

of the author. Hermeneutics turns into a lot more, I don't want to spoil Schleiermacher too much because we're probably doing a much larger episode on Hermeneutics in the future, but the main take away is that...We want to think that because these people walked on two legs and that because we can relate to some sort of underlying humanity in their work that we are experts on exactly what they meant when they wrote something, but it's far from the case! Schleiermacher famously defined Hermeneutics as the art of avoiding misunderstanding. It's so easy to project our own biases onto people from the past when we don't fully understand the cultural and historical context that they were writing in the midst of...and by the way this isn't just something we reserve for people in the past...we do it to each other in our present day as well! Like, if you've ever had a misunderstanding in a conversation...you've witnessed first hand the sort of agony that bad Hermeneutics has wrought. See, because while most people think of Hermeneutics and they think of old educated white guys in clever hats interpreting the bible for the Catholic Church, in a sense, we are all practitioners of Hermeneutics. We are all different collections of experiences interacting with each other and interpreting each other. Some of us are better at interpreting than others. It's definitely a skill that is learned. We all exist at some point on this Hermeneutic skill level continuum...at the top are the people that are super bright...people that do exegesis for a living...people that work at NASA...the fine folks at Google...at the bottom of this continuum are people that have next to zero critical thinking ability...you know...infants...a jar of mayonnaise...bill o'reilly...you know things at that level. Your interpretive ability creates your reality. Our lives are a collection of fleeting emotional states that are largely shaped by how we interpret the world around us. When you look at it that way...are there many things more important than how well or accurately we interpret the world around us? In fact, if you want to take it one step further, just knowing about that separation that your experiences create...just knowing that you have a very narrow collection of life experiences that are unquestionably useful when it comes to identifying construction workers, but probably not very good at understanding EXACTLY what's going on around you all over the world...it seems like acknowledging that there's a difference between your world of

experience and the world as it TRULY is...somewhere out there... could bring you a lot of comfort. Remember that guy living in my head named Johnny? So it would be very easy for Johnny to be born into the late 80's early 90's into a world where we have a long history of being misled by unverifiable speculation about metaphysics...to be born into a world where science does so many great things for people...to be born into a world where it is possible to hold your beliefs to what seems to be a higher standard and then to take a giant leap from there and label the systems of Berkeley, or Plotinus or Spinoza, label them a complete waste of time. To angrily slam down his headphones the moment he hears that the most recent episode is not about something that's not immediately practically useful. Sometimes the most profound and useful things of all aren't just lying on the ground somewhere where everyone can see them...sometimes you have to do some digging. Sometimes you have to buy one of those weird metal detectors and walk around on the beach every weekend with your visor on so that one day you can have your moment in the sun where you hold up someone's lost wedding ring and celebrate on a late night infomercial. I'm speaking metaphorically of course. But how ironic that if Johnny had labeled Kant's famous distinction another useless rambling by a 17th century moron...he would've missed out on the very lesson that could have prevented him from making that choice in the first place. Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you next time.

On Insecurity

Episode #072

So for the last few episodes we've been talking alot about why we make the decisions we do. We've been talking about what makes a decision moral or not, how we arrive at those sorts of moral criteria, not being a passenger to the world around us... basically we've been talking alot about why we think and act the way we do. But its easy for me to imagine someone not being satisfied with this discussion so far. Human behavior. Needless to say, its a pretty complex thing. Not gonna cover it on a couple 30 minute episodes of this podcast, but we can make a dent! I could easily see someone sitting at home saying okay, now I understand the foundation of why I deem things to be right or wrong, but let's not pretend like that is the judge jury and executioner of WHY people do the things they do! Think about it. There are tons of things that you and me and everyone for that matter, DO...on a daily basis, that have nothing to do with whether we've deemed it to be a morally justifiable behavior. I mean, thats just not how it works. We don't go around faced with decisions in our lives and internally start talking to ourselves and say: Ok, i need to make a decision...bowl of oatmeal for breakfast, or blueberry pancakes for breakfast. Hmm. Let me think about this...how do i make this decision. What would JESUS do in this situation? What would a moral exemplar do...what would the stoic sage do? Would the Stoic sage eat blueberry pancakes?Point is, although its entirely POSSIBLE to do...and some people might...most of us...when it comes to those rudimentary tasks of day to day living...we dont make those decisions by having some internal philosophical debate with ourselves...decide what the right thing to do is...and then doing it. It's just not how most of us make these little decisions. Now why IS there a distinction there? Why do most of us HAVE that internal philosophical debate with ourselves...only when we're faced with potentially crippling life choices? We only do it with the really UNIQUE decisions in our lives...not so much with the day to day. We have

no problem thinking over what the right decision is when it comes to changing careers...or who we should marry...or what kind of cell phone plan to have...which by the way Socrates said is the MOST important choice you'll ever make...we do it with THOSE things...but for some reason...we dont...do it...with the little things...Why is that?Well for one thing it would be exhausting. I mean who wants to do that, really? Having a BRAND NEW oxford style debate... in your head about every, miniscule thing you do...even down to every step you take asking yourself whether that step... is bringing you closer or further away from your goals...it would be PARALYZING! Not to mention probably impossible. So what do we do? Well, we pull from the archives! Previously on: Your Life. We make use of... old debates that we've had with ourselves at some other times in our life! See at some point in your life you DID...actually think...about whether putting one foot in front of the other foot was a good idea. You considered all kinds of things about it...your gate when walking...the way your foot hits the ground so you wont sprain an ankle...whether you have those dr scholls arch support things in your wingtips...and thats not all! You thought about whether being able to move and be mobile was a better or worse thing than being entirely stationary...you thought about whether using that movement to walk to your car and drive to work was going to yield a better or worse outcome. You've done the legwork, no pun intended, and now...that decision that at one point wasnt obvious to you...now you just kinda...ya know...drive to work everyday. No philosophical debate...no moral crossroad...you've decided moving and having a job is an integral part of your life long ago...most of us just kind of keep moving and dont question it that much. Stephen, why are you talking about walking. I know how to walk. Listen...I get it. The question that I want to ask you today is: how many of these autopilot activities do most people have? How many do you think? No question you cant have a philosophical debate in your head about everything...but how far does that extend? Whats an appropriate amount of questioning this stuff? about whether what you're doing is the right or healthy thing to do?See, it's a tricky question because there's no definitive cut off point. As I said before, almost everyone does it with the really UNIQUE life decisions...but how unique does a choice that you have to make need to be...before its

appropriate to think about what the right thing to do is? Now the larger point here...is that because human behavior is the beast that it is...and there IS no definitive...agreed upon point where we're all supposed to be thinking about this stuff...is that some people get lazy...and they do it as little as they possibly have to. They almost NEVER contemplate morality...maybe once every...six months when a cop shoots someone or there's an election cycle. And how bout this...how about the fact that every single one of you listening to this show right now...we all know...TONS of people like this! They're all around us! We're SURROUNDED by them. I mean, all of you listening to this are the type of person that listens to educational podcasts... That says something about you! Many of you are probably identified in your groups of friends or coworkers as the person... that likes to learn and think about stuff...that contrast is only possible if there is a strong percentage of the population that AREN'T thinking about stuff. But can you really blame them? There's no LAW against NOT thinking about morality...no ones gonna abduct you into an immoral spaceship if you watch netflix instead of thinking about these things...so it naturally follows..there's just going to be a certain percentage of people that take the path of least resistance. We see this with ANY voluntary behavior. Pople will have these exhausting, taxing philosophical debates in their head...as little as they possibly have to! But the interesting thing is: their behavior hasn't stayed the same from the moment they were born. Just because they haven't contemplated morality doesn't mean they just act like a 5 year old would the rest of their life...so where are they finding out how they're quote supposed to be behaving? When are they making those value judgements...or better yet...WHO is making the decision for them? Well again...human behavior...really complex...not gonna cover it all: but I want to talk about one of them. It's something that ALL of us...are very familiar with. It's not really a question of WHETHER this thing affects your behavior...its a question of HOW MUCH it affects the choices you make. The thing im talking about...is insecurity. What are you insecure about? Class, I want everyone to close their eyes and think about something you're insecure about. Because, rest assured. You have insecurities that affect your behavior. You know, when I was like 18 years old I went to the first therapy session I ever

went to in my adult life and I remember walking in there thinking that if you're an insecure person...you go to therapy. Like really...if you're one of those people that are insecure...you need serious...psychological...help. You need some therapist to just light all that underbrush on fire...burn all that stuff away and start fresh...with a brand new plot of land in that brain of yours. What I realized instantly, is that everyone is insecure about stuff. I used to think insecurity meant that you were flawed...I realized that insecurity is life. Look around you... at all those beautiful people...I don't care how beautiful they are...they're insecure about something and it's affecting their behavior. In fact, some people...if you really looked at them and understood them at a deep level...some people build their entire LIVES around their insecurities. Really, it's like building a house with a tree growing in the middle of it, it's not REALLY the house you want, but this thing is there. For some people... their insecurities run so deep...they affect almost EVERY decision they make...for some people their insecurities make up almost EVERYTHING about who they are! It's why they have the job they do, why they wear the clothes they do, what types of friends or what types of people they're in relationships with...insecurity leaves no stone unturned. Now we all realize that insecurity is something that affects the choices we make, but is it a bad thing? I mean, we typically THINK of it as a bad thing...but why? What is it about insecurity that's so wrong? Doesn't it sometimes protect us from horrible things happening to us? Well sure. In fact if you just look at insecurity...it's actually really similar to morality in a lot of ways...but in other ways...the two are complete opposites. Think about it: morality concerns itself with...you know...there is this outcome that either needs to be achieved or that I want to achieve...and once I assign that end goal to the equation...now I can contemplate and use reason and arrive at a set of behaviors that will best produce that life that I want. Insecurity is: there's a life that I DONT want. There's some thing that I desperately DONT want to happen to me. I don't want X to happen to me so I will restrict myself from X so that that world won't come to fruition. Again, they're very similar if you look at the two at face value but there's a key difference we're going to get to in a minute...one that is best understood if we talk about an example of insecurity. Now everyone close

your eyes and think back to the days you were in school, if you're already in school GREAT! This will be easy for you. Remember shopping for school clothes? Well imagine yourself middle school, high school...you come home after going to the sock hop and the ice cream parlor and your mom has a present for you on the counter. You open it up...and your mom got you a brand new pair of denim overalls for you to wear for picture day at school. Yeah, thanks mom. Thanks for the overalls. Well if you're anything like I was when I was 14...and pretty much every 14 year old that has ever existed...what are you gonna do? You're not gonna wear those overalls to school! Think of the backlash! You would be ruthlessly, socially castigated for wearing them! All your friends would laugh at you. Your enemies would laugh at you. The creepy old janitor would even be laughing at you. You would become that guy that sits in the corner in the cafeteria...eating by himself...people throw food at you...circle around chanting something. That's YOU if you wear those overalls. You are insecure about what your friends will think of you if you wear those overalls. Now, this is a great example of how being insecure about something...thinking about that future world that you DONT want to live in...one filled with social reprisal and no friends and food being thrown at you...you don't want to live in that world, so you're going to restrict this behavior...wearing the overalls...to prevent that from happening to you. Again, on the surface...it seems pretty similar to morality...but what's different...between the two...lies in understanding who is the driver of the car? Are you the passenger in the car, or the driver? The difference is: WHO is making the choices about how you should or shouldn't be behaving? Insecurity robs you of your individuality...of your self identity. Well, actually your self identity just becomes a conglomeration of all of the expectations that all the people around you have for how you SHOULD be behaving. You voluntarily surrender your autonomy. You just become this patchwork of what your mom expects of you and what that guy you hated in highschool expects of you and what Barack Obama expects of you and what the cover of Cosmopolitan magazine expects of you. By not making decisions based on these philosophical moral debates about what the correct decision is...we relegate ourselves to a life of just avoiding behaviors that other people

expect us NOT to do. Now you may be saying, well why is THAT so bad? Sure, I would get socially castigated if I decided to murder someone, maybe its a GOOD thing to fall in line with society's expectations of me! Well, that would be TRUE if the decision of whether to murder somebody was the only decision you were making. In reality, everything you do is a decision...and the most interesting/relevant/terrifying part of this entire subject matter to me is: when you put these decisions in the hands of other people's social expectations of you...sure, nothing bad may be happening to you at all...you may go throughout your life completely happy with the way you make decisions...but the problem is: you dont know what you dont know. You dont know the price that you pay in opportunity cost for any of these behaviors...all you know is...well I haven't gotten killed doing them yet! Gotta be doing SOMETHING right! But is the fact you haven't DIED doing something yet a valid criteria for doing it that way? What if you could be 30% happier if you were willing to have the difficult... internal philosophical debate and realize that a particular one of these expectations that someone else has for you is making you less happy than you could be? There's often a cost that comes with putting your decision making into everyone else's hands. If you work at a job that you despise because it pays you 20 grand a year more than this other job that would make you not hate your life everyday...and the only reason you dont is because theres these friends of yours that make alot of money and you dont want them to know that you make less money than they do a year...you are paying a very real cost...every single day of your life...just so that you can live up to this STANDARD of... just how much money a grown man should be making when they're your age. If you're a 40 year old man and your dating life looks like a constant revolving door of 20 something year old girls...and there are other women you could date that you'd be able to connect with emotionally and have a more fulfilling relationship with...and the only reason you dont is because you're terrified of what your buddies are going to say when they see a picture of her. You are paying a very real price...every day of your life...just so that you can live up to this STANDARD of... dude your girl is hot OMG. The problem with insecurity is: what if the overalls are functional? What if you would've liked the overalls your mom bought you?

What if they had a great pocket for your phone and they were comfortable and they're denim so they're stronger...they're more cost efficient than other clothes. What if you could reason...have one of those internal philosophical debates...and arrive at the conclusion that wearing those overalls would have yielded a better life for you than not wearing them...and the only reason you DIDN'T was because you were trying to live up to a standard that someone ELSE or someTHING else conferred onto you of what you SHOULDN'T be wearing? Again, there's often a cost that comes with putting your decision making into everyone else's hands. See, I'd even that MOST of the time insecurity comes with an opportunity cost...and the reason why is because of how completely arbitrary it is. These standards...that people have of you...the ones you're relying on to show you how you SHOULD be behaving for fear of embarrassment...it's not like there's some constant, static social standard that these people are appealing to. These social standards are CONSTANTLY changing! What someone would castigate you for 50 years ago is completely different than today. Who was more right? What behavior was quote better? On that same note...there isn't one, single standard that people are holding you to. These standards DRASTICALLY change just based on the people you're seeking approval from! If you wore those overalls to school...yeah your friends may laugh at you...the janitor may laugh at you...but those people over there that wear the cowboy hats would welcome you with open arms! If you put on the black nail polish and the black shirt of some emo band no one's ever heard of...yeah...some people are going to think you're a freak...but there are plenty of other people that would EMBRACE and APPRECIATE how you were dressing. You can't make everyone happy! That's the warmed over truism that's relevant here. And by attaching your identity to a way your circle of friends behave and then vehemently opposing any change for fear that they will negatively judge you, is not necessarily wrong...but it's certainly not a recipe for the happiest life possible. Now that said, we've talking about the individual cost for not being led around by our insecurities...something else to consider is the suffering that we often inadvertently cause by projecting our insecurities onto other people! Insecurity just absolutely pervades every expectation we have of our significant others when we're in a

relationship. Well, relationships like human behavior are INCREDIBLY subjective...there's no way I can paint all of them with a broad brush...but the common paradigm that people strive for in most modern monogamous relationships is really founded in insecurity. Think about it: there's no STANDARD about what cheating is in a relationship...in the same way there's no STANDARD about what acceptable attire to wear to school is. What happens is you get a boyfriend or a girlfriend...you have this...most of the time unspoken verbal contract about the line that you can not cross with members of the opposite sex. This line...is different in every relationship you're in. I had this girlfriend once...we went through the drive through of a KFC/Taco Bell and I'm ordering my food...and the person on the other end of the microphone was a girl and she was just being friendly and said something and I made a joke back to her and she audibly laughed. Well I didn't think anything of it...I finished the order...I looked over at my girlfriend and she was just...scowling at me. It was like looking into medusa's eyes. She just goes, That's disgusting. I'm like what did I do? She was mad at me for the rest of the day...apparently I crossed the line! We had this contract set up that I'm not supposed to make jokes to members of the opposite sex...I had crossed the line. I had cheated on her...RIGHT in front of her! So that was where HER line was. That was the STANDARD of what cheating is that SHE had. But there are other relationships...where people can openly flirt with people and their significant other doesn't care at all! You can look...but you can't touch. On that note...there's perfectly healthy, functioning, loving relationships out there where you CAN touch. Where both people love each other's company and they make each other really happy and they don't burden themselves with having to fulfill any fleeting desire their partner may have...and when they're not together they can do anything they want! The point is, there's no STANDARD of what CHEATING is...but any expectation you have... of what is appropriate for your significant other to do...is ultimately founded in insecurity. Again, you're not talking about your OWN behavior here...you're regulating theirs! You're terrified that by having these experiences, they will like that person more than you, realize your shortcomings and leave you for them and that you're going to be all alone. Now if you doubt this for even a second...just consider

this: how interesting that when you're in a relationship...you don't restrict your significant other from most things...you don't restrict them from eating pumpkin pie...you don't restrict them from going to Disneyland...you don't restrict them from going to the mall with their friends. How convenient that there is this one, specific, subset of behaviors that you restrict them from that prevents them from finding anyone else but you. We claim to love these people...we say things like I would do ANYTHING to make them happy...ANYTHING. But we spend our entire lives keeping them locked in this emotional cage...shutting them off from the outside world for fear they'll realize they're happier outside this cage and leave you. We essentially blackmail our significant others with the relationship. We say things like, If I find out you're going out on a date with someone else...I'm breaking up with you! It's OVER! Really, that's the relationship you want to be in? The only thing stopping your significant other from dating someone else is the fear that she can't talk to you anymore and you're going to remove her on Facebook? One thing should be very clear here...this strategy has nothing to do with morality and everything to do with appeasing insecurity...and it's a FALSE sense of security at that. Let's say that the plan works. Your girlfriend FEELS INSIDE like there is a void that needs to be filled...she FEELS like going on a date with the guy from work...but doesn't act on those feelings out of respect to your wishes being a piece of your property. I got news! She's STILL THE SAME PERSON whether you have that expectation of her or not! She still WANTS to go on the date...you're just blocking the exit with a fire extinguisher. She still lives every day of her life... for god knows how long...secretly feeling like some other life might make her happier, but not acting on it because of the insecurity you've projected onto her. This really is what our insecurities can do to the people around us that we claim to love so much. If I met a perfect stranger walking down the street and they approached me and told me there was this thing that they were thinking about doing that they think would make them a happier person and asked me if they should do it...I would say absolutely before they even finished the sentence. But for the person that I supposedly love more than anyone...I reserve this extra special way of treating them...I'm willing to force them to spend the duration of our relationship locked inside of

an emotional cage simply because I am terrified of looking at myself in the mirror and acknowledging that someone else might be better for them. Someone else might make them happier. This insecurity makes us sound downright sadistic. Oh you think you'd be happier with another life, but it's my job to restrict you or bully you into not doing it? The point of this long winded rant about relationships is that when we're satisfied with having our behavior controlled by our insecurities that are COMPLETELY arbitrary...we don't ONLY hurt ourselves with the opportunity cost, we potentially hurt other people around us with the ones we impose on them. That's the other thing...let's say your WORST NIGHTMARE comes to life...let's say your girlfriend or boyfriend leaves you for someone else because you let them go on a date and they liked them more than you...isnt that information you would want to have? How many of you have been in a relationship WAY LONGER than you should have? You're together for a year two years...seven years and you find out there is some fundamental disagreement that is a dealbreaker...that could've easily shown itself two weeks into the relationship if we were playing this insecurity riddled game. Just saying, it benefits you too when you're making decisions with good information. Questioning morality is the antidote to insecurity. But it's not a panacea. All of us listening to this will continue to have things we're insecure about...they will continue to cause you to look in the mirror and kind of turn side to side and feel inadequate because you don't perfectly embody this generation's paradigm of beauty. They will continue to cause you to turn red and be embarrassed when you slip up speaking in front of a group. All I'm saying is how much or little these insecurities affect our decision making and our identity it's not out of our control. And I guess what I'm also saying is...I would never judge or laugh at anyone for wearing overalls. I don't look at myself as the litmus test that I dunk in everyone's choices and tell you whether you're red or blue. What I'm saying is: if you feel insecure all the time...maybe the thing that makes you feel insecure is not you...maybe it's the people you're hanging around with. You know that game show variation of the prisoners dilemma? You know the game works like this...there's 20 dollars up for grabs. You and one other person have to decide what you're going to do, and you can't tell the other person what you're going to do. Your

choices are to either share the money with the other person...or steal the money for yourself. But the other person has the same choice. Now if you both decide the SHARE the money, if that's what you both choose...you each get half. If both of you decide to steal the money, neither of you get anything. If one decides to share and the other to steal...the person that stole gets all of the money. Now what would you choose to do? Would you steal the money or share it? Keep in mind, if you choose to share...you have no idea if the other person is just going to steal it from you! Well BY FAR...the most COMMON thing that people choose to do here is steal the money. And when we think about this question of what drives us to make the decisions we do...we can understand the reasoning...and it is entirely fueled by not what the RIGHT thing to do is, but what future world we want to prevent for fear of social reprisal. That's a long winded way of saying it's just like insecurity. These people playing this game show, just like an insecure person making life choices, would restrict the possibility of sharing the money with the other person, for fear of getting taken advantage of and embarrassed by the other person. What if the other person steals the money from me...I'll be ruined! They've asserted themselves as superior to me! Well, it's a good parallel to insecurity but they could just be doing it because if you steal you either get all of it or nothing...if you share you get half of it or nothing. Uh, but I hope these episodes are helping us understand the variety of different reasons people use when making a decision. The larger point for this podcast is: when is it acceptable to hold someone morally culpable for an action? It's very easy for us to arrive at our own personal code for how other people SHOULD be behaving...and when they do something we don't like...attack them and hold them morally accountable for it...but in reality. Think about it: they may not be making a moral choice at all. As we head into future episodes...think of the peace that comes along with understanding that.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

How To Win An Argument Pt. 1

Episode #073

This is a transcript of episode #073 on Logical Fallacies. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

It's the holiday season everyone. Christmas is in the air! In fact, every holiday Starbucks has unjustly declared war on with their cups...is in the air right now...and we all know what that means! Family is coming over, you're embracing them lovingly, you're making food together, playing games...but as we all know something that's just as much of a fixture in the holidays as mistletoe and pumpkin pie...is the inevitable argument with one of your family members about some sort of problem that they have with a particular race, creed or socio-economic bracket of people. It's just inevitable! Grandma Beatrice grew up in a different world than you did and by golly... is she going to fight to the death to make ours return to the way things once were when things were better. The argument is unavoidable. Now many of you having these sorts of conversations, disagreeing with Grandma Beatrice, may find yourself stuck in a particular place...its a place that I think 100% of the people listening to this can relate to...we've all been here at least at SOME point in our life and the place is this: you're having a discussion with some other party, the other party presents to you WHY they have the beliefs they do about something, and in that moment you can just tell...that something is very, very wrong about their argument. You get this unmistakable feeling in your stomach like, no...there's something wrong about that...but you can't really pinpoint exactly what it is that's wrong about it. The problem with this is that it's very hard to launch a convincing argument BACK to this person if you don't know exactly what part of the argument you should be attacking. You know, I'd compare it to physically launching an attack against a bunker or a fortified position in an actual war. You don't want to run up to the reinforced steel of the bunker and just start beating your head into it...no, you find the creases! You find the weak

points! That's where you launch your attack! Well funny enough, these disagreements with friends, family members or loved ones are not the only places these arguments take place. In fact...THEY'RE EVERYWHERE! With our coworkers about what the best course of action is to move forward on a project...with our spouses about whether we were out of line when we made too much noise in the kitchen...and yes...as you probably guessed...these arguments are an INTEGRAL PART of what it means to be conducting philosophy. Think about it: when Hegel is trying to make improvements on Kant's work or when Kant is improving upon Hume or when Hume is improving upon Locke...a HUGE part of what they're doing when they're trying to improve upon their work is looking back and trying to find the dishonest assumptions that they use as a justification for why something MUST be the case. The entire history of this show so far has really been one generation's polymath genius conducting this type of analysis on the PREVIOUS generation's polymath genius. Kant is essentially grandma Beatrice to Hegel's Christmas dinner. And as a podcaster that has this is the format of the show, it would be EASY for me to overlook that whenever you engage in any sort of philosophical discourse that is productive...you know whenever you guys out there interested in philosophy are actually HAVING discussions about these topics...you can have all the information in the world about any of these thinkers, but if you're unskilled at or incapable of conducting a philosophical argument with someone you disagree with, all of this information is just that: information. Not really useful at all at trying to arrive at something productive BY VIRTUE of knowing that information. Make no mistake, whether you're engaging with your philosophy professor, your local senator, the guy at the grocery store or EVEN GRANDMA BEATRICE...you are engaging in a philosophical discussion. And being able to quickly identify the crease in the bunker...being able to quickly identify the problem at the foundation of the argument that any of these people are making, is one of the most powerful skills you can possess. So how do you get it? Well you look at a LOT of arguments. Thousands. Eventually it gets broken down into formal logic. And to save you time, the pot of gold you'll find...at the end of that rainbow, if you look at thousands and thousands of arguments that people make for why they hold the

beliefs they do...is that although there are hundreds of faulty justifications people give...by and large...across the board...no matter WHAT subject we're talking about...football, healthcare, welfare, civil rights, or the newest harry potter book...people pretty much use the same ones over and over again...they pretty much use and recycle the same 10 to 15 of these arguments...these are just the common ways that people simplify an issue in an attempt to understand it. These "justifications" that people give...are more commonly known as fallacies. So what this episode is...is a handbook of sorts. We're going to be going over the most common fallacies of argument that you're going to face when you have a philosophical discussion with someone. I see this as an episode that is LONG overdue, this is usually covered in most philosophy 101 classes...I see this as an episode that you can hopefully return back to as a refresher course if you ever forget any of them...and I'm honestly having a hard time thinking of any other episode of this show that if you memorized the contents of it...would be more valuable to you practically speaking. I'm here to tell you: when you memorize even just the 5 MOST common fallacies that people have at the root of their arguments, you start to see them everywhere! The world changes all around you and when you're around the water cooler and someone says something that just feels wrong and you don't know why...instead of just having a strong suspicion that something is wrong...now you'll have the ability to instantly pinpoint exactly where the flaw is in the thinking...and that comes with many rewards: you can have more productive conversations, be less frustrated, help your friends and family more when they're confused, you yourself will be less susceptible of succumbing to bad arguments...this really is a skill that in my opinion should be taught to every kindergartner in the entire world... and it is beyond me why it isn't. So with that said, let's get into it: The first common fallacy that somebody might use against you in an argument is called the argument from consequences. Also known as the APPEAL to consequences fallacy...this is an incredibly common one and it goes like this... someone will argue for how TRUE or false something is by appealing to how much they like the consequences that arise if that thing ends up BEING true. In other words, just because IF something was true it makes your life better, doesn't mean that it is actually true. One

of the most common ways people use this fallacy is something like: you know, if God doesn't exist, then what does that mean for human behavior? If God doesn't exist then there's no moral accountability! A Tsumami of rape and murder, is that a world you want to live in? Therefore, God must exist! Now if you're doubting whether people actually use this argument or not, understand that even otherwise INCREDIBLY intelligent people are guilty of falling into this trap! This is the exact argument that Bryan Callen made on his podcast FOR YEARS whenever he had someone on that even loosely alluded to the possibility of a God existing, Bryan would say: I believe that God exists because I don't want to live in a world where there is no God! That's just not a world I want to live in! Well you can see the problem with the thinking there right? Just because a particular human being WANTS something to be true, has nothing to do with whether it is ACTUALLY true. Truth is something separate from human perception. Even if every human being ceased to exist on this entire planet, most of us would agree that there would still be a way that things ACTUALLY are, right...independent of what Bryan Callen or anybody else WANTS to be true. Now I'm sure if you talked to Bryan Callen he would say that of course this is a fallacy ridden argument, but this isn't a scientific claim I'm making...this is a pragmatic one! This belief helps me! It brings ME solace! Well that's fine...and maybe there's no opportunity cost on YOUR end...but you can at least acknowledge how being satisfied with this fallacy ruling your beliefs BREEDS complacency, right? Tell you what, I don't want to live in a world where there are millions of hungry children that go to bed each night living with a tarp as the wall to their house in third world countries. It's just NOT a world I want to live in! So therefore, the food must exist on their table each night! They must NOT be going to bed hungry! This is the potential cost of the argument from consequences. If X, then Y will happen. Y is a good outcome. Therefore, X is true. It could be anything...It could be your friend saying that they love building and driving cars, so because of that...they are vehemently opposed to the idea of self driving cars. It could be your mom saying that she LOVES the idea of us being able to visit other galaxies, so therefore she believes that we're going to be able to build a intergalactic spaceship in her lifetime. Whatever it is, the core argument is the

same...it's the argument from consequences and we need to be careful to not muddle up what the TRUTH actually is with what we WANT the truth to be as human beings. And it should be said that, finding this fallacy can be a little tricky. It seems really obvious, it seems like you'd be able to spot this one a mile away, but I think the reason so many people don't INSTANTLY identify this as a faulty argument when they hear it is because there actually ARE a lot of situations when it IS an appropriate argument to use. For example... if a politician is lobbying congress and they argue that we should adopt their new criminal justice policy because if we did... the world will see a 90% reduction in crime. Well, that too is appealing to the consequences to make a case. They're saying we should agree with this policy because the world would be a better place for the people if we did! But there's a big difference there! The difference between THAT and what we were talking about before is that one is a proposition about what might make the world a better place and the OTHER is a proposition justifying what we should believe and what is objectively true. It's when we start to use the argument from consequences to make claims about what is true that we start to run into problems. The second common fallacy we're going to be talking about today is known as Affirming the Consequent. When someone is affirming the consequent they are inferring the truth of the antecedent of a conditional statement from the truth of the conditional and its consequent. Alright, moving on. Just kidding...you guys really thought I was gonna leave you there? That's not what this show's about! What that's saying in fancy philosophical lingo is that just because you know that if something happened, a specific consequence would result from it...and you live in a world where that consequence is reality, you can't assume that that one thing that would have caused the consequence happened... just because the consequence is there. In other words, you might say that if the cashier down at the grocery store won the lottery, she would be happy. And you might go down to the grocery store one day, go through her line and see that she is really happy. Affirming the consequent would be saying, Oh she's happy! She won the lottery! Now the problem with this way of thinking is that yes, it may be true that if the cashier won the lottery she would be happy, but there are many other explanations for WHY the cashier might be

happy that have nothing to do with 5 random balls being pulled out of a spinning machine. What if she just got a promotion? What if she just got a new boyfriend? What if she listened to the episodes on moodiness and has a new lease on life? The possibilities are endless, so it's WRONG to use a consequence to affirm an antecedent. The best way to get a handle on this one is just to give real world examples that you're bound to hear if you talk to people. You know...If someone was going to be a truly great president...they would've obviously been able to see this long period of economic stagnation in our country WAY AHEAD of time. Donald Trump saw it coming. Therefore, Donald Trump would make a truly great president. You can see how this one's flawed. We have no way of knowing HOW Donald Trump came to that conclusion ahead of time. Yeah he could've gotten it by being an economic scholar...he could also have gotten it by calling Ms. Cleo the psychic on late night TV. Now this by no means proves that Donald Trump WOULDN'T be a great president, but it goes the other way too. It doesn't prove that he would. The difference is, one person's making an argument that it would. Another example...you can imagine talking to a friend of yours that believes in god using this argument as well. They might say, if God existed...then we would obviously be able to see unparalleled beauty and complexity in the works of nature. And look at the human eye! Look at how beautiful the natural world is! Therefore, God must exist. Well again, this is affirming the consequent. There are many other explanations for why we might see beauty and complexity in the natural world than a supernatural God existing, so just because we see it...that isn't necessarily a knockdown argument that God exists. Imagine talking to your significant other. If you were cheating on me right before I got off work then you would have been late when picking me up from work! You were an hour late. Therefore, you must be cheating on me! Obviously, there are dozens of explanations for why someone could be an hour late that have nothing to do with whether they were cheating on you. Maybe they got a flat tire, maybe they fell asleep, maybe they forgot...You can't use a particular consequence that is present in the world to infer an antecedent, that's the point. The next common fallacy people use in arguments is the appeal to ignorance or the argument from ignorance fallacy. Now there's many variants

this one takes the general idea goes like this: that we can assume that some thing is true, simply because there is no evidence that has been presented that says that it's NOT true. There's no evidence that PROVES Bigfoot DOESN'T exist, so therefore, it must exist. There's no definitive, conclusive evidence that PROVES, two humble hobbits didn't go on an unexpected journey traveling on hairy feet to return the ring of power to the fires of Mt. Doom. Therefore, it MUST have happened. Now we see this fallacy everywhere, it's just cloaked in clever ways. There's a famous usage of it in american politics with George W. Bush was running for president...Dan Rather, the anchor for CBS news pointed to documents that seemed to be alluding to the fact that George W. Bush hadn't been so clean cut and honorable during his time in the National Guard, and the way that they combatted this criticism was to accuse Dan Rather of using forged documents to make the president look bad. Now this is a brilliant way to cloak the argument from ignorance fallacy. Now, for Dan Rather to dismiss these claims and regain the legitimacy of what he's saying...now he needs to find some way to PROVE that the documents weren't forged. But how can you do that? Seems pretty difficult to PROVE that something wasn't forged and even if you somehow COULD prove it, by the time you have... the argument has gone off on such a tangent that rarely people ever remember why proving it was important in the first place. I bet you guys see this tactic in your arguments all the time. What happens a lot of times is people hide behind that stage of "gathering definitive evidence" because they KNOW it will next to impossible or exhausting to actually gather what both parties deem to be definitive evidence. For example you might say to a friend or a significant other: I don't like how frequently you've been having a bad day, coming home from work and taking out your day on me! Can we try to find some compromise here? The other person might use the argument from ignorance and say, you think I AM treating you poorly, I think I'm NOT treating you poorly. There's no definitive evidence that says I AM treating you poorly, so until you can provide it, I must NOT be treating you poorly. Well rarely is anyone gonna have a written chronology of all the times you've come home from work and been a jerk to them. And how EASY it is retrospectively to shut down most examples they give as NOT what their criticism initially was. What ends

up happening most of the time is a stalemate. Turns out there WAS no problem after all! But this appeal to ignorance argument takes a lot of different forms, one of the most common in day to day conversations is what's called the personal incredulity variant. And I'm sure a few of you saw this one coming. I mean after all if the root of the argument from ignorance is that we can believe something because it hasn't been completely DISPROVEN yet, then when applied on a personal level, this can be a really convenient way to justify believing in whatever you currently believe and never questioning it... until the end of time. Because now, if we want to COMPLETELY disprove something...we don't have the collective knowledge of the history of humanity to pull from...with the personal incredulity fallacy, all we have now is whatever seems reasonable to one person's brain...right at this very moment. What I'm saying is in other words, because something is really difficult for them to understand, they assume that it must not be true. Let's talk about some examples of this we might hear talking to people. You think the Egyptians built the pyramids? What are you stupid? You actually can believe that people carving stuff into stone and living thousands of years before the common era could carve, move and set slabs of limestone THAT large? What are you crazy? Obviously it didn't happen! Now, the problem is not with believing that there may be alternative explanations for what we see in recorded history, the problem is with THIS particular argument. That because this person can't imagine how they ever could have pulled off this feat, that it must have never happened. You can see the problem with this. What this person "FEELS" should be possible is really just an arbitrary collection of impressions they've gotten from their short time on this planet. People also do this sitting on their couch and make judgement about what was possible in other areas of expertise that they have no clue about. Oh I just can't imagine how we could ever have gone from pond scum...single celled organisms crawling around in a puddle to what we are today. Do you really think that happened? By random chance we just evolve into the incredible creatures we are today? There's no way that's true. Again, there's nothing wrong with questioning the current scientific narrative, but if your only basis for not believing something is that intuitively to you it doesn't make sense, maybe the assistant

manager at Wendy's is not the best gauge for determining what is possible in the universe. The next common fallacy we're going to talk about, is the slippery slope fallacy....and the explanations of these can speed up a bit because I think you guys are getting the idea of what a fallacy is and how it's used. What the slippery slope fallacy tries to do is make the case that a certain position is bad because the acceptance of it will bring about not just it, but a SEQUENCE of events that will be horrible. For example, I was talking to two people a few years ago around when Washington legalized gay marriage and they told me that the reason they could never in good conscience support gay marriage is because once you let them get married...the next thing you know there's gonna be gays on every street corner, making out with each other, feeling each other up...is that the world you want to live in? This was seriously their argument. And I instantly identified it as the slippery slope fallacy. The main tactic is the sidestep the discussion of the actual thing you're having a discussion about, conclude ALL ON YOUR OWN that that thing you're discussing is going to lead to this HORRIBLE OUTCOME and then ask the person you're arguing against to defend this horrible outcome. The funniest part about this one was that they showed their hands when they used people making out on the street as their "HORRIBLE OUTCOME". Anyway, people use this all the time...it's a pretty easy one to spot. We shouldn't give people food stamps! First you give people food stamps, next thing you know we're living in a communist nanny state! We shouldn't EVER intervene militarily! First we're sending a few thousand people to keep the peace, next we're colonizing the globe like dictators! Again, I'm sure you guys will spot this one pretty easy. The next fallacy we're going to talk about is the straw man fallacy. This is a common one, especially when you're winning an argument, so especially keep an eye out for it then. The straw man fallacy is committed when someone takes your argument and paints a cartoonish, simplified, ridiculous version of it in an attempt to have an easy target to attack when THEY'RE arguing. Hence the "straw man". The HOPE of somebody putting up a straw man is that the person they're arguing with not realizing that it is actually NOT what they're arguing because they see glimmers of their position. Then when they TRY to defend the straw man, they are lead to think that their argument

was worse than it actually was. We see examples of this all the time. Someone could say, "I believe in God." Now a strawman that someone could put up here would be, "what you believe there's an old white guy with a beard and a staff up in the sky that's watching you all the time? Wow!" Someone could say, "I think that we shouldn't spend 600 billion dollars a year in military spending!" A straw man might be, "I can't believe you're in favor of leaving our country completely defenseless if we are ever attacked. First you cut military spending, then terrorists are blowing buildings up daily in every major city!" That was a fun combination of the straw man AND the slippery slope fallacy. Point is, mischaracterizing an idea and making it into a worse argument that is EASY to refute...is MUCH easier than actually understanding the issues fully and refuting a more nuanced argument. The straw man fallacy is a great way to avoid productive discussion. Another fallacy people commonly use is what's known as an ad hominem argument. Simply put this is an argument where instead of focusing on what the two of you are actually arguing about, as a diversion tactic, someone will attack you personally in an attempt to discredit the SOURCE of the information... so that they don't have to argue against what you're actually saying. Usually people resort to this when they're LOSING an argument and they have no other recourse. You might say, "I don't think it's a good idea to be throwing your cat off of a second story building!" They might say, "oh yeah, coming from the guy that never had a cat before?" You might say, "I don't think it's a good idea for you to hit me when you get mad at me!" They might say, "Well if you weren't such a moron and knew anything about how people deal with frustration, then you'd KNOW wouldn't you." The variants of this are endless, this is probably one of the most common ones the average person will see just because it's such a knee-jerk response by people when someone disagrees with them and they can't think of a reason why they're wrong...to find a way to SIDESTEP refuting their argument and discredit the SOURCE of the information. Because if you can discredit the source, then you don't have to look at your beliefs honestly and you can ignore everything that comes out of that source. What I like to do when someone ad hominem me is say, OK, I'm a moron, I'm mistaken fine. Let's do a thought experiment. Picture someone you actually respect. Now

pretend the words I just said came out of their mouth...how would you respond to them? What would you say to that argument if somebody you respect was the one that said it? Another fallacy that someone might use on you in an argument is the fallacy of false equivalence. This is a REALLY common one especially in the news media so as most people outsource their understanding of issues to the news, it usually extends into conversations with people because they're parroting what the guy on the news said. False equivalence, as you can probably guess, is a fallacy where the goal is to use one or two attributes about a thing and use those to pretend as though both things are the same. A common example used to illustrate this fallacy is that both cats and dogs are fluffy, therefore cats and dogs are basically the same! Now the REAL world implications of this are massive. Most of the time it's used when it comes to evidence, people will say...you know...some scientists have done studies that prove that humans are increasing the rate of climate change...some scientists have done studies that prove they aren't. It's a stale mate! Now whatever side of this issue you fall on, you have to see the problem here. Just because both sides have done studies does not mean the studies are equally legitimate, are conducted honestly, are of a sample size that is worthy of testing...how MANY studies have been done....there are a lot of other things to consider about either side, things that will probably shine light on which side is more legitimate. This fallacy really aims to mask weaknesses in an argument by aligning one property of it with the properties of another that actually IS legitimate. George Washington wore a hairpiece and Donald TRUMP wore a hairpiece, they obviously are both very like-minded individuals! I'll talk about one more fallacy...this episode's getting pretty long. sorry about that. i could talk about this stuff forever. but the last one is what's called the appeal to the bandwagon fallacy. the argument says that because a ton of people believe in something, or because the majority of people believe in something that it must be true. we hear this one a lot...just turn on your television set. practically every commercial has this at the core of why you should buy their product. their argument is that look! hundreds of people all prancing around drinking a dr. pepper! Can 200 smiling faces chugging down Dr. Pepper be lying to you? Of course not! You know it's good...just TRY IT! Look at how happy it

made all THESE PEOPLE!The point is, how many people think something is the case has nothing to do with whether it actually is the case or not. Millions of people used to believe that the earth was flat. The fact that they believed it didn't make it true. That said, billions of people today think that the earth is a sphere. The fact that they believe it isn't what makes it true or untrue, it's based on empirical data. Or, if you're one of those flat earth people on YouTube...its based on a massive conspiracy to pull the wool over people's eyes and convince them that the earth IS NOT flat. I still haven't gotten far enough into one of those videos to find out why its important to feed people this lie. That said, I hope this episode was helpful. And trust me, if you listen and re-listen to this and memorize them and how to spot them, you will begin to see these fallacies everywhere. You will begin to see that no matter what topic you're talking to someone about, we're almost ALWAYS guilty of the same few logical fallacies. What a fantastic way to INSTANTLY make yourself more proficient in any discussion you may have whether it's with your boss, or aunt Beatrice.Thank you for listening ill talk to you next time.

Hegel Returns!

Episode #074

This is a transcript of episode #074 on Hegel. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So on the off chance the last few episodes of the show have seemed like kind of a departure from what we typically do on this show, uh well you're probably right. And whether this was a welcome departure or an unwelcome departure really comes down to what you want out of this show...for the longest time we were talking about a SINGLE section of a SINGLE philosopher and all of a sudden we're talking about moodiness and insecurity and veganism...and although there is NO DOUBT relevance between that stuff and what we're going to be talking about today...I just want to let you know that if it seems like I've been stalling...it's because I HAVE been stalling. Look, as I alluded to before I feel an obligation to these thinkers to do their work justice. I don't wanna give a biased or cursory overview of the cause they committed their entire lives to. I respect Hegel. And as I said at the beginning of our Hegel episodes, he is notoriously considered one of the most if not THE MOST difficult read in all of philosophy. This difficulty extends to yours truly as I'm doing the research for this show. I've spent the last month and a half re-reading Hegel. And it should be said that its not like these episodes that we did are useless...in fact they kind of opened my eyes to just how much stuff I've been neglecting about HOW to be conducting philosophy in the first place...stuff that is easy to talk about in a classroom setting with people raising their hands...but a little more difficult when each episode is focusing on one particular thinker and their work. So you can expect those types of episodes sprinkled in in the future. But this is a very long winded way of saying that what I realized at the end of this long, agonizing process of sitting in a smoking jacket reading Hegel with my trusty manacle...is that the problem wasn't with how well i understood Hegel...the problem was with when I first sat down to

plan out all the Hegel episodes...I planned out around 3-4 episodes that really went against everything that makes this show what it is. See because as you guys well know...this show isn't about just spewing a ton of random facts at you...you know Hegel was born on August 27th 1770 to doctor Hanz von Winklestein at Stuttgart General Hospital. No, that's not what this show is...this show is about giving CONTEXT to information so it actually means something to you...because that's kinda the whole thing with human beings, we remember what is important to us...not random facts. See I got so caught up...so lost in trying to give you all this information about Hegel's take on all of these different things we've talked about on the show so far, that I completely FORGOT about the fact that there might be no one in the history of the world whose ideas are more responsible for the way that the world is in 2015 THAN Hegel. Kind of a big thing to overlook, but it was eye opening to me. Because as we all know...there's a direct connection between beliefs and actions. We act based on our best guess of what we BELIEVE to be true. Look no further than reports on your local news to see that this is true. You know, and in a weird way, people love to study the darker side of humanity. They love to marvel at what human beings are capable of at their worst. We love to hear about great battles where millions of people die...we love to hear about serial killers and wonder, how could this person ever be able to do something like this? We love to hear about evil tyrants subjugating people and wonder, how could this ever have seemed right to them? But make no mistake...go to your local library, sit next to the friendly homeless man reading the USA today, open up every history book they have and what you'll find is that if the thing in the book actually happened it was ultimately done because of a belief that someone had about what the right thing to do is in a given situation. In this way, this teeny sub-branch of philosophy...is indirectly responsible for all of it. Arriving at new ideas and then analyzing what makes them worth believing is really the ONE thing that affects EVERYTHING. And in this way, I like to think of ideas not as fixed things...i think of ideas as seeds...seeds that have the potential to grow into something bigger. You know, look at a seed. Somewhere...deep down in that seed is a ton of information that we're not seeing...a programming of sorts...in that seed before it's ever put in the dirt is the

potential to become a giant tree. And in this way...there are ideas all around us that are no doubt like saplings...that if they were taken to their full potential would fundamentally transform the world, it's just a matter of time before we learn how much water and sunlight they need. Just consider the fact that some guy named professor Hegel in the early 1800's was probably sitting in his front room one night with HIS trusty manacle...and he had an idea...you know his neurons fired in a certain way in that moment that caused him to arrive at an idea that he would eventually write down and it would eventually go on to change the ENTIRE political landscape of the 20th century. If his neurons had fired slightly differently, maybe we live in a completely different world, maybe tens of millions of people don't die, maybe the atomic bomb is never created. But all of this started... with an idea. And idea that was in response to a question...and the question was: What does it mean to be truly free, and what are the natural implications of this?Now, it's been a few weeks since we talked about this, so I just want to clarify a few things. To understand Hegel's answer to this question...we need to understand what he's responding to in Kant's work. Kant talks about human nature. He sees it as a really static thing. He thinks that...it is an inescapable aspect of human nature that we find ourselves constantly in this state of being pushed and pulled around between two things: one is our faculty of reason and the other are the animalistic desires we have. Sometimes we give in to those desires...other times we are able to use reason to overcome them and do the moral thing...and Kant's position is a little more complex than that but the main point is that this internal battle is a part of our human nature.Well Hegel looks at that and goes...what are we even talking about when we talk about human nature? Is human nature some fixed, unchanging, static thing that we can look to to explain human behavior?People do this all the time: it's HUMAN NATURE to be warlike. It's human nature to be selfish...even I do it sometimes...I say humans by nature take the path of least resistance. But its one thing to say this is usually what most human beings do, and its another thing to etch that theory into stone and say that its somehow part of the nature of every human being who has ever lived. That's a very different statement.So Hegel starts thinking about human nature. Obviously there are some things that are true

about every human being that has ever lived...but is being in this battle between reason and our desires one of them? Is there maybe a different explanation? So what Hegel does is say, look if this is truly a part of human nature, then we should see it across all cultures and all time periods right? And it turns out...there's exceptions to this rule all over the place...Hegel uses ancient Greece as an example...well ancient Athens pre-400 BC...very unique time in the history of Athens...he points out how...before Socrates came along...people didn't have the same sort of individual compass that Kant is talking about here. I mean think about it...the very fact that Socrates was trying to get people to ASK these questions about individual morality...came across as abrasive and eventually got him sentenced to death...remember the charges? "corrupting the youth". Corrupting them from what? Now Hegel takes a pretty interesting position here...maybe instead of us having some fixed internal nature that positions us at the center of this constant battle between reason and passions....maybe many of these things we commonly attribute to being human nature are really just values programmed into us by whatever time period or culture or even just what state, city or neighborhood we live in. Maybe so many of the beliefs we have about how things should be...so much of our identities as people...maybe in a strange sense...they were completely out of our control from the beginning. Hegel even plays out the Socrates example to explain how this individual sense of morality may have come about...he says...so Socrates bursts onto the scene in Athens...morally accosts people in the public square...eventually, people get pretty annoyed about it and sentence him to death for corrupting some aspect of their culture. Now many of us that hear this story would say...well no...Socrates wasn't corrupting anything...he was just asking questions! What you can't handle your beliefs being challenged? But what HEGEL says is that the Athenians may have been perfectly JUSTIFIED in sentencing him to death. If a death sentence was a just punishment for corrupting the youth back then, then Hegel points out...Socrates was GUILTY of corrupting them. We may not see it as corruption in today's world. What Socrates did may have ONLY brought about something that we see as a better world. But Hegel points out that in the context of the culture and time that Socrates was living...bringing about the change he did...REQUIRED this sort of

abrasive...conflicting interest with popular opinion. You know one of my favorite John Locke quotes: New opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common. Hegel extrapolates here and says that there was a way that things were in Athens...Socrates comes along...conflicting interest...in opposition to the way things were...and that the result of these two powerful forces meeting is a SYNTHESIS of the two in the middle somewhere...a combination...a composition. This is what Hegel calls the dialectic. Thesis (the way things are) antithesis (the thing opposed to this way that things are) and synthesis (the meeting of the two in the middle). We can see how this works on a cultural or political level, but it's funny...it even describes the ways we change individual decisions in our lives. Like one week you might eat 100% for taste...then a competing interest might arise...oh well I feel horrible and i'm getting fat...this week I'll eat 100% healthy...but then that goes too far and you end up eating something in the middle like a lean cuisine. Then you go to the store and the lean cuisines aren't on sale...they're too expensive you didn't get paid that week, so now you have another competing interest: cost efficiency...I'm going to eat this week in the CHEAPEST way possible. I don't know...for me it's less confusing to think about it this way than to try to fathom these large cultural shifts with it. But as you can see in that example...the process doesn't stop with meeting in the middle...because then another Socrates comes along...and another Socrates. Figuratively speaking there is always another Socrates that is going to come along. That "synthesis" that is arrived at, figuratively speaking is always going to be challenged by the NEXT Socrates. Hegel talks about how, sure there may have been some sort of paradigm shift towards a more individual approach to existence at that point, and that throughout the years...this individualism grew and contorted and shift due to these conflicting interests...he talks about how the French Revolution, and just that age of revolutions between these countries in general...how it makes sense to think that that might just be when this individualism ran a muck. when this individualism pendulum swung too far! Schopenhauer has a quote: All truth passes through three stages. First, it is ridiculed. Second, it is violently opposed. Third, it is accepted as being self-evident. The root of

what Hegel's saying here is this: as human beings that are trying to figure this world out...were trying to find out the way that things are so we can make a difference or at least find out what the problems are that are facing us...Hegel says that usually what we do is analyze the way that the world is RIGHT NOW. We run experiments, we figure out how things are right this instant, and we write books about how the world is. And this intuitively makes sense...I mean seems like a good place to start. But what Hegel is saying is that maybe in the same way we don't have some fixed moral human nature like the one Kant was pointing at....maybe the world, is too complex and under the influence of outside interests that it can't be reduced down into that way of thinking.Maybe understanding the world, can come only when you acknowledge the fact that it is CONSTANTLY changing. And Hegel says maybe a better tactic at getting to the bottom of this stuff is not trying to understand how things are right this instant, because by the time you've understood them...they've already changed into something else...maybe the key to understanding it is understanding that process...that process of constant change. You know I'd compare it to trying to do an analysis of a very slowly moving target. You can go up to the target, measure the dimensions, find out what material it's made out of, write down what color it is, record what shape it is, carbon date the thing...everything. And you might go back to your workstation and write an entire book about this target, telling the world about your findings and it may be the most illuminating account of that moving target that has ever been written. But what Hegel would say, is that target has moved since you last saw it. You may have done so much research that you can look at the target and it hasn't moved that much so it seems like you still know a lot about it, but eventually it will have changed to something completely different. What Hegel's saying is: if we know that the world is this way, why haven't we ever tried to understand that process of change more? In other words... by understanding the process in which the world changes... we might be able to understand the process by which we can change it. But to Hegel, the implications of this are much further reaching than just being able to start a super PAC and change the world...there are DEEP moral implications for him here as well!See because the very first question you

probably have for Hegel here is okay, everything is changing...everything is moving...where is it moving to? You said everything was moving...where is it all going? Is it random? Is the world and everyone in it for that matter really just randomly meandering around at the mercy of these competing interests that we have little to no control over? Hegel would probably say well we may be meandering...and many of us may be at the mercy of them...but one thing for certain...it isn't random. We're going somewhere. And the ultimate destination we're going for is "minds total understanding of itself" and THAT to Hegel is almost synonymous to total understanding of freedom. All of these changes throughout history have ultimately been heading towards that. But hold on...this is yet another really interesting position that Hegel's taking...and it's far from a given. How in the world...is total self knowledge...practically synonymous to freedom for Hegel? How is that even possible? The two don't SEEM like they're the same. Well think about it from Hegel's perspective. What is an average person like? Most people don't go around aware of any of this stuff consciously. They don't go through life actively trying to figure out which of their values are really just conditioned into them because of their particular culture and time period. No, just like the people from Athens in 400 BC in Hegel's example...these people don't go around thinking that something was WRONG with their approach to morality...and in that sense... Think of what that means! You only have access to the ideas that are around you in YOUR CULTURE AND TIME PERIOD. They didn't have the luxury of living in a post Socrates world...So in a weird way, they never had the OPTION to adopt a more individual approach to morality. It was IMPOSSIBLE for them to. I'm not saying the laws of physics were preventing them from ever arriving at a different conclusion, but given the tools that they had...effectively it is impossible, because they would never feel the need to question any of this stuff...because they didn't think it was wrong! What Hegel's asking is: is this total freedom? Or is this you just living your life in a really big cage that you never see the bars of? You know it's easy to look back and denounce people that owned slaves in the 16 and 1700's. How many of those people were just kinda...going along with whatever was socially acceptable during their culture and time period? How many of those people...it's not that they were

some evil dude twirling their mustache...it was acceptable back then, so they never questioned it?I've said this on the show multiple times...look around you. How many things that we just take for granted...100 years from now...people will look at us like we look at the slave owner from the 1700s? The interesting thing is...they're there. We are constantly in a state of change to Hegel, so it is inevitable these things are all around us...most of us just cant see them because...much like the slave owner...it's socially acceptable so why question it?Think of the implications of this. How many beliefs do you hold right now...even down to things that you think make you a special, unique person...how many of these things are just things that have been conditioned into you, and you're not a bad person for having them...it's an inescapable part of life...what Hegel would say is: shouldn't we at least be aware.. that that's the world that we're living in? That that's where those values come from? In other words..if we don't understand WHY we hold the beliefs we do, can we really be said to be totally free? This is the connection of total self knowledge with freedom. To be totally free, to Hegel...it's not enough to just go through life passively and let this constant process of change dictate everything we do and never question it. We need to UNDERSTAND THIS PROCESS of historical change. Understand that we exist in a constantly moving target, and by understanding that the process of change is ultimately heading to a great place, you feel a sense of calm. Peace. Because...even if in the short term something seems to be contrary to what you value...you ultimately see everything for what it actually is...one brick in a long road towards total freedom. Nothing is contrary to your interests at that point. Truly understanding and accepting this fact is a state of total knowledge... and at that point...Hegel says...it's tough to get mad about anything...all the things we took as hostile and exterior to ourselves before are actually a part of us...a part of the process of change towards total freedom. Every nation, every government, yes even every cable news anchor...has been a part of this process of change. Hegel truly thought that...by writing these things down...he was GIVING the world total self knowledge. In the same way the people in Athens didn't have the luxury of living in a post-Socratic world...lucky us...we have the luxury of living in a post Hegelian world. We have ACCESS to this stuff. And in a

way...the big question at the root here...the one that I started the other Hegel episodes with...one that is very closely attached to ALL of this stuff that Hegel's talking about...is what is freedom? See because a traditional definition of freedom...we've all heard that before. What do I want in life? I wanna be happy. What would make me happy? No restrictions...freedom to do anything I want anytime I want...if I want to jump on a plane and go see my dying grandma...i want to be able to do it...if i want a day off of work...I want to be able to not work. Sure money doesn't buy happiness, but money is freedom in paper form. Freedom...is just being able to do anything you want to do without restrictions. But Hegel's making the argument...like many of his contemporaries...but his work ON this question went on to be incredibly influential...is that enough to be considered TRULY free? And that...just like WE might be conditioned to have the values and beliefs we have and that part of being TOTALLY free is understanding WHY we have the values we do...not just blindly going along with them...part of being TOTALLY free in other areas is not just being able to do what you want to do...it's understanding WHY you're doing what you're doing. It's that self-awareness of what it means to be human that is liberating. You could sit on the couch all day long and watch TV and see the same burger king commercial over and over and over again...subliminal messages...weird evil George Bush mind control tactics constantly digging their way into your brain...and when you got up and felt hungry...it might feel like a COMPLETELY autonomous, free choice to decide that you're going to go down to burger king and get a cheeseburger...but unless if you're aware of the fact that that's the reason WHY you're going to burger king as opposed to the countless other options you have...you are enslaved to a certain extent...your behavior is being controlled. Hegel's asking, can we be said to be truly free if that's the case? This is the million dollar question. His work on this question was the idea...the seed that was planted that eventually went on to affect Marx and countless other thinkers. Because a big thing that arises naturally from this discussion...which we're going to continue to expand upon...is another question. Given how at the mercy of all of these competing interests we are...and given how easy it is to insulate yourself away from all the options out there...with ANY choice you're making... and just do your best to

stay comfortable with what ever you've already been exposed to...maybe...although we THINK we know what we want and what would make us the most happy...maybe we aren't the best ones to decide what we should be doing...what career we should have...what marriage we should enter into...and yes...even what cheeseburger to eat. Thank you for listening...ill talk to you next time.

Hegel's God

Episode #076

This is a transcript of episode #076 on Hegel. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

For the next thirty minutes or so of your life, try to forget everything you know about God. Well, everything you believe you know about God. See when I say the word God...its a very loaded term isn't it? Consider the fact that every single person listening to this...when I say the word god...you have your own personal vision of what that is...you picture something slightly different....than everyone else out there. You know we've talked about this on the show before...this seems to be an inescapable aspect of human language. Fact is these things we use called nouns, adjective and verbs...these things are just... not descriptive enough... to plant the EXACT SAME IMAGE in my head and your head...two different people's minds that come from different childhoods, different experiences. Philosophers have tried to fix this problem in the past, but the reality is at least right now as you're hearing this podcast...when I say the word...microphone...each and every one of you pictures a slightly different microphone in your head. You might picture a black oblong one, she might picture a pink sparkly one, the point is...the MICROPHONE that you picture... isn't pre-programmed into you by something...all it is is the byproduct of some process going on in your head...its just the sum total of all the experiences you've had with microphones filtered through your mental faculties to determine what "microphone" is. Well, the word God, is just another example of one of these words. Based on all the experiences..the conditioning you've received from the people around you up until the moment you decided to listen to this episode...you have an acquired definition...an expectation of what I mean when I say the word God. But for the episode today...let's try to forget all that. Let's do a thought experiment. Let's go deep down into the dark recesses of our brains and let's find that exact folder in our hard drive where that definition of God is...and lets just delete it for the episode today. Zero

expectations. What I'm asking you to do is to pretend as though you're a child again. Pretend as though you had never even heard the term God before...there's nothing you think you know about God that must be true...see because when you're a child...before you ask your mom and dad...what is God?...and they begin that conditioning about what it is...there's no inclination you have in ANY direction about what God must be...God could be any number of things...it could be a piece of paper. It could be..that fuzzy red stuffed animal you want at the arcade...it could be the all powerful creator of that stuffed animal that knows you by your first name and WILLED for you to GET that stuffed animal when you played game with the claw that never works. To put yourself in the shoes of a child that doesn't have this conditioning in them yet is an extremely useful thing to do for a number of reasons...and these reasons extend far beyond philosophy...it can help you get a new perspective on your life...it can help you understand anything that's difficult to understand...but it's also extremely important for the episode today because as I was re-reading Hegel over the last month and a half I came across a section of Hegel where he talks about a possible option of what god is...and it sort of reinvigorated me. I felt as though I had been put in the microwave for 30 seconds...I was refreshed. Continued my research on it, found a few great articles and I decided you know what...this just needs to be talked about. Hegel does a great job at doing everything that's great about this show...not the least of which is that he spends a large portion of time before he even MENTIONS anything about this possible God...trying to get us to question all of the assumptions that we have about what God must be. You know ever since the rise of this new atheist movement in the early 2000's...its very easy...especially for young people i've found or just people that are new to this process of questioning the nature of existence...it's easy to think of our beliefs or lack of a belief about God as just one point on a giant line graph between two extremes that are actually a false dichotomy...you know you can either be a fundamentalist follower of religion...God created the world in seven days! A man loaded up two of each animal onto a boat...or on the other hand you can be a science loving, occasional skeptic that proportions your beliefs to the evidence. Its conventional wisdom that these two extremes, unfortunately,

are just the "God landscape" that we were born into. But as people that like to think about this stuff more than the average person...we of course know that this is a cartoonish representation of either side...it's nowhere NEAR this simple. We don't live in some NEW world where these are the only two ideas that are intellectually respected. You know just the name New Atheism implies that there was an Old Atheism before it. When Richard Dawkins writes the God delusion...or when Sam Harris writes the end of faith...neither of these guys would say that these are new ideas they're presenting. Atheisms been around for thousands of years...democritus, epicurus, lucretious...we've talked about them before. I see this in emails all the time...Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins aren't philosophers...where their genius lies is in being able to package together these ideas that already existed and write them in a way that resonates with the culture in the early 2000's...a very unique time in history where it's actually possible to package together these ideas without being drawn and quartered. These are not new ideas that rattled the foundations of thinking where now we only have one of two options. But we can at least be sympathetic of the fact of how someone new to these discussions might look around them and feel like they live in this world. These two groups ARE very vocal. We certainly SEE them the most. And there certainly IS a divide between the two of them...A divide that we've been led to believe is irreconcilable. Theologians ever since Darwin have been trying to find a way to reconcile the differences between what seems reasonable to believe based on scientific experiments with the clear inconsistencies in any of these religious texts. It's proven to be a pretty difficult thing to do. Now, some people claim that they've done it, but there are always problems...always questions left to be answered. And because there is no knockdown argument for this...it becomes really easy to believe that you either have to believe in one or the other...fundamentalist religion...or the scientific narrative. But Hegel would say...throw all of this out the window. Forget this debate that you're having...forget what you THINK you know about God because this idea that you have that these two viewpoints are talking about two separate things is and they're not both talking about the SAME thing... ultimately that's founded in a giant assumption you're making about what God must look like. Hegel

spends page after page pointing out all the problems with the way that people typically think about God. He says...you know...most people... you ask them if they believe in god...and they say yes...you ask them OK, so what does that God look like? Hegel says, most people, and i think this is pretty accurate...most people say they believe in something that is an omniscient, omnipotent being that is good and just and all that other stuff...Hegel thinks this is ridiculous. He thinks its an oversimplification. He thinks it's unsurprisingly transparent that this is the sort of conception of God that is usually arrived at by people that don't think about God that much. You know, either they are too quick to dismiss the idea of a God existing out of insecurity or they just went to church when they were seven and were told what to believe. Hegel says this for a few different reasons...he starts out by saying that if this is the sort of definition of what God is that you subscribe to...forget about omniscience or omnipotence...forget about all these personality traits you're trying to tack onto that God...one big mistake that you're making if that's the way that you think about God is that you're assuming God is a "being" at all. God is not a being to Hegel. God can't be a being. To be a being...in a world where we describe OURSELVES as beings...you know we call ourselves human beings...a lot of people think of themselves as spiritual beings having some sort of contact with this God we're talking about...God can't be a being in that universe because if it was...it would be limited. One things for certain, if this archetype we refer to as God exists...it must be something infinite. It must be by its very nature something that is unlimited. To be a being in a universe filled with beings...is to be limited at least in some small way. After all, I'm not god. You're not god. When your dog has an accident on the floor...your dog did not excrete a piece of God onto the floor. To be a being is to be finite. God isn't finite. So in this way, Hegel says God can't be a being...if it exists...whatever it is...it must be something greater than a being. This probably reminds you of Maimonides and many of the subject matters of the episodes we did closer to the Middle Ages. You know...this eternal question...can faith and reason co-exist. Can reason justify the existence of a God and if it can, what does reason dictate...what can we infer ABOUT that God if it in fact exists. Hegel thinks we're so quick to make these sweeping inferences about what this

God must be like...so often we think about this God as just a bigger...stronger back lit version of a human being that can do all sorts of cool magic tricks...when in reality...Hegel thinks...God isn't anything like that. God isn't a wish granter. God didn't write his magnum opus on some clay tablets...god doesn't have a personalized plan for you...God...to Hegel... is just the process of self-determination imbued into the cosmos. Now what does Hegel mean by this? Well...he thinks...at least he seems to think...that understanding what he's referring to as "God" here is the easiest by looking at what we are in relation to God. He breaks it down like this: Hegel doesn't think that most of us are real. Not...in a physical sense. Like, of course you could have a scientist come down to your house...put on their goggles and run an experiment on you and it would be pretty clear you're real in an empirical sense. But just like last episode when we talked about freedom being practically synonymous to total self knowledge and how you're not completely free unless you understand WHY you do what you do...in a sense...when we realize one of these ways that we're being controlled by the stuff around us and not by ourselves...Hegel says that in a small way we are more REAL than we were before...now...we're more self-determining as opposed to being a subject in this dictatorship of outside influencers....from advertising, to cultural shifts anything. The point that Hegel's making is: something that makes itself what it is...is more fully real...than something MADE by something else...and constantly DEPENDENT on something else.

When we get past these barriers of trying to simplify the world...when we transcend that cultural slavery...that conditioning...those shackles that we're born into...shackles that by default would drastically affect what we do without us even realizing it...when we engage in this sort of open-minded discussion with ourselves about why we think and believe what we do...we are to Hegel...more real in those moments than in others because we are more self-determined. We are making ourselves what we are, instead of being at the mercy of something else. So Hegel's saying, how about this idea: God isn some Gandalf looking guy up in the sky that's mad at everyone. God isn't some finite being with a plan for everyone...no what if God was just the process of self-determination...and if you think

about it...in keeping with what we talked about on the last Hegel episode...wouldn't that also make god the truest reality? Now what makes this such a profound thing is that...this is the connection! In a world where people believe in a God for the sake of spiritual growth...in a world where people feel gratified because they believe in something greater than themselves and they're told that there is no way to have that spiritual tool available to you unless if you're willing to be in direct opposition to the current scientific narrative...here's Hegel talking about a God where it seems like that doesn't necessarily need to be the case. Both can be true. After all, if God isn't a being...if God is just whatever is most fully real...well...that sounds a lot like the chief objective of science right? To use induction and falsifiable experiments to arrive at an increasingly more accurate version of what reality is, not our superstitious assumptions. And for the person that doesn't really care about that and just sees God as a catalyst for personal development, what an incredible virtue to strive for...pure self determination without being unknowingly controlled by outside forces? Now I have a secret...I can see the future. I can see the emails coming in now and I know that one recurring one i'm going to be getting is this and I might as well address it now. You know it's funny...I don't think I'm going to get much email disagreement from people who are fundamentalists. Honestly, Hegel is saying God exists...that corresponds with something they already believe...most of them will probably just try to find a way to find SIMILARITIES between what they believe and Hegel believes. The people that are going to be up in arms about this episode are people that probably don't believe in god...they probably pride themselves on being a skeptic and they probably are saying, well Hegel certainly hasn't PROVEN the existence of God here and really all he did was just switch the definition of God to something else less controversial. But couldn't you do that with anything? Couldn't I just Personally define God as...my car? And then go outside point at my car and say oh look! God exists! Hegel would no doubt look at that person and say: look at you. there is nothing else you could have said right there that more obviously shows the biases that you're bringing to this discussion about God, biases conditioned into you by the current discussion going on during your lifetime. The notion that God is this

omniscient omnipotent being that knows you by your first name was NEVER on the table. That wasn't even what we were discussing. I think Hegel would be confused at first but then I think he'd feel like what was really happening here, something else he talks about...is that this person is blindly vitriolic to the word "God" being used at all, no matter what it looks like just because of the history that is connected to the word. And on one level it's understandable, but I think what Hegel would say...is that if every time you hear the word God you instantly raise your eyebrows or scoff or find some way to dismiss the conversation on the grounds that it's outlandish...you are not someone interested in finding the truth...you're someone interested in reinforcing what you already feel is true. Think about it: why is the word God a taboo thing to say? Why is this archetype of some sort of creative mechanism or thing that sustains the laws of the universe or whatever it is...why is that an idea that we should be instantly dismissive of, if we in fact want to know the truth? Shouldn't we leave room for it to be a possibility? Imagine a world where we know a lot more about the universe than we do now but there's still some really big mysteries out there...What if allowing for the possibility of that philosophical archetype of a God existing was the missing link between total understanding of the universe and living in ignorance? Shouldn't we at least entertain the idea of there being a timeless, infinite, incorporeal thing that's responsible for certain constants in the universe? And really, aside from how allowing for the possibility of a God might get us closer to truth about reality, for this person potentially sending in this email, there's a very real self-interested motivation you have for not instantly dismissing the idea of a God every time it's brought up. Because BY dismissing it, you are essentially allowing the people you're fighting against to hijack the word God and conflate the possible notion of a God existing with their cause. Here's what I mean. It's actually really similar to something we've already talked about in the belief episode...the question of when it's appropriate to make a faith based assertion about something. See it's really tempting to look at your Facebook wall...see someone say something about how this baby was saved from this harrowing, fiery car wreck, see one of your friends say.....God is good...glory to god for saving this child...its very easy to sit there and say...oh well they believe that

based on faith. problem with that is that its completely unverifiable...unlike me who believes in things based on the evidence. I believe in cold hard facts, if there's not evidence to support it...I don't believe it. It's easy to mistakenly think that faith is belief without evidence...when in reality faith is belief without SUFFICIENT evidence. A fundamentalist baptist from Mississippi may have initially just DECIDED to believe in God when they were a kid, but they look around them and they point to what they see as "evidence" of God's obvious existence. The beauty of nature, coincidences, feelings of bliss they have when praying...they point to these empirical phenomena as EVIDENCE garnered in their own personal experiments...that God exists. Evidence is all over the place...the really interesting question that remains is...what is SUFFICIENT evidence? What is sufficient evidence to claim to KNOW something? Because this same person writing this email, hostile towards the idea of God the moment they hear the word...they'd no doubt acknowledge that...what we think we know in the year 2015 based on scientific experiments is by no means infallible...its just the best thing we have. No doubt in 100 years most things we think we know now are going to be completely disproved...that's kind of whats great about science...it's the furthest thing from dogmatic...it always is improving upon itself. So knowing that...even if science IS the best thing we have right now...is it sufficient evidence to claim to know that something is true? Or is it just BETTER than arbitrarily DECIDING to believe in something? Make no mistake...as we talked about in the belief episode...it is a currently inescapable aspect of human existence that every belief we hold...no matter what evidence we cite for WHY it's true...every belief is a leap of faith at some level, but not all leaps of faith are created equal. And THAT'S the key distinction. Because in the same way someone might instantly dismiss the idea of a God existing as soon as they hear the word...my point is...people also do this with the word faith right? To the person writing this email...if you rail against the idea of faith based beliefs altogether...not only is it incredibly insecure...but you're also allowing your opposition to hijack the word "faith" and then align any merit connected to faith with their cause. Let me give an example...somebody might make the point that we are human beings...we have very flawed senses, brains

designed to pick bananas, a very narrow lens to view the universe through...and there is no guarantee based on those limitations that every aspect of reality is knowable to us. Maybe, to avoid going completely insane...it's beneficial to believe in some things based on faith because there currently is no way for us to know some things beyond a shadow of a doubt. I got news for you...that is a totally reasonable point. This is a great argument for why it may be necessary to believe in things based on faith. Now if you're someone that hears the word "faith", cringes and says no I don't believe in things based on faith...I believe in cold hard facts based on evidence. You're allowing the other side to align their beliefs, no matter what they are, with the merits of faith...when in reality, ironically, every belief you HOLD is based on a leap of faith...and the TRULY productive conversation begins when you ADMIT that fact and say, OK we both believe in what we do based on a leap of faith, now explain to me how yours is justified. What I'm saying is...in the same way it is beneficial to not let any group hijack the word "faith" and align in with their cause...the same thing is true about the word "God". By not being vitriolic towards the idea of a God exists...you're not giving up...you're not saying that talking snakes are real...what you're saying is that you're willing to be honest about what is possible. Now, similar to the faith conversation, now the onus is on THEM to justify why their individual conception of God is justified. And if I'm just giving advice to a fellow thinker...THAT is where you will win the argument. THAT is where they won't be able to hide behind GENERAL arguments about why the possibility of a God existing is reasonable, and they'll be forced to verify the specifics about what they're saying. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Marx and Kierkegaard on Religion pt. 1

Episode #077

This is a transcript of episode #077 on Marx. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So when I was but a wee lad I used to read quite a bit of fiction books. Don't really read much fiction anymore, but it used to be 100% of what I read...learned a lot of lessons from those books...started out with Goosebumps...sort of graduated to the Hardy Boys franchise...and after that I started reading Mark Twain. Read all of the classics...sort of exalted Mark Twain in my head as a quasi deity. Would read quotes by him. Saw him as this beacon of wit that was unparalleled. But then around three years ago I was surfen' the Youtubes and I came across this video of him. Yeah, a video...Thomas Edison had a camera and they took it and just made this horrible quality, black and white video of Mark Twain staring at the camera like he'd never seen a camera before. They get this long, suspense building shot of him walking along the side of his house...it was really simple. And it was weird, when I saw this video all of a sudden this guy that I had formerly exalted in my head as the God of wit in my pantheon of Gods, all of a sudden he was just a person. An old dude smoking a cigar on his front porch. He became more real to me. Well over the years on this show we've talked about a lot of philosophers from all different kinds of backgrounds. We've talked about reclusive philosophers...aggressive philosophers...we've talked about slaves turned philosopher...philosopher kings. But something happens right around the mid to late 1800's...the invention of the camera starts to become more prevalent. It starts to become common place that if you're a notable figure making waves in the world...chances are someones gonna want to take a picture of you. What I'm saying is...something changes when you can look into the eyes of these philosophers. Not a sculpture of them, not a likeness painted over a fireplace...but an actual moment frozen in time. This is them. This is who they were at

one point in time. What happens I think is...they become people rather than enigmas. Socrates was an enigma, it seems sometimes like he was more of an idea than a person, he stood for a clear cause, he died for that cause, his reputation lives on throughout history...and because of that...there's something magical about Socrates. There's something magical about other people from history that are similar to Socrates. And it's a magic that's only made possible when there's no objective proof this person even existed. Maybe it's because I live in an age where everyone has a camera in their back pocket, but seeing a picture of Karl Marx, on one hand...it instantly takes that magic away for me...but it makes something else possible that Socrates could never give me. When you look into the eyes of Karl Marx, when you look at photographs of the very people living alongside him that he looked into the eyes of...seeing them as people that were in pain and oppressed...how he dedicated his entire life to trying to find a system that he thought would bring an end to that pain...what happens with Karl Marx is...you can start to relate to him not as this enigma that embodies communist thinking like many people do, but as a person. A philosopher by day and a thumpin' good one at that. But this episode isn't about communism. We got a lot more episodes on Marx to do, we'll cover it there. This episode is about those people that we just talked about...those people living during Marx's time that you can see photographs of and why Marx thought they were being oppressed. This is part one of a two part episode on Marx and Kierkegaard's views on religion and how differently they looked at it. Now you may be asking, why do an episode on religion, why not cover their views on religion as a part of the rest of the episodes you're dedicating to them. Well, I think these episodes are going to help us understand the rest of their thinking a lot better. See if we can understand how these guys viewed the plight of the average person living during their time period, it'll give us some great context that will bring clarity to the more nuanced aspects of their thinking. To understand Marx, and how HE views the purpose of religion, the best place to probably start is to give you a little bit of a background on where Marx is coming from. Marx is living in a world where the full affects of the industrial revolution are being felt. All of the thinking of just a few generations ago...the economics of Adam Smith, the

improvements in government by Hobbes Locke and Rousseau, ALL of these things have been in affect long enough to start paying dividends. These dividends include...economic prosperity. Now, during this time, if you're living in Europe, you aren't just limited to trading with your immediate neighboring countries like you were in the past...brand new, unprecedented opportunities are starting to become available to you...now you have this unprecedented ability to cross the pacific ocean and trade with the united states...now you have this unprecedented ability to trade with India and many parts of Asia... Marx talks about how what happened as a result of this is that...because you have more and more people that you're able to trade with, the demand for whatever you produce becomes greater and greater and you have to find a way of making EVEN MORE of what you already were making. So in that sort of economic climate...in this climate of ever-increasing demand...if you're just an individual artisan or craftsman...you cant survive. Whatever it is you're making...if you're whittling figurines out of a piece of driftwood...you can only whittle so fast! Now instead of whittling for 8 countries you gotta whittle for 20 countries 30 countries. its impossible to keep up!Marx says that the people that DO survive in that environment are not the craftsmen...but the manufacturers...the people that have the means to mass produce stuff. The problem with this Marx says, is that instead of trade and the economy being in the hands of thousands of craftsmen, now it's in the hands of a very small handful of manufacturers, that in turn have an inordinate amount of control over the lives of the average citizen. Now, this in itself would be enough of a problem to deal with, but Marx sees this as a HORRIBLE thing that's going on...one that needs to be stopped immediately...because he looks back at various points throughout history and says, man...I've seen this before haven't I? Marx is the most famous follower of Hegel's thinking we have and one of the things Marx centers his philosophy around the most is Hegel's dialectic. Remember, Hegel thought that understanding the world is not understanding something that is fixed and static. No, the world is constantly changing and shifting and that in the same way understanding a moving target comes down to understanding the rate and nature of the way that it's moving, maybe a better strategy for people trying to understand the world is to

understand that underlying process of change. Hegel arrives at what he calls "the dialectic"...the three part process of conflicting interests butting heads that leads to any change in the world. The thesis, the way that things are, the antithesis, the conflicting interest, and the synthesis, the result of the conflict between the two and the new order of things. That synthesis becomes the new thesis and so on and so forth. Marx liked this idea. He liked it a lot. So what he does is he takes Hegel's dialectic and applies it to one of his favorite areas to think about: the economic history of the world. What he concludes is that quote"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles."What he means by this is that if you look back at history, from an economic perspective it's all pretty much been the same to Marx. As far as he can tell there's always two major classes of people. There's always a ruling class of people, these are the people that have control over the economy, and an exploited class of people, people that are exploited by that ruling class. Marx would want us to apply Hegel's dialectic to the process of economic change in the world. He says think of the ruling class of people as the thesis and the exploited class of people as the antithesis. Eventually, what always happens, is the exploited class of people get tired of being exploited, there's some sort of revolution, the ruling class is overthrown and a new world emerges, the synthesis, but then there's a new ruling class that is then in turn exploiting a class of people who eventually revolt and this process, this dialectical process of change just repeats itself over and over again. Marx gives all kinds of examples from history of what he's talking about...we can think of some. You know if you're living in colonial america in the 16, 17, 1800's...you are either a slave, a member of an exploited class of people, no freedom, or you are a slave master, or at least a free person with the potential to be a slave master. What eventually happened? Enough people got tired of there being this exploited class of people and a revolution occurred. Go back to the middle ages when the feudal system is in style. In that world you're either a landowner... you're a member of the ruling class you know king, aristocrat, or guild... or you're part of the peasantry, you're someone working the land... a member of the exploited class. What eventually happened? People got tired of being the exploited class and peasant revolts started happening everywhere. Marx is

saying that this new economic climate during his time... of trade being controlled by a handful of manufacturers, what he calls the bourgeoisie worsens the dynamic between them, the ruling class and what he called the proletariat, or the people now beholden to the bourgeoisie. By the way. Marx would no doubt look at our lives... as modern workers in a capitalist western society and he would see us... as the exploited class of this time period. Now this raises the question...well if we're the exploited class...who are the ruling class? Well there's a few answers to this question...maybe the big financial institutions that control most of the capital. Maybe big companies that control most of the production, whatever you or Marx would think the answer to this question is, one thing is certain to him, we...the people listening to this show... definitely are all members of the exploited class of this age. Now you may hear that and say, well that's funny...I don't feel exploited. I go to work, I love my job, I get paid well, I have a family, I never go without food or water or shelter, I got two vacations a year!! Where's the exploitation in that? I LOVE my life. See, exploitation just sounds like such a dirty word, doesn't it? You think exploitation and you think of someone holding you down punching you in the face. You think of them treating you like an animal where your life is abject misery. What Marx would say is that just because you don't FEEL like you're being exploited, doesn't mean that you're NOT being exploited. Just because you've grown fond of the chains that you've had around your legs since birth, doesn't mean that they're not there. You may love your job. You may get 50,000 dollars a year to do something rewarding for you. But one thing is entirely clear, you are making that company you work for a LOT more than 50,000 dollars to do the stuff that you do for them every year, if you didn't it wouldn't be very profitable for them to pay you 50,000 dollars to do it. So in the sense... that they're paying you not what you're actually worth, but what you expect...in that sense, you are being exploited for your labor. You may think its in your self interest to work for them, that job may help you realize every dream you have throughout your life, you may never feel like you're EVER going without at any point in your life, the point that Marx is making here is a broader one. Why does the system NEED to be this way? Why does the system NEED to have this dynamic of one party getting rich... off of other parties being

paid less than they're producing? And if we realize that this is the case...why would we be satisfied with that arrangement? Forget human rights or anything like that...Marx points out...think about it...look at history...what ALWAYS happens when that dynamic exists? There's a revolution! The exploited class, time after time, rises up and overthrows the ruling class! Often times with a lot of blood shed, often times with a lot of political strife and a period of time where the entire country vulnerable to attacks from other countries...why should we just accept... that that's a natural part of this world we live in? In other words, is it at least in theory possible...to devise a system...Where there is no ruling class and exploited class? Now, if you're one of these people that is perfectly happy with your lot in life, you don't feel exploited...Marx would say... well that's EXACTLY how the ruling class wants you to feel and that feelings probably been conditioned into you by an elaborate propaganda campaign to make you satisfied or distracted from the way that things are. Think about it: put yourself in the shoes of someone in the ruling class. If you recognized that you're a member of this ruling class..and you saw the pattern throughout history of the inevitability of this exploited class causing a revolution...what does your strategy become then? Well obviously to prolong the amount of time in between these revolutions as long as possible. You have to maximize the amount of time you can profit off of exploiting these people. Marx thinks historically, there's been a lot of different tactics the ruling class would use to do this. Think of Rome...Bread and circuses...Gladiatorial games...meant to appease and distract an under served population from political turmoil and deception. This stuff has happened in the past...interesting thing to think about is...is it happening today? Well, we may not have gladiators getting eaten by lions in today's world, but we can definitely see some possible parallels right? All of the food at everyone's disposal, we have video games, movies, sports games, the academy awards celebrities...practically an endless sea of methods to distract yourself away from what is going on in the world politically and economically. Now this may not be orchestrated by a cabal of people at the top that design the media this way for this purpose, but it certainly gives people that option right? You look at the numbers of people voting and the general aura of political apathy in the United States and you start

to wonder if that's what's happening. But Marx thinks, all these methods are child's play...no..if you really want to distract people from whats going on... by far the most successful, effective and nefarious version of these methods of controlling behavior is...religion. I'm sure you've heard his famous quote: Religion, is the opiate of the masses, but what does he mean by that? He's not just saying religion is a drug that people take, think of specifically what an opiate is. When you're putting up Christmas lights and you fall off the roof and break your leg in four places and you get rushed to the hospital, what does the doctor give you? they give you morphine or some sort opiate so that you're not in excruciating pain and they can work on fixing it. Opiates mitigate and help you forget about...pain. The pain of being exploited. Marx thinks that religion takes you out of this world and carries you off into a different world...the same way video games or movies or a TV show might carry you off into a different world. But this is the ULTIMATE fantasy world to Marx...it tells you that in this world...no matter how bad you have it...this is only a temporary existence...you're just on the moral proving ground...what your REAL focus should be is on otherworldly things! On heaven and eternity and paradise! You know, The sweet by and by if you're a slave in colonial America. Take no thought for the morrow, don't worry about this mortal realm, God's got your back. I mean, the reason religion is such an effective tool at making people happier is the level of acceptance that it breeds about everything. No matter how bad things seem...no matter how many horrible things happen to you in succession...ultimately...it was God's will. You have to accept it, who are you to question God's will? He's just making you into a better person by throwing adversity your way. Again, a terrific recipe for personal happiness...not a very good recipe if you're Marx and you're trying to improve the world and do away with this ruling class for good. This is how Marx saw religion. Some guy or girl a long long time ago that was a little bit smarter than the people around them realized that if they just wrote down a story and got people to believe it, they could control them. This was such an effective tool they kept making revisions and additions...religion 2.1 religion 2.2...and eventually we arrived at a widely accepted story of prophecy and miracles and hope and that the ruling class has been using this story to economically oppress the exploited class

all throughout human history. And Marx would really hammer home the notion that isn't it so CONVENIENT that the religion that is popular during a certain time period always mirrors and justifies the economic structure of that time period. Really interesting point to consider. Let me give you a few examples of what he's talking about. What is the economic and political structure during the feudal system, during that thousand year period in the Middle Ages? Well again, it's hierarchical. At the very top of the pyramid you have the King, underneath him you have the aristocrats, underneath them you have the guild, the three of these groups combined making up a very small percentage of the population, and then underneath them you have the peasantry. That's everyone else. Well, what is the prominent form of religion in western Europe during this time? It's a specific type of Christianity that has evolved and shifted into what we now know as Catholicism. Now, what is the structure of Catholicism during that time? Oh well you have the Pope at the top. Underneath him you have cardinals and bishops, underneath them you have the priests, the three of these classes making up a very small percentage of Catholics, and then underneath them you have the laity. Again, that's everyone else. Marx would say that not only is this transparently a mirror image of the feudal economic system that is designed to control people and keep them in the peasantry, the two appear to justify each other and seem to be working together: hence his claim that the ruling class using it as an opiate. After all, if you're a peasant living at that time...if this hierarchical structure that I see in church is God's will, no matter how much I don't like it, that must be the best way for a society to be run too...not to mention the fact... whenever a new king comes to power, it's always the pope, acting on God's behalf that puts the crown on his head. To a peasant, God MUST endorse what's going on here. The structure of religion always mirrors... the current ECONOMIC tactic for coercion by the ruling class. Marx would say, if you doubt this fact ...look at what happens next in history. As we move away from the 1000 years of the feudal system, as the peasant revolts put an end to it...here comes capitalism replacing the feudal system. Now, here's a brand new economic system that has a very DIFFERENT way that people are organized, right? See, under feudalism...there was a hierarchy...things were class based...and you

are chained to that class for your entire life. Well, in capitalism it's different...in capitalism people should be equal as opposed to being a member of a class...in capitalism... liberty is a virtue, not being bound to a class for your whole life. Marx would say... how convenient... that right when the world started shifting into a more capitalist model, that's exactly when protestants start giving Catholics trouble and religion begins to reform into something that allows for 1) a level of liberty in interpreting the bible and 2) largely abandons the typical hierarchical structure of the clergy. Marx sees this as nothing more than religion adapting to its environment so that it can mirror and morally justify the capitalist system of economic exploitation. He see this and thinks it's clear: religion is a calculated political and economic tactic of keeping people passive, meek, and poor as a virtue. Matthew 19:24 it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God. Think of the message that sends. Yeah, you are overworked and exploited and barely scraping by and you look at other people that are profiting off of your labor and eventually...its not unreasonable to think... you might begin to resent some of these people. Enough of this resentment builds up... and you might DO something about it. But then Marx would point out you bring that resentment to church on Sunday and you're told to turn the other cheek...you're told to be grateful for what God has given you to accept the way that things are as God's will...you're told that rich people go to hell...don't envy that guy over there profiting off of your work...feel BAD for him! Well at the end of the church service...all the pain you felt when you entered that church must be lifted from you. God's got my back. This existence is temporary. I don't feel so bad anymore. The same way you might be writhing in pain in a hospital bed, the doctor starts an IV of morphine and it brings you the same kind of relief. But it's not like everyone was this cynical about religion during Marx's time. Another brilliant thinker that thought very differently about all these things was a guy named Soren Kierkegaard. And we'll hear what he has to say about Marx on part 2 of this episode next time on Philosophize This! Thank you for listening. Ill talk to you next time.

Kierkegaard on Anxiety

Episode #079

Well, we're going to talk a lot about what Kierkegaard MEANS when he is saying that today...but I think to understand what he's saying in its entirety...it's necessary for us to look at another quote by Kierkegaard...written years apart in a completely different work of his...and um...for the sake of it appealing to our modern ears that are accustomed to...you know...NOT talking like we're wearing a coon skin hat in the 1800's...I'm gonna paraphrase it a bit and it goes like this:The biggest danger one can face in this life...is losing ones self. The reason why is that it can leave you...it can as he says "pass off in the world" without you even realizing it. Everything else you lose...five bucks...your wife...your phone...it's immediately evident to you that you've lost it...you know you're getting in your pajamas...pat down your pockets and say OH NO! i left my phone at Applebees!...when you lose your SELF though...you could go months or even YEARS without even realizing it!This is why it's a particularly nefarious situation to be in...you might not even realize that you're in it...see to Kierkegaard, most people living today...probably in the upwards of 90% of people that are alive at any given time...are not actually being true to their "selves" ...like we talked about last time...a lotta people are lost...a lotta people find themselves either lost in the finite...you know conferring their identity onto social conventions or whatever culture happened to fall into their lap when they were born...or lost in the infinite...stuck in a state of analysis paralysis about the truly infinite possibilities that they can choose from and never really acting on one.And as we were talking about last time...truly being a self... requires you to have the realization that... yeah there are an infinite number of things I can do, but it also requires you to actually make a choice and act on one that corresponds with who you truly are.See, when we find ourselves in this balancing act between the two...the finite and the infinite as Kierkegaard calls them...we experience what he calls a state of "dizziness"... dizziness caused by the fact that we look at the sheer magnitude of possibilities we have...

coupled with the fact that eventually...we gotta choose one of them.As you can probably imagine, our heads get filled with all of these questions...we start catastrophizing...what if I'm wrong? what if this is a huge mistake? what if I wake up when I'm 60 a retired Navy Admiral with a prosthetic hip and realize I did everything all wrong?? And this is the essence of anxiety...to fear some future outcome, that we really have little control over anyway. You know Kierkegaard says:"Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eyes as in the abyss...anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."See it's really important to make this part of Kierkegaards thinking clear...at the risk of sounding redundant...what hes saying is that anxiety is the reaction... to the idea that you have freedom to choose from millions of options but you have to eventually choose one and act on it. Now, it's interesting...this freedom that we have...you'd have to acknowledge as a fellow human being... it can be both a blessing and a curse.... I mean, on one hand, were free hooray! we can do anything we want! on the other hand...wow...im free to do anything...what if I make a mistake? This is like Barry Schwartz's lecture on the paradox of choice. We seem to be happier as human beings when we have LESS options rather than more. He gives the example of salad dressings in the grocery store I think.You know imagine if there were only three bottles of salad dressing to choose from when you walked down the aisle at the grocery store...ranch, blue cheese and bar b que. Not that anyone...uses bar b que dressing. Anyway imagine if there was somebody in the world that actually used bar b que dressing...they would walk down that hypothetical aisle in the grocery store and they would be pleasantly surprised to find BBQ dressing...easy choice over the ranch and blue cheese to that... guy or gal.But that's not the reality we live in is it. You go down the salad dressing aisle...GOOD LUCK. You got BBQ, spicy BBQ, honey BBQ, mesquite BBQ, low fat BBQ, lousiana BBQ...the more options you have, the harder the decision is to make and the more likely it is you're gonna go home and put your loosiana BBQ salad dressing on your salad and think...maybe I should've gotten the spicy BBQ instead. Now snap back to Kierkegaard...we're not talking about salad dressings here...we're talking about your

LIFE...and we're not talking about 10 options to choose from in the grocery store...we're talking about practically and INFINITE number! It's no wonder he talks about how when we find ourselves in this is a weird limbo state between freedom being really good for us and really bad for us ...that we might feel a little uncomfortable...we might feel A LOT uncomfortable...this emotional state...is something that he repeatedly refers to as a state known as "dread". Now you know I don't like to make assumptions on this show, but I'm going to assume when everyone woke up this morning they didn't say to themselves...you know...let's be in a state of dread today...yeah that sounds good...no. Dread is horrible, dread is agonizing. And if we're just talking statistically here...what do most human beings do when they find themselves in an incredibly uncomfortable situation? They get away from it...they find a way to run from it. This is the reason many people don't exercise...it's the reason many people don't have difficult but necessary conversations with people...it's the reason most people to Kierkegaard desperately look for some way to avoid this tough road to becoming a self. Now I like to think of this whole process that Kierkegaard lays out of becoming a self as sort of a descension down a staircase. Right? We started out completely lost either in the finite or the infinite...once we were made aware of that we took a step down the staircase to a state of dread...and once we found ourselves in that uncomfortable situation we take another step down the staircase into a state that Kierkegaard calls "despair". Now, despair is where most people spend their entire lives. He says despair comes from the attempt to rid yourself OF yourself. He calls despair a "sickness of the spirit". Now maybe you believe in an incorporeal spirit that inhabits your body that is responsible for your emotional state and all sorts of other things...but for the rest of you godless monsters that are just treading water on this planet until you inevitably end up in a chain gang in one of the seven circles of hell...for the rest of you...the word "spirit" doesn't have to alienate you. Think of spirit in the context of how it's often used in within casual conversation, "I don't feel in good spirits today." Think of the sickness of the spirit as a disease that is afflicting your emotional state. And these words that he uses...sickness...disease...this is really how Kierkegaard views this state of despair...like a latent disease. Or actually, not a latent disease but a

disease that is symptomless but still always quietly inside of you waiting to strike. It's like having herpes of the spirit. We can relate this to any other undiagnosed disease. I mean, if you don't go in for your regular checkups and take an inventory of your body every once in a while...you might just collapse on the ground one day and find out you've been living symptomless with cancer for the last nine months of your life...find out this disease has been doing tons of damage without you even realizing it. Same thing with despair to Kierkegaard. See, because when you're in a state of despair it's not like you're necessarily walking around pouting like a seven year old that didn't get what they want for Christmas. No, you can seem like the happiest person in the world and still have this void of despair inside of you that is just waiting to rear its ugly head. See if despair is a disease, then the problem is with diagnosing the disease. Not only is the person afflicted by it often unable to even know whether they're a victim of it, but remember despair is that next stair on the staircase when you're running from that state of dread...people run from that sense of dread in thousands of different ways, where do you even begin to look? Kierkegaard has a great quote that's always stuck with me over the years: "Most men are subjective toward themselves and objective toward all others, fightfully objective sometimes - but the task is precisely to be objective toward oneself and subjective toward all others." The problem is with being sufficiently self-aware and honest enough with yourself to realize what exact type of despair you've gotten yourself locked into to avoid that state of the dizziness of anxiety and dread. There's no way we can go over all of the different kinds of despair here today, but the one type of despair that Kierkegaard thought was the most common for people to fall into is what he called "a sickness of despair over something earthly". We've all seen this one before. It's essentially conflating your identity and your self-worth with something external to you in the world... that you really have no control over. I can wax on forever about how Kierkegaard describes it...best way to help you understand what he means is just to give you some examples. Let's say you come of age in the world you realize you're lost in the finite...you step down the staircase into a state of anxiety and dread...you run from it, step down to the next stair and you find yourself in a state of despair...now, when you're in the state of

despair you should be feeling intense anxiety, but to distract yourself away from this monumental task of being a true self you dedicate all of your life to swimming. You refer to yourself as a swimmer. You go down to the pool...every single day and...swim. You identify with this activity so much that you even say things like, "man, if I got into an accident and for some reason couldn't swim any more, what am I at that point? I'm nothing. I would just kill myself." Now let's say you get into a horrible accident at the zoo. An elephant has a seizure and falls on your legs...your legs are mangled...beyond repair...the doctor has to amputate them. Let's say you can never swim again. How would you feel? Well you'd probably feel like your life was over...like a giant piece of who you were was taken from you by an epileptic elephant...you'd probably feel empty inside. But what Kierkegaard would say is that that emptiness that you're feeling was there all along, you had just been distracting yourself away from the task of being true to yourself by attaching yourself to this earthly activity and making THAT into who you are. It has echoes of the episode we did a while ago about Kant's idea of "What is enlightenment?" You know it's so easy to outsource your understanding of a particular subject to a book and just parrot lines out of it whenever that topic comes up...it's so easy to outsource your morality to a pastor or your diet to a diet guru. What Kierkegaard is saying here is that it's really an alluring concept to even outsource who we are as individuals! Our values, our priorities...everything that makes you...you! But if we're outsourcing it to swimming or to hiking or to ping pong...that's not necessarily you, right? You could just be running from the discomfort of this state of despair. Another thing that Kierkegaard says might keep us in this state of despair a lot longer than we have to be is the transient nature of things that we have no control over. Example: Somebody loves their significant other...immensely. They're the love of their life. They can't imagine their lives without them. They couldn't live without them. If they ever found out this person in their life met a tragic demise...I would clasp the smiling cold steel of this dagger and drive it deep into my breast so as to feel at least something...one last time. Yeah, yet another example of someone avoiding this process of being a true individual. But imagine they didn't die. Imagine things were going great...you felt whole inside and then you guys broke up...and

you felt agony...you felt empty inside...but then you guys got back together and you felt great again...but then you broke up again and you felt empty. Kierkegaard would say that the emptiness that you feel was inside of you through the good times AND the bad, and that to be a true self requires you to contend with the anxiety and emptiness inside of you. It's kind of funny. A lot of us spend tons of energy trying to not ever have to deal with this anxiety that comes along with becoming a true self, when in reality, at least to Kierkegaard...feeling intense anxiety means you're on the right track. See think of this staircase we've been descending down...what is the point of all of these different steps? Well it's to get away from anxiety...the anxiety that you're faced with when you find yourself needing to choose from an infinite number of options and act on one of them. We've RUN from this anxiety the whole time, but Kierkegaard thinks we should embrace it. It's a necessary part of being a human being. Ironically, as negative of a connotation as anxiety typically has associated with it, the more intense anxiety you feel about making this choice...the closer you probably are to arriving at your true self. Instead of just outsourcing who you are to some culture you can't control or some person you can't control or whatever you're doing...embrace your freedom. Kierkegaard sees the process of becoming an individual as sort of a baptism by fire; yes you will experience anxiety and dread and all of these temporary feelings...but just like the discomfort you feel when you're lifting weights at the gym...that adversity is a catalyst for growth. I know this isn't a revolutionary concept or anything, but that's how I've always viewed going out for a run or lifting weights at the gym...it's directly analogous to life itself. The same way you're met with resistance and you don't want to do it and you feel like quitting but you push through it in the gym...life throws you resistance...life things you don't want to do and I think because of that training... you are much less likely to quit. Now some of you are probably saying...I'm already an individual. I don't follow anyone's rules not even my own. I don't outsource my self. In fact this whole process sounds really easy...who's this Kierkegaard guy talking like he's so enlightened...oooh I'm a self! Look at me! I would implore you...not to undersell how difficult this is...in fact Kierkegaard writes extensively about how difficult it was for him to become an individual even after he understood the

process of becoming one. He said: "What I really lack is to be clear in my mind what I am to do, not what I must know...what matters is to find a purpose...to find a truth that is true for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die...This is what my soul thirsts for as the African desert thirsts for water." Listen to that...a truth that is true for me. As weird as it seems living in this millenium...Kierkegaard was uncovering something here in philosophy that had gone largely unexplored up until this point in history. You know...for so long in philosophy we'd concerned ourselves with trying to use reason or our senses to try to find some sort of objective TRUTHS about the universe that we live in...arguing the whole way about what the most reliable means of doing so is. But as we've learned over the course of 80 episodes or so is that since antiquity... no matter how brilliant of a person is trying to take on this task...objective truth is a very slippery thing...not only do we not know if it's possible to attain, but would we know the truth if we saw it? Would it bring us any sort of enlightenment when it comes to what it means to be a human being? See a huge reason WHY Kierkegaard does so much work talking about these things like...the process of how we make choices, how important it is to take action on those choices, the freedom of our will that we all possess...the reason he talks about this so much is that he is rejecting the notion that Hegel had just laid out...that ultimately our choices are mostly a byproduct of wherever we happened to be born within the framework of that historical process of change. Kierkegaard is trying to make the case that the choices we make are free choices, and that we need to remain vigilant in keeping an inventory of ourselves because these choices are OUR responsibility...not some manifestation of something out of our control. Again, what is that historical process of change other than the conglomeration of billions of individual subjective existences. This would be the first shot fired towards a target that would eventually be called "existentialism." That said, if you despise me right now is the time to turn the podcast off. For everyone else I want to thank you all for the outpouring of support. I went hiking a couple days into the woods trying to emerge on the other side with some sort of new perspective or at least hopefully pushing a figurative reset button. I was just walking along, completely oblivious...i'm by no means a skillful hiker or somebody that

understands the land...and I came across this black bear...it was probably 40 feet away from me and it just stared at me. And because I'm a genius I didn't have bear spray or really any idea of how to deal with the situation at all...so I just stared back. And it felt like time was moving in slow motion and as it was happening there was just this bird chirping...singing a song...like nothing was going on. Anyway, maybe I'll write about it in length...a free audio book or something if enough people wanna hear about it but in that moment something changed for me and I don't think of myself as cured of anxiety but I had a thought that has made me not feel it since that moment. For that, for you guys and for that black bear I am grateful. Thank you for listening...i'll talk to you next time.

Capitalism vs. Communism

Episode #081

This is a transcript of episode #081 on Marx. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Hello everyone, I'm Stephen West, This is Philosophize This! No sponsor this week. As always, if you want to help the show out you can go to Patreon.com/philosophizethis...you can go through the Amazon banner, but **ADDITIONALLY** this week...if you collect the Philosophize This! Tshirts or are one of the many people that were asking for a tshirt with the actual Thales logo of the show on it...we have one of those Teespring campaigns going...long story short the shirt is available for the next three days and if not enough people buy it...you don't even get charged...it's not even printed...so if you're interested in that you can find that on the landing page of philosophizethis.org. Let's get onto the program. So let's all imagine something. Let's imagine that you're walking down the street with a camera and a microphone and you're interviewing just **RANDOM** people in an average city in the modern United States. You know just the first person you run into walking their dog down the street... Statistically speaking...if you asked that person the question...which do you think is a better economic system Capitalism or Communism...you know pretend as though those are the only two options they have...what do you think they'd say? Well I don't think it's a very controversial prediction to make that most Americans are going to say Capitalism. I was born into a Capitalist system. Look at all the prosperity it's afforded me and my family. Look at all of the innovations that have come as a result of capitalism. In Capitalism we have mansions in the napa valley...in communism you have a refrigerator box...in capitalism we have the super bowl...in communism you have...who can chase the rat underneath the dumpster the fastest and get dinner. Maybe that's a little extreme...but you know what's interesting? For several years of my adult life this is not that far from what I thought the differences were between the two. I don't think most Americans are given a fair representation of the criticisms Karl Marx had of capitalism...I think largely

people are sold this bill of goods that communism and socialism are profane words...if somebody acknowledges anything about them that might be a good point...it's tantamount to being unpatriotic or somehow a BAD American. BAD AMERICAN! But there's something else interesting about this. Around 20 years ago if you walked down that very same street and talked to the people then...you'd be much more likely to find people that won't even ENTERTAIN the idea of socialism or communism. People that raise their eyebrows to someone even ASKING if we should consider something other than capitalism. But something's changed in these last 20-30 years hasn't it? Just look at these numbers: we have Bernie Sanders...self proclaimed socialist democrat not only capable of running for president, but ALSO giving Hilary Clinton a run for her money...winning entire states! Gallup just came out with a poll a few days ago...35% of Americans view socialism in a positive light. That's a far cry from the way that things were not too long ago...so what changed? And a common answer to this question is that people are starting to see the very real flaws in a capitalist system and are looking to move onto something they think is better. But again, for years of my life I didn't know how you could even critique capitalism...I thought it was case closed...I thought the only people that had a problem with it were people that were lazy and just wanted the government to give them everything so they didn't have to work. Boy was I wrong when I first read Karl Marx several years ago. Now, to be fair...not everyone that's a proponent of capitalism is as naive as I was about it...you know...there's a good friend of the show on Twitter this week that referenced the quote Capitalism is the worst system, except for all the others. You know...most people KNOW there are problems with capitalism...they just see it as the best option we got. Nevertheless, whether we've refined a system better than capitalism in today's day or not...whether the first iterations of Karl Marx's vision of communism went horribly wrong or not...I don't think anyone would disagree with the value of looking at well thought out criticisms of the system we're currently in...if for no other reason than to make it better. And THIS is the value of looking at the criticisms that Karl Marx had of capitalism...many of which have not been addressed...many of which possibly can not be addressed because they're built in systemically. I guess one

thing we all have to accept as honest human beings is that capitalism is not a perfect economic system...and despite the fact we were born into it and see its effects around us all the time many of them we see as good, it is not the only way that things have ever been done. No there are many economic systems that have been tried...and Marx as a philosopher taking a step back and analyzing them all next to each other would say... that each and every one of them have contradictions built into them that are probably the reason why they aren't still in use today. He called these competing forces built into these systems...internal conflicts. The feudal system in the middle ages has certain internal conflicts that led to revolution. Slavery in the new world had certain internal conflicts that led to revolution. Marx is saying...maybe capitalism does as well. Whats an example of one of these?...well I don't want to get too tangential here so I'll try to keep it short...we'll no doubt be talking about this again when we're talking about his critiques, but I really want us to understand the systemic nature of these internal conflicts that Marx is talking about and how to him they seem like unsolvable problems that will inevitably come to fruition no matter what we do...they're built into the economic model. One thing that a Marxist might say is an internal conflict within capitalism is that capitalists, these people that control the means of production, owners of corporations mostly in our modern day are always looking to make more capital. That's kind of the whole thing there. Anyway, how do they get more capital? Well Marx would say a convenient place to look and one that is a huge expense to most high production, profitable entities is...employee wages. Sometimes 30 to 40 percent of your total sales. So the capitalist responds to this and they make things more efficient, maybe introduces technology to take over certain jobs, lays people off and has less employees do the same work that more employees used to do, stagnates wages as profits increase...not because they're bad people...but because they're operating within an economic system where capital is the intrinsic good. Now what happens Marx says is that...naturally...when you're paying less people less money...capitalism begins to cannibalize itself...these competing forces not only make it so that the employees...the consumers of what the capitalist is producing have less money to actually buy what they're producing...but it

also insures that because of this intrinsic good of capital...coupled with the inordinate amount of control that a handful of people have over the means of production...it insures that without intervention the rich will always get richer and the poor will always get poorer in a capitalist system. You know...a Marxist would say...a common way that a Marxist would look at the economic history of the 20th century is that since the inception of capitalism being the primary economic model in western society...a lot has changed. They'd say that it worked for a while...uh...workers in the western world were living on sort of economic islands...they were able to demand a better quality of life from their employer...better wages...better work conditions, etc. But then around 1968...1971 whenever you think global trade really started its massive expansion...the people that controlled the means of production that had to pay these people in the west all these higher wages...they looked at places like China and India and Taiwan and realized hey...these people over here will do the same work for pennies on the dollar...so the jobs started leaving. Marxists call this the mass exodus of jobs and they'd say that we're still living in its wake...they'd say that how convenient right around the mid 1970's is when people started taking out credit cards and going into massive debt as just a normal part of life. Fast forward to today and just to graduate from college and be able to contribute to society you practically HAVE to go into tens of thousands of dollars in debt...not to mention that house you want to buy or that car. Anyway, the point is: Marx believes there are internal conflicts built into the capitalist system...and I guess the next question is: why didn't we see this coming? I mean when Adam Smith writes the wealth of nations and walks up into some guys office thats making the decisions and goes knock knock...whos there...wapow...capitalism. Why didn't we see these problems coming then? Well the answers pretty complicated but one of the biggest answers is that we were living in an entirely different world. Really brief background on the origins of capitalism. So during the transition phase between the feudal system and capitalism in Europe... there were a lot of families that used to live and work the land or be part owners of the land that were displaced because of things called Inclosure Acts...or things like the Inclosure Acts of the United Kingdom given your respective country. The Inclosure acts

were a series of actions that made land that used to be common land into land that can be privately owned. So naturally, the people that used to live on this..common land...had to find somewhere else to go. A lot of people...had to find somewhere else to go and survive. So, it makes sense... they went to where the jobs were...over this handful of generations at the dawn of the industrial revolution...these people would be making a huge change to their lifestyle...going from working the land to working in factories, textile mills, etc. Now it's important to understand the mindset that these nation states were in during this time. They were just that...nation states that were competing with each other. Nation states that were emerging into new worlds that they could trade with. All of a sudden you could trade with India and China and the American Colonies if you want...the problem was: how are you going to make enough stuff to fill that demand? How can you go from just making enough stuff for just your nation state and your immediate neighbors to now... ten countries worth of stuff...twenty countries worth of stuff. Couple this with the fact that it was a widely held view at the time that the export capacity of your economy is directly related to your economic strength...and when Adam Smith introduces the ideas of specialization and division of labor...you're going to grab onto that with both hands! You know instead of having one guy that makes clocks all day...works really hard for ten hours and might be able to make one clock...Adam Smith says let's have him specialize in making the cogs...let's have her specialize in making the springs...and with this more focused, specialized, menial task as the only thing that they're doing...there's much fewer moving parts to consider...they refine their systems faster and maybe they can make 1000 cogs in a day...so collectively 10 people might be able to make 1000 clocks in a day, as opposed to the 10 they'd be able to make if each one of them had to do every facet of the clock production. Karl Marx would say: what a great idea to make a lot of clocks! This is what Capitalism is great at...making a lot of stuff and finding out what the next thing is we have to make and then making a lot of THAT stuff. But is...making the most stuff possible so that we can make the most money possible all that we should be concerned about? Marx thinks it'd be one thing if humans were robots...but they're not. We're forgetting about the effects of the fact that it's ultimately

human beings that have to make all this stuff. One of the big criticisms he has of capitalism is that it alienates the worker from a sense of purpose or fulfillment. The point that he's making is one that we can ALL relate to living in a capitalist system. We've all had a job at some point or known someone that's had a job they don't really like that much...it's boring...unfulfilling and makes you feel like a meaningless cog in a machine. Karl Marx says that this is a natural byproduct of specialization. Yes, specialization is great at making a ton of stuff...but the more specialized jobs become the less important the person feels that's doing the work. For example, if you're the guy down at the Siracha factory and you work on an assembly line and you're the guy that puts the green cap on top of the bottles...all day long. It's very difficult for you to see the positive effect that you're having on society...you probably don't walk into a Teriyaki place, look around at all the bottles and be like yup...that was me. No, Marx says to feel fulfilled we need to "see ourselves in our work." Back to the clock making example...if you're the person that builds the entire clock start to finish...there's a craftsmanship to that. There's a connection you can have with it. The way you build that clock is a representation of you and your personality. Let's say you make a simple, elegant clock made with attention to detail...maybe that's the way you approach every aspect of your life. You see a little piece of YOU in that clock. You walk around and see your clocks hanging around and you feel like you contributed something essential to the world. Sure, you can only make one of them a day...but the process was fulfilling to you. But instead of that, Marx says, we got this guy churning out a thousand cogs a day and not caring about a single one of them. And he says what happens... is that this dynamic creates a disconnect between what we do to serve others in our society... and what we WISH we could do or what we know were capable of doing...if only the system didn't require you to be so highly specialized in an attempt to make as much stuff as we possibly can. Again, for anyone that's ever worked a really monotonous job and you felt as though you had so much more to give to your fellow human beings...you can kind of see where he is coming from here. So Karl Marx continues on and says... look... this would be a bad enough state of affairs on its own...but the fact is this isn't the only negative affect on the workers that capitalism ignores.

Another way that it undermines the employee is that it makes them feel terrified about how expendable they are AS a single, insignificant cog in this machine. Look if the recession in 2008 taught us anything...it's that we are far removed from the days where you are a loyal employee of a company and you suck it up for the company and the company takes care of you in good times and in bad. No, if it means a better bottom line...anyone is expendable. Marx would've predicted this dynamic and he says that this feeling that the worker has...that if they make a couple of mistakes or if anything changes that's out of their control where it's no longer profitable for the company for them to be an employee...termination. This is a horrible, volatile place to spend every day of your life...and Marx says it goes back even to our roots as human beings. We hate to be rejected...we're terrified of wearing the wrong color shirt or having the wrong haircut and then having our friends or our tribe cast us out into the wilderness alone. Capitalism insures that this is always the case for the worker. Now we can see a pattern emerging here right? What I mean is: Both of these critiques of capitalism are a result of how production... and therefore capital is the primary thing to strive for...and how that ignores and sort of dehumanizes the people that have to operate within it as workers. Again, like we talked about a couple episodes ago...to Marx...the working class is the exploited class. And he'd say not only is their emotional quality of life exploited like in these first two examples, but also their physical production. Marx believed that capitalism at it's core... was simply getting someone to do something for one price and then selling it to somebody else for a much higher price. And if you doubt this at all, Marx would probably ask you to take a look at the job you have right now. At some point in the process of getting that job you went in for an interview...landed the job and they told you how much they'd pay you to do the work...let's say \$40 an hour. Now at some level you realize that they are profiting off of the work that you're doing for them. If they weren't, they'd either pay you less or not hire you. Now all that they're doing there is getting you to do something for one price and then selling it to somebody else for a higher price...in other words...you're not getting paid what you're actually worth...just what you expect. The difference between what you're actually worth and what you

expect...well the companies have a name for this...it's called profit...but to Marx...he says that profit is just a euphemism for theft. While you at the bottom are working hard producing more than you get in your paycheck each week...a handful of people at the top of the business are getting way more than they produce. Marx says, why does the system have to be this way? Why do we necessarily HAVE to have a dynamic where a small handful of people control all the means of production and use that power to blackmail the working class? Are we destined to be this way forever? Is there perhaps another economic system we might be able to adopt that addresses this, maybe one that focuses on human prosperity exclusively as opposed to this capital stuff that claims to lead to prosperity? And on that same note Marx would ask...why in the world would we be so satisfied with this economic climate that's so volatile? Every morning when you turn on the TV you have some dude ringing a bell in New York City at the stock exchange...and these people sit around all day long tracking the volatility of the economy...dreading the idea of there being some horrific crash of the numbers that day. Oh what if the squiggly line goes down...NO! Oh good look it's going up! ... Every ten years we have a steep decline...maybe it fixes itself...maybe we sink into a depression where people are in bread lines suffering begging for work...we've been told that these ebbs and flows of the economy are just a natural part of the world...but Marx would say it's a hallmark of Capitalism. He'd say yeah, remember before when the problem was that we could make ENOUGH stuff? Well capitalism did it's job. It made our economy WAY more efficient and productive. The problem is, now we're making way too much and the disparity between what's being produced and what is being purchased eventually compounds and causes these huge volatile spikes. Now, I'm not sure if that theory shores up with what we think we know in modern economics, but the important part to Marx is that we've done something pretty amazing. We have actually created an economic climate that is SO productive and SO efficient...that in theory...no one EVER has to go without anything. What other economic system throughout history can claim to have done that? More importantly to Marx...we have more empty houses than homeless people. We have more cars in those unsold dealership overflow lots than we have citizens without reliable

transportation. In fact, Marx says...if we have this capacity to produce WAY MORE than we would ever need...there's MORE good news...not everyone has to work! Why NOT just sit home or explore hobbies and enjoy your life if you can. Why does everyone have to work? The human species has DONE IT! We've become so efficient...people get to go home early from work! The managers sending people home! Point is, we as members of this capitalistic society have been conditioned to think of this state of not working as a BAD thing. You know...the unemployment rate is really high this month. Marx would call it the freedom rate. And just think about that...when we elect a president and beg for them to get America back to work! Marx would see that as us begging to be put back in chains! Anyway, it should be pretty clear what Marx's position is given the similarities between these criticisms. It seems like there's two fundamental problems with capitalism in his eyes: one is that private individuals have the ability to own the means of production...which is a very small handful of people...and number two is that when you give people that level of power over an economic system, they're going to inevitably use that power to try to make the system work better in their favor. For example, the idea being that when a private individual owns a factory that has 500 employees...and they all of a sudden have the ability to go to Brazil and hire 500 people there for way cheaper than they're paying now, it's not surprising that they'd make that choice to move the factory and put all those other people out of work. Now on the other hand...to Marx...if that factory...if the means of production was controlled by the workers of the factory...they would never choose to move the factory to Brazil...they would never put themselves out of work or go without the tax revenue generated to fund their community's police force or fund their schools... Anyway, maybe I'm getting a little bit into future episodes. Speaking of future episodes...even though we're going to be talking about a lot of criticisms of Marx in future episodes, I feel like it would be wrong for me to not mention a few common ones right now...keep in mind we'll talk about many of these in more detail soon. One really common one is that everything Marx is saying is great on paper, but it's actually not realistic...its a horrible, delusional utopia when it's actually practiced. Another common one is that Marx fails to take into account human nature

well enough...that there will always be lazy people out there that don't want to work and that if we take away the capitalist structure...it saps them of any motivation to even marginally contribute to society. Another one is that not every job out there is going to have people ready and willing to do it simply because it's fulfilling to them. This isn't like the guy that makes the clock that's a representation of him...some jobs aren't going to have that luxury...like nobodies going to crawl into the sewer and unclog it because they...you know...see a piece of themselves represented in the overflowing fecal matter. Who's gonna do THOSE jobs Karl Marx? Marx would have responses to all of these, but the main thing he would say back to them is probably that...at least...the effects caused by these problems are manageable. Now compare these to the problems caused by capitalism. The disdain that individuals are conditioned to have towards each other because they see them all as in competition with them. The terrible effects on the environment because of the ceaseless desire to keep producing and consuming more and more beyond our means. The massive income disparity where the top 70 people in the world have more than the bottom three billion combined...many of them dying of starvation, dehydration or curable diseases. I think Marx would say...look at the problems we're satisfied with contending with as an alternative. This episode was a huge test for me...and I hope it was as interesting to you as it was difficult to write. Expect a new episode very soon. I'm back for real this time. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

This is a transcript of episode #081 on Marx. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Austrians and Marx

Episode #082

This is a transcript of episode #082 on The Austrian School of Economics. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Hello everyone, I'm Stephen West, This is Philosophize This! No sponsor this week. [Patreon.com/philosophizethis](https://patreon.com/philosophizethis) if you want to keep the show going, we also have the Amazon banner if you're buying something from there anyway...Hope you love the show today, let's get onto the program. So last week we talked about all kinds of stuff...we talked Karl Marx and the glaring problems he saw there being with Capitalism...we talked about the political ideology he prescribed as a solution to those problems...we talked about me...and how after 81 episodes I finally needed to come clean with everyone...although I don't believe in a world of forms or a near infinity of tiny monads that make up the fabric of reality or an even evil demon...whose constantly trying to deceive me...apparently I'm a Marxist through and through...but the good news is today we're going to be talking about the counterpoints to the things I believe in so dearly...were going to be talking about the critiques of Marx that you Capitalist pigs have been throwing in my face for my entire life... In fact...something I've noticed as a closet Marxist over the years...ok I'll stop...you guys get the point. Whenever somebody has a problem with something that Marx says...they can disagree with the guy on a number of different levels...but it's usually in one of two places. They either disagree with Communism...as a political ideology. Or they disagree with the economic inferences that Marx makes...you know the way he viewed markets, how they work, people within markets...etc. But one important thing to understand before we move forward and talk about all the different thinkers over the years that have spent decades of their life trying to prove to people that Marx is wrong...is that a good way to organize all of these criticisms of Marx is to understand that there is a very REAL connection between the

beliefs that Marx held about economics, and the political ideology that he created and espoused. It's actually really interesting to think about how it relates to us...how the beliefs that we have about how economic systems work are often directly related to who we are willing to vote for in an election. I mean if that is true...think about how important economics is. Think about how important it is for us to have an understanding of the history of economics. Maybe this is a little too hypothetical...for example...imagine you're a card carrying Marxist living in the United States in the year 2016...like me...imagine you have two presidential candidates to choose from...Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump. Well if your economic views are that Capitalism is a fundamentally immoral system based on theft and exploitation of the worker...you're probably going to have a hard time going to the ballot box and voting for a Capitalist like a Donald Trump. I mean, no matter how many other issues you may agree with him on...just given the global, economically driven world that we live in...how can you ever justify theft and exploitation of everyone... in the name of progressing a few single issues you agree with the guy on. What I'm saying is: you may look at the last couple episodes and think that this has turned into an economics podcast. You know, I'm changing the name to Monetize This! now. My point is: given the world that we live in, our views on economics are the foundation of many of the values that we hold..not the least of which might be the political ideology that we end up voting for. Understanding the economic theory of our day...massively helps us in understanding the political philosophy of our day. Now back to the people disagree with Marx, usually in two broad categories right? Communism and his economic beliefs...well if we look at it in terms of these two main categories of disagreement that people have...this square of opposition starts to emerge... where each type of disagreement represents one side of the square. One side of the square would be people that agree with Marx's economic views, but disagree with Communism. You know, they agree with the criticisms Marx is making of capitalism, it's just that Communism is not the best solution to those problems. Now, another side of the square would be people that agree with the ideology of Communism, but disagree with Marx's economic views. You know they'd say, Marx, bless his heart he lived and wrote all this

stuff in the mid-1800's...we've come a long way since then in our understanding of economics...Communism IS the correct solution to the problem... but we need to make some tweaks to the way HE thought about economics in the 1800s. His solution was correct...his premise was not. Now obviously another side of the square would be people that just agree with him...they agree with both his economics AND political ideology...but then the last side of the square would be the opposite...people that disagree with both...his economics and political ideology. And the people we're going to be talking about today fall into this last category. But it's interesting...because its the ECONOMIC inferences that Marx makes that sets the foundation for why Communism needs to be implemented...one thing that comes as a byproduct of that is that if you are able to refute the economic theory of Marx...At that point...you're able to kill two birds with one stone. It sort of cuts the legs out from underneath communism. At that point Communism becomes just a really interesting...abstract theory about how society might be organized...if we...happened to live...in a completely different universe where that's actually how economics worked! Just like Plato's Republic or Augustine's City of God or Francis Bacon's New Atlantis...let's take all these zany ideas...and put them next to Dr. Seuss FAR AWAY from the non-fiction section of the library. Point is: this is why this collection of people that we're talking about today spent a lot of time trying to refute the ECONOMIC philosophy of Marx... as opposed to the political philosophy. Now, if you were one of these people...commissioned with the task of finding fault in Marx's economics...a really good place to start...one of the cornerstones of his thought that we talked about last time is the notion that profit...is theft. Profit is a euphemism for the exploitation of the worker...Capitalism is not just wrong as an economic theory...it is a fundamentally immoral system because it allows for the worker who is producing a certain amount of value for an employer...just like the slaves in chattel slavery...just like the peasants of the feudal system...the worker in a capitalist society is paid less than the value they're producing for that employer...the discrepancy between these two values being to Marx...the equivalent of strong arm robbery. Why does it have to be this way? But therein lies an assumption, doesn't it...aren't we assuming there...that it's

possible to objectively and consistently estimate the true value of someone's labor? Tons of questions arise...like, let's say we wanted to pay a worker EXACTLY what they produce in value...where do we get that number from? How do we even know what they're worth in the first place...is the value they're producing always the same...does it never fluctuate? If it does fluctuate...should we pay them less that week and more next week? Not to mention, how do we even know where to start when it comes to WHAT we should pay these workers? Just as a thought experiment for a second..think about the value a worker provides...now think about it in terms of an increment other than dollars and cents...just like a dollar bill...a bag of charcoal has a certain amount of value...how many bags of charcoal should I pay you for eight hours of your work? The bigger question is: how do we even know what a bag of charcoal is worth? Well finding an answer to all of these more specific questions is ultimately based on our answer to a much more SIMPLE question in economics. And because it's such a simple question...I think intuitively to us it may SEEM like there must be a very simple ANSWER to this question...but history I guess has proven otherwise. And the question is this: what determines the value of anything? How do we know what to charge for something at all...how do the great philosophers Bob Barker and Drew Carrey just conveniently always seem to know the exact cost of a Swiffer. Well before there was ever the Price is Right...there was paradox within economics...a famous paradox that dates back generation after generation that practically every economic philosopher has taken a crack at in some capacity: it's called the diamond/water paradox. It goes like this: water is an absolutely essential part of human life. We're made out of the stuff. Seven days without water...you're dead. Ok, so knowing that...why is it that water is so cheap and a diamond costs thousands and thousands of dollars. I don't NEED a diamond. I mean, personally I like to have them in the giant crucifix I wear around my neck, but that's just more so I can be accepted by my hip hop counterparts...I NEED water to survive, but for some reason it costs next to nothing for me to get a glass of water. Why is it that a diamond costs so much more than a glass of water? Well Marx thought... like many before him... probably put most articulately by David Ricardo, "The value of a commodity, or the quantity of any other

commodity for which it will exchange, depends on the relative quantity of labour which is necessary for its production, and not as the greater or less compensation which is paid for that labour." In other words, the reason why a diamond costs so much more than a glass of water is because it takes much more labor to produce one diamond... than to produce one glass of water. I mean, to make a diamond you have to fly to some diamond mine, put on one of those helmets with a flashlight, risk life and limb navigating the bowels of the mine, hammer a diamond out of the wall, fly home, cut it, polish it, set it...it takes a lot more labor to do that than to just go down to the nearest fresh water source and scoop up a glass of water for someone. This is what's known as the Labor Theory of Value...or that the value of a commodity is directly related to the amount of labor that it took to produce. Now, Marx has his own nuanced brand of it but he would say that although you can definitely find exceptions to that rule, the exceptions can be explained away and that the vast majority of the time it is true. As you can imagine...this Labor Theory of Value...and how the value....is based on someones labor...this becomes a really important part of Marx's philosophy and a crucial part of his idea that profit is theft. So if you're somebody that's trying to refute that point...a great place to start is by trying to refute the Labor Theory of Value. Now right around this time in history there's three big economic thinkers that are trying to refute this Labor Theory of Value: There was Leon Walras from Switzerland, William Jevons from England, and a man named Mr. Karl Menger who was from Austria and would eventually be known as the first big thinker of the Austrian School of Economics. That's who we're talking about today: the great Austrian Economists and their critiques of Marx. So the first thing you gotta do... if you want to destroy the labor theory of value is to come up with another answer to that diamond/water paradox. I mean, if it's not the amount of labor required that determines what something's worth...what is it? Now what a lot of people do here is say: no! it's not the amount of labor that makes something valuable...it's the law of supply and demand! You guys all know about supply and demand...you know theres a demand for something...if the demand increases over the supply....blah blah supply and demand. An Austrian Economist would say, well that's definitely PART of it...but it can't be the whole

story because we see exceptions to that rule all the time... Think about Las Vegas, Nevada. A glimmering jewel in the middle of a barren desert. The chance of fortune and great spectacles await you...unfortunately what also awaits you are seven dollar bottles of water. What's even more shocking is that people regularly pay...seven dollars...for a bottle of water. So, is a bottle of water seven dollars because of a scarcity of water? Even though Las Vegas is in the middle of the desert...is there a scarcity of bottles of water that's causing the price to be that high? Is Aquafina delivering water at maximum capacity to Las Vegas, or do the vendors have a dozen cases of water in the back that just aren't on the shelves yet? Point is: the Austrians would say that the value of something can't be based SOLELY on supply and demand...it can't be that simple...and to understand what they think is missing from that theory, let's look at the diamond water paradox again, but this time let's not do it from the, comfy sleeping bag of Las Vegas, Nevada or modern civilization...now let's do it and pretend we're stranded in the middle of the Sahara desert. What changes? Well, we've all heard the adage...we're stranded on the desert island...I have a cheeseburger and you have a million dollars...who is richer? Well this is the sentiment the Austrian Economists are expressing here. When you're in the middle of the desert severely dehydrated and somebody asks you which you'd pay more for...a diamond or a glass of water, obviously the answer is going to be a glass of water. The Austrians would say that what you're doing there is making a subjective judgment about the value of a glass of water. See in that particular context...a glass of water is way more valuable than a diamond...however if for some reason you could teleport back to your house in that moment...it wouldn't be very long at all before you would change your mind and say the diamond is more valuable. What does this mean? It means that the value of a commodity isn't based on something objective like the amount of time it took for someone to produce it or the scarcity of the item...but on the conglomeration of individuals making subjective value judgments based on whatever particular set of circumstances they're in. The level of value of an item is the gap, or margin that an individual assigns to how valuable it would be to have one more of that item in those circumstances. If we're sitting at home on the couch with the kitchen sink

not far away from us, the value of water or the margin that the individual assigns to having one additional glass of water is really small. In the middle of the desert...that gap, or margin is massive. This is better known as the subjective theory of value. I keep peppering the word "margin" in there because that's what this type of economics is called "marginalism". You know it's often said by economists that the idea of this subjective margin is really appealing to the average person. You can kind of see why...it takes economics away from theory and mathematical equations and it makes it something very human. Ultimately, it's individuals that are making these decisions about how valuable something is...and what they decide the value is... is based on any number of factors...the time period or culture they live in...their level of hydration or hunger in that moment...how they feel about the brand they're buying from...even whether they got eight hours of sleep last night. It makes it all feel very human. But let's slow down for a second...let's keep in mind what the Austrians were originally trying to refute here...remember...it was Marx's idea that profit is theft. No question, if we think of this as a war that the Austrians are waging on the idea that profit is theft...no question the first attack that they launched in this war was on the Labor Theory of Value, but even if we're willing to grant that the subjective theory of value is a knockdown argument to the labor theory of value...this certainly doesn't do away entirely with the idea that profit is another word for the exploitation of workers, right? Really, all the subjective theory of value accomplishes here is to make it so that we don't have this really neat package of: the value that a worker produces is equivalent to their labor and that we should pay workers the total value of what they produce. Again, if we accept the subjective theory of value, it does away with the FIRST part of that statement... the value that a worker produces is equivalent to their labor...but it doesn't explain why we shouldn't pay workers the total value of what they produce. A Marxist would say: even if we accept that your new theory totally refutes the labor theory of value...the question still remains: Why is it ok for a capitalist that controls the means of production to pay workers less than the value they produce and take the rest for themselves? What an Austrian Economist would probably say back to that question is that the problem is that it assumes that the laborers

aren't already being paid for the value of their capacity to work. They'd say...who gave that worker that job in the first place? The employer...that heartless capitalist that started the company...and what did they do initially? Well they found an empty plot of land that wasn't producing anything...and they BUILT...from the ground up with their bare hands...the means of production that they control. They've taken an empty, unproductive plot of land and they've transformed it into a bustling factory where hundreds of people are able to make money and provide for themselves and their families. Now, let's not gloss over that process...to make this factory it took that person ingenuity, a tremendous amount of risk, knowledge of the marketplace, hard work, vision, perseverance, being at the right place at the right time...through all of this sacrifice, this capitalist has created essentially a magnifying glass of value. A place where people can not only work and make a living, but also because they have access to this factory and the equipment inside of it and all of the efficiency that comes along with it...these workers are able to produce much more value in one hour of work than they otherwise would be able to if the factory didn't exist. The sacrifice that the capitalist made to make this magnifying glass of a worker's value... coupled with the ceaseless struggle that they have to contend with of maintaining the factory and the equipment and employee morale and making sure the factory next door doesn't put them and all of the people that work at the factory out of a job...just like a worker gets paid a wage to do THEIR job and produce a certain amount of value at the factory...profit is really just the wage that the capitalist is being paid to magnify and sustain all of this additional value their sacrifice is providing. Of course they get paid more...without them...everyone would be out of work. Now a Marxist might hear this and argue back, well that doesn't really tell the whole story. That really only explains the profit of capitalists that are actively out there taking risks, building factories and providing jobs to people. What about idle capitalists? What about Scrooge McDuck? What about people that have all of their money in a bank earning interest...or better yet...publicly traded companies have shareholders that own a certain percentage of the company. It's customary at the end of the quarter to send the shareholders checks in the mail known as quarterly dividends. A

Marxist might ask: why is that guy getting a check in the mail? That guy never stepped FOOT in a factory...did that money just appear out of thin air? Where is that money coming from if not the exploited labor of somebody else? And in keeping with your previous example about how the capitalist sacrificed so much to earn that "wage" that you call profit...what did that guy sacrifice? What sitting around all day watching a line go up and down? The Austrians have a really interesting response to this question...they'd say that these shareholders ARE sacrificing something...and it comes back to their subjective theory of marginal value. But in this case...instead of the subjective value being changed by something like...being in the middle of the desert...this time the value is altered because of the way that people look at the value of something in relation to time. We seem to value things available to us immediately more than we value things that are available to us in the future. Real world example: let's say you needed a pair of running shoes...so you go on Amazon.com and find some that you like and get to the checkout screen and you're left with a choice. You can pay \$80 for the shoes to be delivered to you in three days...or you can pay \$80 for the shoes to be delivered to you in three years. Which do you choose? Keep in mind...it's the same pair of shoes...you're still getting an \$80 pair of shoes in three years...you just have to wait three years to get them. The Austrians would say it's not that crazy to think that your subjective value of shoes now vs. shoes three years from now would be different. You wouldn't pay as much for the shoes in three years...and why should you? Think of the opportunity cost! Imagine all the days over those three years you could've been smiling, running through the park in your new shoes like you're on a commercial for rheumatoid arthritis and someone's reading the long list of side effects! Imagine what could've been. Now take that same psychology about the purchase of the shoes on Amazon and apply it to the capitalists that just have their money sitting in a bank earning interest or investing in companies. Companies go out of business all the time...not ten years ago every bank in this country almost went out of business...and their money is only federally insured up to \$250,000. These people are assuming a great risk, and for what? What is their money doing? Banks are loaning it out to people to make their dreams come true...so they can buy their dream house...so

someone can open up that hot dog stand they always wanted to...so someone can buy a car and have reliable transportation to be able to contribute to society. Their money is just sitting there. Making the world a better place...and think of the opportunity cost on THEIR end. They've already made their money. They're forgoing consumption now for consumption later. They could theoretically pull every penny out of the bank and take a party bus to Macau, China and consume, consume, consume...spend every penny they ever made. Just like you would have to sacrifice three years of potential running days in the park with your new shoes...these people have to sacrifice years of having that money in the bank instead of buying something else...the Austrians would ask...why isn't it fair that their sacrifice should be honored with a little interest? One final point...and by the way so much of what makes up Austrian economics is a set of claims about how the world works...it goes much deeper than this episode this is really just some interesting points on how they thought they refuted Marx...if you guys like the subject matter obviously we can do more on it in the future...but anyway probably one of the most interesting ideas to me that comes out of Austrian economics is the idea that prices...are not only a number on the shelf in the supermarket...but purveyors of knowledge about the state of things all over the world. Here's what they mean by that: the great Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek has a really famous example that talks about the importance of the prices of things that we buy where he talks about a tin shortage. Just to summarize it briefly, he says that we are human beings that understand there's not an infinite supply of anything...we have a finite number of resources on this planet to harvest during our time here and that because of that fact, in a perfect world if the supply of one of those resources started to run out...it stands to reason that we would want people to use less of it and find other alternatives. Now let's say for example that the supply of tin started to run out...well we have a problem: how do we get the information to EVERYONE in the world that...hey! we're running out of tin here! Slow down! Getting this message out is a logistical nightmare though. It's not like everybody watches the same TV station or even watches TV. So how do we reliably get that message out? Well Hayek and many others say that this is one of the great things about the price system. You don't have to find a way to go

door to door and keep everyone updated on this week's scarcity report...no the price system sends the message to the people that matter: the consumers interested in consuming things made out of tin! Tin farmers start to charge more for their tin...tin foil companies start to charge more for their tin foil and when someone goes to the supermarket and has to choose between foil made out of tin or foil made out of aluminum...they don't even need to know WHY there's a tin shortage...the price informs them of what's going on in the world of tin. Now the reason this point matters when it comes to Marx is that Hayek would argue that the ONLY way the price system works and delivers this information to consumers is if it is functioning in a system where private property is protected and can be freely exchanged. If nobody owns anything, if people aren't making mutually beneficial exchanges with other people...how can price possibly reflect the true value of something? This extends into the means of production...if the means of production aren't privately owned entities conducting exchanges with other entities that are privately owned...how can they ever get this wealth of information that the pricing system gives us when we're in a system that doesn't denounce private property rights like Marx does? Price is a purveyor of information. Again, much more Austrian stuff to come, but the ideas we talked about on this episode are probably the most relevant to Marx. Hope you guys loved the show and have some food for thought. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Henry David Thoreau

Episode #083

This is a transcript of episode #083 on Henry David Thoreau. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

Henry David Thoreau was an American author and philosopher who in the year 1845 resigned himself from public life to a shack, in the woods, next to a lake...for two years, two months and two days of his life. Why? Well if you wanted to get a little closer to finding out why... might not be a bad idea to visit the actual shack that he lived in! You can do it! Well, it's a replica shack...they rebuilt the shack...but you CAN visit the actual site where he built his shack before it got torn down...they found the hearth or the bottom of the fireplace buried just under the dirt and from there they extrapolated where the rest of the cabin had to have been...but the fact remains...to this day... you can go to concord Massachusetts and stand on the exact spot where Thoreau stood...you can see the actual views that he writes about...you can close your eyes and listen and if you can drown out the sound of the SUVs and motorcycles passing by just behind you can hear many of the same things he heard. Let's say you did it. Let's say you did visit Walden Pond in today's world...what you'd see...are narrow trails... fairly dense woods all around you...and when you approached the actual site where Thoreau built his cabin you'd come to a clearing and you'd see a big piece of wood staring you in the face...and etched into this piece of wood is one of the most iconic lines from his famous account of his time out there and it goes like this: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Do you ever worry about that? Do you ever worry about what he's talking about here? Waking up one morning...50 60 years old and having an epiphany about life that had been staring you in the face your

whole life and if only you had done things just a little differently you would have realized it when you were twenty and not wasted decades of your life? Well I do. I worry about that stuff all the time. Kind of a strange thing to worry about...the worry doesn't really solve anything...all it really does is keep you motivated to keep thinking about life and your place in the world so that at least if you DO wake up 60 years old and realize you've wasted it all...at least you put in all the work you could have. Well, Thoreau seems to be of a similar mindset...he wants to live deliberately...which it seems by that quote is a very active process and he wants to do this...so that he doesn't come to the end of his life and realize that he never lived at all. Now, I don't think many people would disagree that they don't want to come to the end of their life and feel like they wasted it...the confusion that most people have about that quote is his method of achieving that. Yeah, I don't want to waste my life either...but when I'm brainstorming all the ways I'm gonna try to prevent that from happening...I don't arrive at the conclusion that we should go camping for two years. Why would Thoreau go to the woods to accomplish that? Well make no mistake...the lessons that Thoreau learned in this little unassuming cabin of his would go on to change the lives of untold numbers of people, not to mention his own. But to understand why he landed on the woods...in particular...I want to briefly talk about two things that are going to help set the stage...one is the psychology of Thoreau living during the time that he did...and the other is the approach to life commonly known as Transcendentalism. So let's get right into it: long before Thoreau ever decided to isolate himself at Walden Pond...he knew he didn't really fit in...with the rest of the kids on the playground. He just didn't think about things the same way as the average person that was living back then. And you'll find example after example of this if you just take a quick look at his life. For example, Thoreau had just graduated from college...went to Harvard...and he must of been under a tremendous amount of pressure from himself...his family to make this degree he just worked so hard for to actually do something for him...and he gets a job as a school teacher. Well the policy of the school at the time...what the majority of the community of people he was serving wanted him to do if the kids start misbehaving is to use corporal punishment to keep them in line.

Thoreau, living during a time when that kind of thing was acceptable...didn't like it...so he quit his job. Thoreau was a conservationist during a time when we didn't have grisly images of evil corporations sawing down acres of trees leaving pandas with no where to live. He saw the environmental writing on the wall before most people even realized it could POTENTIALLY be a problem. Thoreau was a huge opponent of slavery...during a time when people owned slaves all around him and weren't being morally denounced for doing so. Point is: given where society has gone since his day and age...Thoreau seemed to be way ahead of his time. But whether he KNEW he was right or wrong or not...he still has to live in a world surrounded by people that don't see any problem with this stuff. Now this raises a very important question if you're Thoreau...what do you do about it? What do you do about the fact that you live in a society that endorses all kinds of stuff that you think is immoral? Not an easy question to answer...after all...you're just one citizen...why are you so special? Should the rest of the country have to bend to your will so that you get what you want? And the extension of that is...democracy is majority rule...do you have an obligation to your fellow citizens to go along with what the majority has deemed to be morally acceptable? On the other hand, you might feel the exact opposite! You might feel like if you see something going on that you think is wrong...you might feel like you have an obligation to NOT keep quiet. You need to stand up for what you believe in and change the world! This was not an easy question to answer for Thoreau early in his life. But then something changed. Then it became really easy to answer that question...probably the strongest conviction Thoreau held throughout the latter stages of his life. And the seed that was planted...that would eventually grow into this strong belief about the answer to this question...was when Thoreau read an essay that was written by a good friend of his named Ralph Waldo Emerson...and the title of this essay was Self-Reliance. Self Reliance was an essay that called for everyone who read it to understand the importance of being, well...self reliant. But maybe a better way of putting it is that it called on people to understand the value of being an individual. Emerson writes: "There comes a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for

better, for worse, as his portion.” What Emerson is saying here is that as a human being, we’re born into this very unique condition where we need to find out who we are. We need to find out what we care about...what kind of person were going to be...what sort of legacy we’re going to leave behind us. The problem is...none of us are born with a full understanding of what that’s going to be...so an alluring trap that people fall into is to look around them and just conform to the way that other people act. Certainly gives you a quick and easy answer to the question of what you’re going to be...unfortunately...as Emerson says...imitation is suicide...you going around doing your best imitation of what the people around you are doing in the interest of avoiding a difficult conversation with yourself...is effectively suicide...suicide of your individuality. No, self-reliance preaches a sort of radical non-conformity. Anyone who just blindly believes anything that’s told to them or just blindly goes along with whatever people are doing around them...are foolish to Emerson. Maybe the best way to do this crazy thing called life...is to figure it out for yourself...go out and find your OWN way. See, Thoreau and Emerson are living in a world where advances in science and philosophy show that this thing that we call objective truth...is a pretty slippery thing to define...if not entirely impossible for us to ever arrive at. So as a response to this...what Transcendentalism does...and self-reliance espouses Transcendentalist ideas...is it takes ideas from all over the world at various different points throughout history...There are ideas from Romanticism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Vedism, even further east to Confucianism...it takes all these ideas and creates an approach to life that’s not just about living wisely...but that ultimately that wisdom is something that you as an individual need to arrive at yourself...that inside of everyone there is a genius of sorts...the infinitude of the individual as Emerson writes...and that maybe you should trust your own thought...more than the thought of people that are considered “wise” by other people around you...maybe what we should all be aiming for is not objective truth about the way things are...but a personal truth about the way things are. Now at this point a certain type of person starts nodding emphatically...slowly clapping. Yes. What’s true for me...is not true for you. This is MY truth. Yes, I believe that the ghost of a witch that was wrongly convicted in the 1700’s is

haunting the property lines of my house...but that's MY truth. I'm impervious to criticism! No, it shouldn't be like this. It shouldn't be some get out of jail free card to not take the process seriously and then wave it around whenever someone tries to tell you what you believe is ridiculous. No doubt it will be used this way...but the point of the personal truth is to accept the illusive nature of objective truth and show who the onus is truly on....YOU! This truth is yours and yours alone...the only people it should affect should be you and the people you care about...think of how important your personal pursuit of truth becomes in that world. Now if this is what you believe...one of the things that naturally goes along with that...is that one of the worst things you can do is just look around you... see how other people are acting... and just blindly copy whatever it is they're doing. You're not working to try to figure it out on your own...you're not trying to arrive at a better personal truth with that strategy...you're just trying to get by. You're just killing time in a waiting room...but for what? What are you killing time and waiting for...death? Ralph Waldo Emerson thinks that "society is in conspiracy against the manhood of its members"...and what he means by that is that civilization...these societies that we live in with our cities and our culdesacs and our farmers markets and all these activities that have us in close quarters with each other bound together by a social contract...these things PROMOTE this mentality of being a passive, quiet, drone that just conforms with everything going on around them and is protected from the baptism of having to take your views about the world to task. In other words, the same way society protects the physically lazy...it also protects the mentally lazy. Society, for all the good stuff it seemingly does for us...it may be the BIGGEST boulder in the way if you're truly someone that wants to try to live deliberately. This is why...Thoreau removes society from his life. And it wasn't long after he read Emerson's self reliance that he went to his friend Emerson and asked if he could live in a shack on his property in concord Massachusetts...at which point Emerson said...what have I done...look when i wrote the essay i didn't really anticipate everyone coming and wanting to live on MY property...it was more of like a personal property thing...like your PERSONAL truth. Just kidding he let him. Now as you can imagine, this move to the wilderness seems like it must have

been a pretty big shock to Thoreau's system...i mean, to go from all of the comforts of modern living to just having a desk a couple chairs and a bed...must have been a pretty rough adjustment phase, right? Well the reality was...no...it was actually kind of nice. See, Thoreau realized something as he was thinking about all the ways society is in "conspiracy against the individuality of its members." He realized the more you own...the more your stuff owns you. He said we often find ourselves not totally happy...not feeling a strong sense of self worth...we think about what we think might bring us that self worth...and a trap that a lot of people fall into is they look OUTSIDE of themselves for the answers to whats going on on the inside of themselves. He says we tell ourselves this lie that oh, if only i get that new pair of shoes or if only I get that car I want then everything's going to be great! But he says what we should realize...is that even if you were trapped like a lost hiker underneath an avalanche of new shoes...YOU would still be there. All of the negative mental holding patterns that contribute to that lack of self worth are still there...you just now have a nike symbol imprinted into your forehead. This goes beyond just stuff by the way...it's interesting he and Emerson talk about how people often do this with travel. You know they say whats going to finally make me feel right? When I can travel the world and meet all kinds of people and see these different cultures...that's what's gonna fix it. But just like the other example...he says whether you're in China or Russia or India or where ever...the common thread in all three of those examples...is you. The solution to your problem is inside of you...not a lack of some special thing outside of you. And this is just one of the many lessons he learns by removing society from his life and just opening his eyes to what's going on around him in nature. This is one of the hallmarks of Thoreau's work: there's a wisdom in nature...if you're creative and can spot it. There's a beautiful passage where he talks about...you know...what happens when a chestnut and an acorn fall on the ground right next to each other in the dirt? Does one of them yield to the other one? Does one decide to just not grow so the other one can grow? No, they both live in accordance with their respective natures until one day one of them overpowers the other one and it dies...one things for sure...regardless of whatever adversity was thrown that chestnut's way...it was a chestnut

through and through until the day it died. Not some facsimile of an acorn or a juniper bush or a geranium...it was a chesnut...and in that sense...we as people can learn a lot from that chestnut about how to live life. You know, personally...something I use as a means of cultivating acceptance about things that are out of my control is actually a reworking of an idea Thoreau had in Walden! You know, I live in the Pacific Northwest and if there's something there's a lot of up here it's meth and trees. So no matter what direction I'm facing...pretty good chance there's always going to be a tree within eyeshot. Think of trees not as plants for a second...think of them as living things that have been around for hundreds and hundreds of years. Now how do you survive for hundreds and hundreds of years...you gotta be doing something right. Well consider the fact that 24 hours a day seven days a week...while you're sleeping...working...watching Netflix...constantly...these trees are met with the ceaseless onslaught of the elements. Rain, wind, snow, lightning...here are these wise elders...these living things that deal with that adversity...constantly...and how do they do it? They sway. They sway in the wind. Gently back and forth. If they resist it too much, they break...if they don't resist enough they have no foundation...they have no roots. What a cool metaphor for how we might approach the ceaseless onslaught of adversity the world throws our way. Anyway, I highly recommend Walden pond if this stuff fascinates you, but Thoreau accomplished his goal when he was out there for two years. He comes back to society looks around him and more clearly than ever before sees not individuals, but passive, ignorant subjects that constantly seek for others to define who they are in exchange for the crumbs of security that society provides them. He says man, isn't it crazy...that when people are given the freedom to be anyone they want to be...they end up just acting like everyone else. This isn't life...this is the opposite of life...he says a scarecrow can do everything these people are doing...but this is what the tendency is when we all decide to congregate around each other and conform to society. "Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor." I guess another upside to Thoreau spending

all this time away from people its that he found an answer to that question we talked about at the beginning of the episode...you know whether we're obligated to keep quiet and be respectful of the majority, or whether we're obligated to speak up and change things for the better. Well you can probably guess his answer to this now...of course we should speak up! We should never just passively go along and conform to what people are doing around us. Now this in itself is far from a novel concept...but what IS novel...probably the most influential idea given to us by Henry David Thoreau...one that would go on to shape the hunger strikes of India and Mahatma Ghandi...it would go on to shape the civil rights movement in America and countless other movements...it wasn't THAT we should stand against society if it doesn't stand for what is morally right...but HOW we should go about standing up to society. He wrote a book called "civil disobedience"...the opening line of which cites the quote "the government that governs best, governs least." now often misattributed to Thomas Jefferson. But keep in mind...what Thoreau is saying there is not that the smallest government is the best government...he's saying the government should be as simple as possible, but not any simpler and not any more complex than is necessary. See Thoreau realized that majority rule is by its very nature coercive to the individual. This wouldn't be that big of a deal if it didn't force that individual to live in a society that doesn't go along with their conscience or beliefs. "... the government does not concern me much, and I shall bestow the fewest possible thoughts on it. It is not many moments that I live under a government, even in this world. If a man is thought-free [free in his thinking], fancy-free, imagination-free, that which is not never for a long time appearing to be to him, unwise rulers or reformers cannot fatally interrupt him." In other words, as long as you're living a life that corresponds with your conscience and beliefs about things...nothing can really bother you! So how do we accomplish that given the unfortunate state of affairs that the coercive nature of majority rule often forces us to not live that life...what do we do about it? Well if you're expecting Thoreau to say to grab your pitchforks and head down to city hall...you got another thing coming. In fact, he doesn't even think it's your duty to actively lobby for change much at all. "It is not a man's duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to

the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man's shoulders. I must get off him first, that he may pursue his contemplations too." So Thoreau's position here is even more nuanced than just "stand up for what you believe in and write a letter to your congressman!" No, he makes it really clear at multiple points in Civil Disobedience...look I have a lot of other stuff to do...I didn't come into this world to make this a good place to live in...but simply just to live in the world as an individual...whether that's a good place or a bad place. So the question then becomes, if it happens to be a bad place when you're here...how can the individual still continue to live freely and deliberately... without having to feel morally guilty by association to all of these bad things going on? Thoreau's answer to this question is Civil Disobedience. He asks a really interesting question at the beginning of the book: why do we necessarily need to have the government meddling in issues of morality? Look the government has a lot of stuff on their plate in addition to having to be the moral arbiter of the United States Thoreau would say...they gotta fix our crumbling roads and bridges...they have to collect taxes...why not give them a break? Better question is: why is the government in the business of legislating morality? The government's great at doing some stuff...maybe not so much when it comes to morality. Thoreau seems to think that the government "has not the vitality and force of a single living man." No the individual is central to any progression...and this centrality of the individual is one of the most profound ideas he'd ever give us: in the same way if you're feeling really bad on the inside...the solution is going to come from you as an individual, not some outside intervention...so too in issues of morality...it's the INDIVIDUAL that is central to reform...not government intervention or coercion. Best thing we can do?...to Thoreau? Non-violent protest. Now living in an age where we've seen non violent protest play out so seamlessly over the years...it may be tough to put ourselves in the shoes of the people living back then where it wasn't an obvious option that they could go to in times of

political strife...but really...during this time and overwhelmingly throughout human history...the torch and pitchfork approach was the go to method if you wanted to get something done. Here's Thoreau offering a different solution. For example, Thoreau lived during the generation that gave rise to the Mexican-American war...now it was commonly seen at the time that this was a war not based on any sort of moral foundation...it wasn't a necessary war...it was a war waged for the economic expediency that came along with the eventual expansion of slave trading to a larger territory. Now if you're Thoreau...staunch opponent to slavery...how can you in good conscience pay taxes and support a system that is taking those tax dollars and waging a war that is nurturing the positive growth of slavery as an institution? Well you can't. So Thoreau...didn't. He stopped paying taxes in protest of the state getting involved in issues of morality that he thought it really had no business being a part of. The beauty of this is that if enough people follow suit, the state no longer has the resources to fund the Mexican-American war. Now the significance of this is: for this change to come...no one had to bomb city hall or punch anyone in the face or worst of all...start a hashtag...no this civil disobedience has brought about a "peaceable revolution". Yeah, Thoreau went to jail for not paying his taxes, but he didn't see that as being so much of a bad thing. In fact, he saw it as the only way to truly be an individual. Sure he could've pouted...paid his taxes...complained to everyone around him...publicly attacked the leadership of the war...but he'd be doing all of this...all the while he would be monetarily contributing to a system that didn't correspond with his conscience. It's really interesting as we talk about these different economic models and systems of government...no question we've talked about at least one that you don't agree with or that you think is immoral. Well try to put yourself in the shoes of Thoreau here: Thoreau...in a weird way...went to jail...in order to be truly free. Not the other way around. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

William James on Truth

Episode #084

This is a transcript of episode #084 on William James. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So it seems clear...we live in an age of empiricism. What I mean by that is that ...Science at it's core is an empirical...realm...ultimately any experiment you're gonna do as a scientist... is going to be a PERSON ...looking through something like a microscope with their eyes...or a person listening to wavelengths with their ears...this person's going to be organizing all of this information through very feeble and really a completely arbitrary set of mental faculties that they have...the hope being...that having done this science experiment with our senses...we'll be a little bit closer to knowing the way that things are in the universe....the truth!

We think about the truth that way...the truth is this objective thing out there exterior to humans...that we're trying to come into contact with...the way that things actually are...for example, if every human and every animal was eradicated from the planet tomorrow...and no sentient being was even attempting to try to find out what the truth was...it makes sense that in that universe there'd still be a way that things are...we're just not around at that point to try to access it.

But that's the thing...even if we WERE around to try to access it...the chips are stacked against us...We realize our senses are not the greatest tools you could ever have if you're trying to arrive at this TRUTH that's out there...that's the reason we USE things like microscopes and telescopes...to augment our senses and try to access this TRUTH out there. This sort of...cosmic Wikipedia that is fully filled out...now currently the best way we have to access this is through Science...but it didn't always used to be that way...

Let's all grab our togas and head back to antiquity for a second. Remember Plato's dialogues? Remember hearing about Socrates accosting people in the Athenian agora begging people to help him arrive at a better idea of what justice is...or what beauty is...and someone who was really confident that they understood what justice was would give Socrates an answer like, "oh, justice is the balancing of the scales. when someone or something wrongs you and takes something away, justice concerns itself with taking something away from that other party so that the scales of justice are balanced out again."...at which point socrates would execute socraticmethod.exe and would proceed to show them every exception to their rule in existence...the goal being to illustrate to them that they actually DON'T understand what justice is in its entirety, and that more thinking and more discussion about the subject needed to be had.

Now, Socrates didn't just do this with everyday people...he did it with his contemporary philosophers as well and if you remember, his reason for doing this...for trying to arrive at the end all be all ultimate definition of the concept of...for example...beauty or good...is that how can we ever begin philosophizing honestly about beauty...if we don't even fully understand what it is we're talking about? The hope was...if we just have enough of these intelligent conversations with each other talking about beauty...asking people for their definitions...finding the exceptions...refining the definitions...finding exceptions to those...that eventually we will have done it: we will have arrived at the true...objective definition of beauty!

Now if this is what you're doing...the primary assumption that you're operating under is that these objective definitions of things exist at all... and what we're left with after all these years we've been having these conversations is not a Webster's dictionary with the perfect definition of beauty in it...what we're left with are common figures of speech like, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." We say things like...each culture has their own set

of ethics...their own idea of what “good” is to them.

In other words...these concepts of Beauty and Good and many others...we don't think of them as nouns anymore...we think of them as adjectives. We don't think of them as an objective thing we're trying to access like Socrates did back in antiquity...we think of them as subjective value judgements that really just describe a particular type of experience that a human being is having in a particular moment. For example, when I say that a song is beautiful, What i'm talking about is a particular way that song makes me feel...a particular human experience that I'm having that that song is producing in me...I'm not talking about it being representative of some cosmically defined beauty that I've gained access to through pondering the concept of beauty.

What I'm saying is: Led Zeppelin is not inherently more beautiful than Justin Bieber...just as a class system is not inherently more “good” than egalitarianism. How good we think egalitarianism is or how beautiful we think Justin Bieber's music is largely comes down to a very subjective judgement that we're making based on all of the prior experiences we've had and what sort of feeling is evoked within our bodies...our human experience of something.

Well if you agree with the statement that beauty is in the eye of the beholder or that there is no cosmically defined “good” that we can arrive at...the guy we're gonna be talking about today would probably ask you the question: what if truth...was the exact same way. What if truth isn't some thing out there that we should be trying to access...what if truth is not a noun...but an adjective we use to describe a particular type of human experience?

Now on the surface this may seem pretty counterintuitive...so let's give some context so we understand where this guy's coming from. This guy...is william james...psychologist...philosopher...1842-1910...and what william james thought is that if

you look back throughout history at the different types of people and why they believe that certain things are true...they can mostly be broken down into being one of two types of people. Two types of people in the world: what he calls tender minded and tough minded.

Quick breakdown...these two types of people often find themselves falling into very predictable categories...a tough minded person is typically somebody that is skeptical...placing a high priority on something being proven for it to be true...a tough minded person tends to be more deterministic...not believing in things like free will...a tough minded person is more likely to be an Atheist...they prefer to learn things through experience rather than reasoning to conclusions.

Now a tender minded person would be the opposite of all those...a tender minded person prefers to learn about things A priori...by thinking about things rather than conducting experiments...a tender minded person tends to be more dogmatic...more willing to accept things to be true without a strong PROOF they can point to...they tend to be more religious, etc.

Now historically, William James would say...this has caused a great deal of tension.

When you have one of these tough minded people butting heads with one of these tender minded people and they're trying to arrive at a conclusion about what the truth is...not much productive conversation usually gets done...they usually can't even begin having a conversation at all because they disagree so fundamentally with what makes something true...how can they?

Well, William James thought the philosophical line of thinking known as pragmatism solved this problem and united the tender and tough minded. But before we can understand why James felt that way...we have to understand what's known as the Pragmatic maxim...an idea laid out initially by a friend of James' Mr. Charles Sanders

Peirce...and it begins like this:

Peirce asks the question: what is wrong with the following statement? A diamond is actually soft, and only becomes hard when it is touched. As opposed to the diamond just always being hard regardless as to whether we're touching it...What is wrong with that statement?

I mean really, how do you know that the diamond isn't soft when a human being's not touching it? How can you honestly prove that it's not? Now on the surface this may seem somewhat pedantic...but it's actually a good point he's making here.

The answer to that question what's wrong with that statement...is that...there's NOTHING wrong with that statement...nothing is FALSE about it... that's the whole point. Think about it...whether you believe that the diamond was soft until you touched it...or whether you believe that the diamond is hard in perpetuity...absolutely nothing changes about your experience of that diamond, how others will experience that diamond, whether you're able to put that diamond into a ring as a token of submission to your significant other/overseer. Nothing changes about how we experience that diamond at all...so our belief about this diamond and whether it was soft when we weren't touching it really ends up not mattering. And think about what that means...it doesn't matter if you believe that an invisible leprechaun is keeping that diamond hard...nothing changes about the way a human being orients themselves to it.

This is the pragmatic maxim...that the meaning of a concept...is the sensory effect of its object.

William James has a really famous example that I think illustrates the concept a little bit better...he says pretend you are walking through the woods and you come across a beautiful little squirrel clinging to the side of a tree...and it looks at you...and you make

eye contact...and the squirrel decides to scurry around the tree clinging from the bark on the other side of the tree as though it's trying to hide from you and you say no, no squirrel...i'm not done with you...that's a beautiful squirrel...i gotta see it again...so you sort of crane your neck trying to catch a glimpse of it's fluffy tail...you can't see it...so you begin walking in a circle around the tree trying to see it...but this squirrel has a vendetta...this squirrel isn't your show pony...it's not gonna trot around for your viewing pleasure...it decides...its gonna use its psychic powers to just always know where you are and its gonna just always stay on the opposite side of the tree that you're on. But you're not going down without a fight...you start running...as fast as you CAN around this tree...but the squirrel prevails...his plan is working...no matter how many times you go around...you can't see the squirrel.

Now here's the question: having circled the tree now four or five times...would you say that you had gone AROUND the squirrel? Seems like there's two ways you can think about it: you could say...yes...I've gone around the tree...the squirrel is in between me and the tree...of course i've gone around the squirrel i just didn't see it...or you could say...no...i didn't go around the squirrel it's face was always facing me the whole time. What would you say?

Well just like the diamond example...whether you think you DID go around the squirrel or DIDN'T go around the squirrel...neither of these accounts about what happened are actually "false statements"... it really just comes down to how you define "going around" the squirrel...if going around means passing to the north south east and west of the squirrel then yes we've gone around the squirrel...but if it means passing in front of, to the left right and then behind the squirrel...then no we haven't gone around the squirrel.

Point is: whether you believe you went around the squirrel or not...nothing changes about what actually happened in reality...you're still having the same human experience of that event. William James thought this goes beyond just vindictive squirrels in the

middle of the woods...us not understanding the practical definitions the other person is using for certain arguments leads us to disagree with people that actually agree with us about what is going on in reality. He said that so many of the disagreements that we have in philosophy or any of the natural sciences...are not really disagreements about reality, but debates about the specific words that are being used.

Now this leads us to the question: what IS reality? what IS truth? And if you were having this conversation with William James...he'd probably start by saying ok, let's talk about this popular concept of objective truth...let's establish a baseline here: no one listening to this actually believes in things because they think they are objectively true facts about the universe.

Even if you fancy yourself one of those skeptical, atheistic, tough minded people guided by the evidence and the evidence alone...even if you were the most tough minded person ever and you only believe in the most unbiased, repeatable, triple checked scientific synopsis of the way that things are...you still know that one day many of the things that you believe are gonna be replaced by better science...just look at history...the one constant of science is that it keeps improving upon itself...so in the sense that you don't believe in things because you think they're objective truths about the universe, but really just the closest facsimile of that truth available to you during the years you are alive...really you believe in the stuff you do because you see it as the most useful set of beliefs a person can have...it really has nothing to do with whether they're actually true or not. And as better science comes out and disproves one of your beliefs and gives you a more useful belief...one a little bit closer to that truth hopefully...you'll adjust your beliefs accordingly and believe in THAT useful belief.

This is what leads William James to make the claim that how truthful an idea is...comes down to how useful it is...or whether it serves the function it's meant to serve. He says...much like our belief about whether we actually went around the evil squirrel or

not...if we have a belief that doesn't contradict what we already know...and it serves the purpose of explaining the way that things are and predicts things well that are going to happen in the future...there's no reason NOT to consider it to be true. Again, think of truth NOT as a noun like Socrates did, but as an adjective describing a certain human experience that we have.

“True ideas are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as.

The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events. Its verity is in fact an event, a process, the process namely of verifying itself, its verification. Its validity is the process of its validation. “

So an idea is a “true” idea if it serves the purpose of giving us a particular useful human experience...just as a piece of artwork is “beautiful” if it serves the purpose of giving us a particular type of human experience. Now a common question people ask here is: okay, I'm on board with you when it comes to the inevitable progression of science...but what about things that are just true by virtue of definition. Like that a triangle has three sides or that all bachelors are unmarried...can't you say that these statements are just...true statements...objectively? You don't really need someone to have a useful human experience to be able to define these as true...William James would say...Those aren't “true” statements...they simply just are the case.

This is a really interesting part of James's philosophy...remember what were talking about whenever were talking about truth. What William James would say is that whenever we're talking about something being true...all that we can EVER be talking about is our human experience of some thing. Now, you may say well all he's doing there is switching the definition of truth! But it starts to make a lot more sense when you look

at this connection he thinks there is between belief and what he considers a true idea to be.

So for an idea to be true it needs to be useful...and for an idea to be useful...you actually have to believe in it. I mean, if you don't believe that the big bang was the event that marked the inception of the universe...how can it ever be an adequate or useful explanation to you? His point there is: you BELIEVING that something is true...is a huge factor in determining whether it's actually going to be useful to you or not. He gives an example of someone lost in the woods...they have no idea where they are...the only thing they really have to go on is this path that they're following. Now at this point that person can believe in a couple things, they can believe that the path is going to lead them back to safety and civilization...or they can believe the path is leading them deeper and deeper into the woods making their situation worse.

Now William James would ask: think of how your beliefs determine the outcome of that situation. On one hand, if you believe that the trail is leading you deeper into the woods getting you more lost...why follow it? Why not do nothing or walk in another random direction...the USEFUL way to use that belief is to not follow the trail. Maybe you stay lost out there for days and eventually starve to death. Now on the other hand...if you believe that the trail is going to lead you back to safety...think about it: just as we hold beliefs about science that are incredibly useful to us and we consider them to be true...even though in reality we're "figuratively speaking" effectively...lost in the woods our whole life...by believing that those scientifically founded beliefs are accurate...by believing that the path leads to safety...it becomes useful and therefore becomes true to William James.

This is his basis for the quote: "Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does."

Now let's clear some things up because I already know what many of you are saying: so

no matter WHAT I believe...no matter what idea I can come up with...as long as I act on it and it becomes useful to me...it's therefore is true?

Well, no... there are certain criteria that William James thinks need to be met by any belief for it to be considered justifiable...let's talk about them...one...is that there needs to be evidence in its favor. there needs to be some discernible thing that you can point to as evidence of why this is a reasonable idea...but James would say more realistically this usually manifests itself as...the majority of the evidence available to you during your time needs to indicate that it is true...

Two...the idea needs to be strong enough to be able to stand up to counterarguments. What he means is...If someone can just walk up to you, criticize the idea and leave you speechless in terms of an explanation...it's probably not passing the test.

Three...once you believe in the idea...the idea isn't just... off the hook at that point. It needs to keep proving its worth as something that is useful to you...and part of doing that is consistently predicting future results...if its not doing that...James Would say probably time to believe in something else that's a little more useful.

Now, the great thing about these three criteria, is that they account for both types of people...the tender minded AND the tough minded. They account for all different time periods...for people living in today's world or people living in medieval superstition. For example if you were living in Western Europe in the 1400s and you believed it to be true that the earth is flat...William James would say that even though we know now that it's a sphere...your belief that the earth was flat was a true belief back then because remember, truth is an adjective describing a specific type of human experience... the experience someone had with that belief back in the 1400's is the same as the experience we have today with the idea that the earth is a sphere.

Just to make this more clear...let's look at this example through the lens all three criteria so we can see how similar our experiences really are.

First criteria we need...evidence it is true.

Well, just as we would point to something like satellite imagery that shows that the earth is a sphere...someone in the 1400's would point to the...you know... eye witness testimony from the guy with a peg leg that saw an entire ship of noble fishermen get sucked down to davy jones's locker. He swears it happened...he even saw it with his good eye! Nobody...second guesses his good eye.

Second criteria...the idea needs to be able to withstand criticism.

So...In today's world, if someone came up to you and offered a counter argument and said something like...well if the earth is so round...why does the horizon look flat no matter how high up you go? We could no doubt argue back and talk about how things appear to the human eye and fixtures in the landscape only made possible by the curvature of the earth...our idea that the earth is a sphere is going to be able to withstand criticism...just as the average person in the 1400's probably isn't going to be running into many people like Sir Isaac Newton that is able to provide a compelling argument that refutes their belief that the earth is flat.

Third criteria... the idea needs to continue to help you predict future outcomes.

So...In today's world...our idea that the earth is spherical would continue to be reinforced...right?... we'd continue to compensate for the spherical shape of the earth...we'd continue to adjust flight patterns in the interest of saving time by taking advantage of the shape of the earth...and we would continue to reap rewards from doing

that. Just as...Back in the 1400's they would continue to hear stories about people falling off the edge of the earth, they'd continue to predict that those crazy people that are going on that super long voyage near the edge of the earth...yeah they're probably not coming back. And when they didn't it would serve as confirmation that what they believe is true.

Point is: just like with the squirrel...just like with the diamond...our human experience of our belief that the earth is a sphere...how useful it is to us, how well it predicts future outcomes that are relevant to us...we have the same experience with our belief that the earth is a sphere...that someone back in the 1400's would have with their belief that the earth is flat! And to William James, both of these beliefs would be worthy of the adjective true when describing them, given their respective contexts and how they allow people to orient themselves to the world.

You know...many people take issue with James because they think he's being far too tolerant of these beliefs like...the earth is flat. We shouldn't allow that to be called true...but keep in mind...this is entirely contingent upon them living in a different time when other evidence was unavailable. He would no doubt take issue with that belief in today's world given how it doesn't stand up to his three criteria...and in that sense he is FAR from tolerant of people just believing in whatever they want. By the way...that extends on to you as well...once a more useful, for most of us more accurate, interpretation of some subject comes out...if your beliefs no longer hold up to scrutiny...he would be equally as abrasive to your beliefs as well.

Maybe the best thing to reiterate at this point is that William James sees truth not as something inside of objects themselves, but our experience of how we orient ourselves to things in the world. You know, he wrote a book called the varieties of religious experience where he dissects...basically every type of religious idea that people can have and tries to find similarities between them...and the interesting thing is...William James doesn't

think of religion the same way many of us do...he doesn't think religion is limited to only things like Christianity...Hinduism...Orphism...no William James thinks that ANY fundamentalist interpretation of life should be considered a religion...because it's ultimately the same type of thinking going on.

That could include any number of things...unbridled nationalism...racism...sexism...religion to William James is better described as, "man's total reaction upon life."

There's a great quote in the introduction of the book:

"We must therefore, from the experiential point of view, call these godless or quasi-godless creeds 'religions'; and accordingly when in our definition of religion we speak of the individual's relation to 'what he considers the divine,' we must interpret the term 'divine' very broadly, as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not."

Beautifully worded...obviously what he's saying here is look: just because someone's simplified way they look at things doesn't have a ten headed deity with horns involved, don't think that the "divine" qualities many traditional religions place on that thing are incapable of being conferred onto something like...you know the founding fathers...or David Duke.

By the way real quick...i realize there's people alive today that strongly believe that the earth is flat...and they have tons of evidence to support why that has to be the case. I'd just like to ask for you to be understanding of me having to find an example for this episode...you must realize you're part of a small handful of intellectual elites that have watched the same YouTube videos you have...and you certainly must realize that the vast, vast majority of us listening to this episode are uneducated sheep that are victims of

propaganda. The point was not to continue my covert shilling for the CIA...it was to try my best to explain some William James. By the way, if you're out there...please reach out to me! I really want to know why all the governments of the world benefit from concealing that the earth is flat.

Anyway, thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Peter Singer on Effective Altruism

Episode #085

This is a transcript of episode #085 on Peter Singer. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So I want us all to imagine something. Imagine you went out to dinner with your friends or family. Imagine you had a good time...it was a good meal...the staff of the restaurant only sung happy happy birthday to seven people around you on this particular occasion. And as you exiting the restaurant and you're heading out to your car you hear a sound and you look over to your right and you're shocked to see a little girl...maybe four...five years old...lying in the gutter...crying...bleeding out of her head...looks terrified...you look around nobodies helping...she doesn't seem to have any parents around.

What would you do if you were in this situation? Would you stop and help the girl? Or would you look at her...continue walking to your car and just go on about your day? I think somewhere around 99% of people would say that they would stop and help the girl.

Now...new situation...imagine instead you were watching this on the news...there's a story about a four year old girl that died in front of a restaurant and they were showing security footage of 10...20 people coming out of the restaurant...looking at this little girl lying in the gutter who could be dying...and they just kinda shrug say oh well and keep going to their car.

What would you think of those people? Well again, I think most of us would say...how could they possibly do that? More than that...how could you possibly live with yourself for the rest of your life knowing that you COULD have saved this little girl's life...you

COULD have done something about it...but instead you decided to just turn a blind eye and go on about your day? What was so important that a human life couldn't be saved?

Peter Singer points out: we currently live in a world where 6.9 million children die a year of completely preventable, poverty related causes. That boils down to about 19,000 children every single day. We currently live in a world where each and every one of the people that were negatively judging those other people walking past the little girl dying on the news...have resources AND access to charities that could decrease that number...yet they choose not to. Now given that we've already established that we care about the cause of children dying when we could have done something about it, why are we so willing to help the girl in front of the restaurant and simultaneously so willing to turn a blind eye to the millions dying a year when we could do something about it?

Maybe the best place to start...maybe the place Peter Singer would start...is to congratulate you. Peter Singer would like to personally congratulate you on winning the lottery. You know its funny whenever you see people in the United States lining up down the block...waiting to get their powerball ticket because its up to 1.7 trillion dollars or whatever it is...its surpassed the national debt and these people are trying to see if their piece of paper will win! But just think about what they're doing...they're essentially asking the universe to let them win the lottery twice in one lifetime...because I got news for you...for reasons we've talked about all throughout the history of this show...if you're born into modern western civilization...in relation to every other human being that has walked the face of the planet...you have already won the lottery. The efficiency your money commands...the amount of money you get paid for the job that you do...the benefits you have...the access to fresh food, water, entertainment, healthcare...of course every ONE of these things could be better, but from a historical context you are the sultan of bernai.

Ah yes...modern civilization is pretty great. It's become almost an inexorable fact of life

that you go to work...you make money...you bring it home and then you use it buy things that you don't necessarily need. Just think of how AMAZING that is! Think of the scarcity that's haunted practically every generation of human being that has ever lived...We're not tribespeople anymore...we're not peasants trying to scrape by enough to barely feed ourselves with...every single person listening to this right now buys stuff...they do no need. Let me tell you...as someone that was homeless at the age of nine...living off of bread for three months of my life before child protective services came and got me...you COULD be spending less than you do. And that doesn't make you a bad person! That's the point! Peter Singer thinks this is actually a really exciting thing!

Think of the opportunity that you have... that no other human in the history of the world has ever had! You have the resources at your disposal to save lives! Maybe a key point to mention is that we should all understand...that there is a direct relationship between the resources you have at your disposal and your moral culpability in situations you find yourself in.

For example...imagine there's a person drowning in a lake. Now let's say you're wearing clothes...not that strange of a situation to imagine...you COULD take off your shirt...hold the shirt out to the person in the water and pull them to safety. OR you could stand there and watch them drown...because that's your favorite shirt. You just saw them over there eating Flamin' Hot Cheetos...you're not gonna let them get their greasy red fingers all over your favorite shirt! They don't even make this shirt anymore!

Now a lot of people there would say that you were wrong for not sacrificing your shirt to save a human life...now imagine you're in the exact same situation except now you're a member of some nudist brigade...nobody's gonna say you did anything wrong...you didn't have a T-shirt that you could sacrifice in the first place.

This is an example of how the resources at our disposal sometimes change whether we're

seen as morally reprehensible. Now you might be thinking this isn't fair...I didn't actually DO anything. Sure, I didn't donate...but it's not like I karate chopped one of these starving kids in the neck...in fact I didn't do anything...how can you say I'm a bad person when I really haven't done...anything...on either side of the issue.

Well in the words of Peter Singer, being a good person or leading an ethical life...is not only about staying away from the "thou shalt nots"...sometimes there are things that we are morally obligated to act on...the "thou...shalts" I guess. And there is a direct relationship between the resources at your disposal and how many of these thou shalt we have to consider during our time on this planet...and this really shouldn't come as a surprise...I mean, on episode 59 of this show called Categorical Trolley Cars we talk about the famous ethical dilemma where a train is barreling down the tracks towards five people...all of them are going to die...the only way to save them is to pull a lever that would switch the train onto a different track where only one person is going to die. The question is: do you pull the lever to save the five over the one.

Well think of the lever in that ethical dilemma as resources at your disposal. Fact is, if you didn't HAVE a lever that could switch the train onto a different track...you wouldn't be at a moral decision point..you'd just be some weird person that hangs around train tracks and likes to watch people die.

The fact that you have the resource of the lever...changes everything. It gives you more potential choices to pick from on the multiple choice choose your own ending book of living an ethical life. Peter Singer would say that inaction does not absolve you of all guilt. No, by choosing NOT to pull the lever...by choosing NOT to use resources at your disposal...you're still making a choice. And you'd have to ask yourself...as someone who's already established themselves as a person who cares about the child dying in front of the restaurant...someone who cares to the extent that they feel it would be wrong NOT to intervene...someone who certainly wouldn't give someone a free pass if they said what? I

didn't do anything...I just walked past the kid to my car! You'd have to ask yourself...why aren't we giving more to these causes? Is it just because they're far away from us and we don't have to look the suffering in the eyes ourselves?

Peter Singer talks about a sprightly young chap named Toby Ord. Toby Ord was a graduate student in philosophy at Oxford when he asked himself this question. He calculated how much money he needed to live comfortably...about 18000 pounds a year..and subtracted that from the total amount of money he was going to make over the course of his career...and what he realized was that on top of living a totally comfortable lifestyle..he could also give enough back to cure roughly 80,000 people of blindness in countries rife with poverty. There's a bacterial infection called trachoma...gets under your eyelids...pus starts oozing out...gross...point is...it's completely treatable...costs about 40 bucks to do, but if you don't treat it fast enough...you go blind. Blind for the rest of your life because you didn't have 40 dollars. Estimates are that around 6 million people have gone blind from trachoma...and this is the cause Toby Ord wanted to do the most he could to help.

Now Peter Singer would say...sure it's great that Toby Ord wanted to give so much, but we don't all have to give MASSIVE portions of our income to be able to make a difference...we don't all have to be Toby Ords. In Peter Singer's book: *The Most Good You Can Do*...he advocates 10%. Most churches ask you to donate 10% of your income...for most people it's not a life ending amount of money to give...but it IS a life SAVING amount of money to give. Plus think of where that money is going...if you give it to your church...what are they gonna do with it...fix up the rec room? Maybe print up more of those glossy colorful pamphlets they like to leave on everyone's front door step? No question they're using it for the most good they can, but that money would accomplish SO MUCH MORE in Africa than it ever could in the United States. What he's saying is...It's not enough just to give to charity...we have to be smart about it...we have to use our capacity to reason to find not just where our resources will help, but where our

resources will do the most good they possibly can.

This is the “effective” part of effective altruism...and it’s extremely important. We all have known somebody that meant well and they really wanted to try to help someone...but the stuff they did to try to help ended up doing more harm than good...we can all imagine someone who has great intentions...tons of heart...they feel so strongly for a cause...but if they don’t think through what they’re going to do...they’re just this big bundle of emotions with zero direction. If you feel like donating money to try to make the world a better place...instead of donating it to your alma mater...or to the church down the street so they can buy more lemon cookies for fellowship...Peter Singer’s saying use that ability to reason to find where the money is going to do the most good it can.

Something interesting that struck me as I was reading this is that this commitment to use that capacity to reason to find how you can effectively do the most good possible for a cause that you care about...it extends beyond just the resource of money and the cause of eliminating poverty. Like, I realize I’m not...you know...curing the blind in Africa...but as you guys know I think philosophical thinking is a very important thing to spread around in the world...i think there’s nothing that affects everything quite like philosophy...it’s a cause I care about a lot.

Now I’m not getting rich doing this show, I love doing it...and about a year into doing the show I had a pretty strong influx of people that were telling me...people I respected...that I obviously like to explain things...why don’t I go back and get my teaching certification...would take two years...and quit the show and go be a teacher somewhere...maybe I could work my way up to that prestigious job at a community college I’ve always wanted! Their point was...I’d be making a lot more money teaching at a college...not to mention the wonders it would do on my self esteem to be able to have people groveling at my feet for a grade. I could walk around with a sense of entitlement on campus...it’d be great!

And I gotta be honest I thought about it a lot...but then I thought of something and I haven't thought about it since. Yeah, professors make a lot more money...but they also charge their students tuition, which is extremely limiting. This podcast is free. How many people am I going to be spreading this message to as a teacher? 200 students in a class...5 classes? What 1000 people a semester? 1000 people download this show in an hour. Point is...much like Peter Singer talking about reasoning to the way of contributing to a cause that you care about that's going to do the most good...this show is a much more effective way of getting this message that I care about so much out to as many people as possible. I guess I just want to make the point that whatever cause you care about, personally, is there a way you might be able to sacrifice a little bit of personal comfort in the name of doing the most good you can do.

Ok so we've established that we care about the dying little girl...we've established we WOULD intervene and morally condemn others who did NOT choose to intervene...we've established that we DO in fact have at least a dollar that we COULD give and that inaction is not a get out of jail free card. We've established all that and yet...I'm gonna guess...there probably are tons of people out there still listening to this that really want to disagree with Peter Singer. A lot of people feel attacked...and it's easy to understand where they're coming from.

I'm not a bad person...I volunteer down at the food bank...this old lady dropped her change purse the other day...I picked it up and gave it back to her...I don't FEEL like a bad person...yet here I am Peter Singer being told by you that I'm doing something wrong! This sort of dynamic is a perfect recipe if you want to get people to come up with arguments for why they act the way they do that aren't necessarily philosophically sound...but are attempts at trying to justify the way they already behave. You see this

same sort of behavior when you talk to people about why they treat their significant other the way they do like in our insecurity episode...when you talk to people about the reasons they give for why killing animals for food is morally justifiable...and unsurprisingly another area that Peter Singer specializes in: the life of an effective altruist in today's extremely unique world. Now because of this dynamic...he spends most of the works that he's done on this subject answering common questions and counterarguments that people commonly throw his way whenever he has conversations about it. So let's take a look at some of the most common ones...

One argument that always seems to come up is...alright Peter Singer...you care about the children? Do you REALLY care about the children? Well I think if you honestly cared about them...you wouldn't spend your time writing books about how everyone else should be helping them...you'd quit your job as a philosopher and go down there yourself and provide aid to these people. And on that same note...where do we draw the line? Let's say I really feel compelled now to help end global poverty...can there be too much of a good thing? Why shouldn't I conclude that I too should uproot me and my family's life and move somewhere where I can constantly help? The core thinking here being that if I want to help out with a particular cause...the MOST good I could ever do is to be something like a Mother Theresa dedicating every second that I have.

At this point Peter Singer would probably direct your attention back to that amazing and very unique life that you were born into... and he'd say...that because of the tools you have at your disposal...you can really do the MOST good...by just being a highly productive citizen living in the United States.

There's actually people out there that are much more extreme than Peter Singer that say that we, as citizens with this sort of opportunity available to us, we have a moral obligation to work really hard towards making MORE money in our careers, so that we can give all of that additional money to these causes. Again, that's a more extreme

position to take...but the sentiment still remains in Peter Singer's point.

What he's saying is: sure you could quit your job, move to Africa, and spend all day every day handing out sack lunches to people...or you could continue living your life as you do, and eventually donate enough money for a charity to employ...three aid workers...five aid workers....all of which are going to do the same job you would have done, but that didn't have this unique opportunity like you do...to have their skills pay for the work of multiple people.

Another common argument people will come back with is: ok, so I want to help...I want to sacrifice so that other people don't have to die. Why do I even need to be comfortable? Why would any comfort of modern existence ever be more important than those dollars being spent to potentially save another life? Why shouldn't I go all in and donate every penny I possibly can? Why Shouldn't I live in a box? Why shouldn't I eat once a week and in between meals crush up some rocks and water into a thick paste that serves as a benign mass inside my stomach tricking it into thinking that I am full? Why shouldn't I do that?

Again, because you were born into a such a unique set of circumstances, one where you can use your opportunity to work to contribute truckloads of money to these causes...it actually is counterproductive for you to not be comfortably living. It's a little bit like when they say on a plane...secure your oxygen mask before you secure the mask of the child next to you. The thinking being...if you're not breathing...it's probably going to inhibit your oxygen mask fastening abilities. Now in the same way...if you're weak and mentally foggy because you're not getting your caloric needs met, if you're sick because you get your drinking water from that communal hose on the side of your apartment complex...even if you're not able to maintain a professional veneer and follow the dress code of your workplace...all of these things inhibit your ability to make money to donate...if in fact you wanted to truly do the most good you could possibly do.

Another argument that people commonly give is that, look everything you're saying is true...I WANT to donate...but unfortunately...another thing that makes the time period I live in unique is that we live in a world where charities are often wasteful, ineffective or even downright corrupt. I wish I could give my money more directly so that it doesn't have to go through this middle man where I have no idea if the funds are actually going to the people I want to help!

It's a good point. There was a poll that Peter Singer cites in his book...70% of Americans that give to charity do absolutely ZERO research into where the money is actually going...and around 29% of that remaining thirty do a very cursory look over of things, usually looking for a single criteria to be met...like what percentage of the money actually goes to the people vs. administrative costs. But even THAT statistic can be misleading...even though it sounds great oh, they're giving 98% of all money to the actual people in need...often times...the fact that they only use 2% to cover administrative costs makes them less effective at providing the help than some other charity that used say 5%...also, because they have such a low budget to operate on...often times the service they're providing isn't the most effective way to help the people they want to help.

For example...imagine a charity that has a very low operating cost and they use 2% percent of the money to travel to places where people are dying of Malaria and give them Malaria vaccine...pretty simple operation...versus ANOTHER charity that sends teams of people to these communities and teaches everyone how to make their own nets that prevent mosquitos from biting them in the first place. Now, the second operation might cost a bit more to execute, but think of how much more GOOD is being done as a result of it.

So no question it can be tough to separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to

finding what charities are actually going to be doing good, but again...a hallmark of the time period that we live in is that we have access to information. There are independent groups that do nothing but audit charities...exposing any waste...exposing any corruption...showing where every dollar goes...they even give them a ranking so you can see very quickly which ones are actually doing good. Again, this goes back to the “effective” part of effective altruism...it’s not enough to have a knee-jerk emotional response to something...we need to be willing to do a little digging to find out what organization is going to do the most good with our money.

But probably THE MOST common argument that people give back when they’re faced with this thought experiment about the little girl dying in front of the restaurant...is that it’s not that I don’t want to help...for me it’s the problem of: how much good can I actually do? I mean, I’m not a billionaire...I don’t have millions of dollars to be throwing around...yeah I COULD give a dollar a month five dollars a month...but how much good is that actually doing?

Well what if...five million people had that same outlook? There’s the millions of dollars that could have made a huge impact. By the way real quick...I’m walking proof of how big of a difference the dollar...five dollar donations make. I pay my bills and survive from the one...two dollars an episode that people give on Patreon...so for all of you out there that didn’t say, oh what good could I possibly do...thank you because you make this show possible.

The same dynamic applies to people dying in developing countries. You know Peter Singer talks about how...were born into a world that tells us hard work is a virtue...and the paradigm that you’re supposed to strive for is to make more money...so that you can spend more money. You know, it’s exciting when you get a raise at work or when grandma beatrice leaves you a huge inheritance because now...you get to buy that nicer car you’ve always wanted...you get to have a bigger and better house...you make more...to

be able to spend more. But what often happens is you find yourself on this hedonic treadmill where you're always thinking about what you're going to buy next and once you get it...it's onto the NEXT thing you're going to buy...and so on and so forth until you realize that the stuff is never going to bring you satisfaction...the satisfaction has to come from the inside.

Peter Singer asks...why does it have to be this way? Why, hypothetically speaking, couldn't we live in a world where we have the same idea that hard work is a virtue...but instead of making more so that you can spend more...you make more so that you can give more?

When it's all said and done...you're 80 years old...you're looking back on your life...Peter Singer would ask you...which would you rather look back on...a lifetime where you made tons of money you didn't need and bought stuff you didn't need...stuff that's all sitting in a landfill somewhere now...or would you rather look back and say...I made more money that I needed and with that money I was able to save 100,000 lives. 100,000 people are alive today that otherwise would have died...and that's because of me...that's because of this guy.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Sartre and Camus pt. 2

Episode #087

This is a transcript of episode #087 on Albert Camus. Check out the episode page [HERE](#).

So as you probably know by now...philosophy...more specifically the more abstract, out there ideas in philosophy can be a pretty tough thing to just cannonball into and fully understand them right off the bat...and I think most educators realize this...and a useful tool that i think a lot of them use to sort of...set up a skeleton of an idea that they can flesh out later with more of the details... is they try to take big ideas or even entire branches of philosophy and distill them down into a single sentence...or a single question.

For example, epistemology...notoriously referred to as the branch of philosophy that asks: how do we know what we know? Now, that's great as a working definition of epistemology if you need a frame of reference as you're learning about it...but the more you DO learn about it the more you realize that... that's really only a fraction of what epistemology actually deals with.

Metaphysics...notoriously referred to as the branch of philosophy that asks: what is everything made out of and how did it get here. Again, great definition for educational purposes, but the more you look into it the more you realize all of the metaphysics that definition is leaving out.

Now the guy we're going to be talking about today, Albert Camus, he thought that he had found the most fundamental question in all of philosophy...a question that he thought...no matter what other philosophical question you could ever come up with...it

was ultimately going to be a follow up question to THIS question...but the problem is if I just SAY the question...uh i've I've found that a lot of people initially disagree with him and end up poised waiting to disagree with everything else the guys saying.

So what I wanted to do to give some context to this question...just so we can better understand where Camus is coming from when he's asking it...is I wanted to tell you a story from Greek Mythology about a King named Sisyphus. Sisyphus was the kinda king...he wasn't really feeling the whole Pantheon of Gods thing...you know the whole I'm gonna rape you and then blast you all over the cosmos and make you into the big dipper...no Sisyphus was known as someone all throughout his life that didn't really march to the beat of the drum of the God's so it came as no surprise when one day...when it was his time to die...Hades...LORD OF THE UNDERWORLD came to get Sisyphus, wrap him up in chains, and suck him down into the blackened recesses of his realm.

Now Sisyphus...cunning as he was...when death shows up to take him...he starts talking to the lord of the underworld...and somehow convinces him of testing the chains out on himself before he uses them on him...so when death's all tied up and says yep these chains definitely seem to be in working order!...Sisyphus just throws him in his closet and goes on about his business. Now as you can imagine...there are some consequences when death doesn't show up to work...for one thing...people can't die. Throughout the myth of Sisyphus they give all kinds of examples of how people would get killed on the battlefield and still show up to dinner that night...people would get like run over by a horse and just stand up and dust themselves off. Point is: the Gods soon realized what had happened. Now as you can ALSO imagine...for Sisyphus...kidnapping the lord of the underworld and hiding him in your closet has some serious consequences as well. So the God's sentenced him to one of the most horrible fates imaginable...it's a motif we've all probably seen at some point in our lives...Sisyphus is the guy condemned by the gods to a lifetime... of rolling a boulder up a hill...back breaking, grueling labor...only to reach the top of the hill and have the boulder inevitably roll back down to the bottom for him to

start over again. Condemned to a lifetime of pain and anguish and working hard only to have his efforts be completely futile in the end...the boulder will always roll back down to the bottom of the hill.

Now Camus would say...what a wonderful metaphor for your life. Now I'll explain his reasoning in a second but just imagine...if this is true...imagine If the life you live right now is comparable to rolling a boulder up a hill only to have it inevitably fall back down again...if that is true...then as Albert Camus says, "There is only one really serious philosophical problem, and that is the decision of whether or not to commit suicide." This is his fundamental philosophical question that I was talking about...this is the question that underlies EVERYTHING else. Should we commit suicide?

Now hold on at this point you might be saying...alright...don't you think that's just a little bit melodramatic...Camus? My life isn't that bad...I'm not condemned by the Gods...I'm not rolling a boulder up a hill everyday...I don't even like boulders.

Well it's a metaphor...Camus would say: look. we're born, we grow up, we get a job and it's so easy in this modern life for people to fall into this momentum of living the same exact day over and over again...up, work, home, TV, bed, up, work, home, TV, bed, up work...you get it.

This isn't how human beings were meant to live...it's monotonous, it's tremendously unfulfilling, it's practically devoid of anything that feels even remotely rewarding. Saddest part about it to Camus is that most people just go along with it and don't ever really question it. This is just the way life is! I've resigned myself to a life of sleeping pills and caramel macchiatos.

But not everybody ends up this way. Camus would say if you're not one of these people that just sort of sheepishly goes along with it and never questions it...well...then you're

one of the lucky few that get to have your very own existential crisis! Congratulations. Because what happens when you really take a look at that lifestyle...that up, work, home, TV, bed...lifestyle...is you start to wonder if any of this stuff you're doing everyday matters at all. You start to feel isolated...alienated. You start to look at death looming on the horizon, you start to wonder...am I wasting this gift of life... and you can't help but feel really uncomfortable.

So IN an attempt to alleviate this discomfort...You start to ask yourself some really tough questions...questions that are trying to get some clarity about this existence: what is the purpose of my life or the universe for that matter...what is the meaning...is life really just me watching netflix until I go casket shopping one day?

Camus talks about how when we find ourselves in this uncomfortable place we seem to have this longing for happiness...and this appetite for clarity...or an appetite for being able to make sense of everything...trying to find the purpose that we serve...and an extremely common place people start LOOKING for that purpose...just given the last several thousand years of human thought...is that they try to look for some sort of preordained cosmically prescribed meaning to it all. They look at their place within the universe and they start to ask...what plan did this universe have for me? What function do I serve in the grand scheme of things?

They ask these questions and what do they get? Silence. Nothing answers you back as a human being when you ask those questions. It's not like some customer service rep from the universe call center picks up. Well Camus would say...given that fact...that leaves you with a very real problem on your hands.....Because if nobodies picking up at the call center for the universe.....we don't KNOW what the purpose of the universe is. We don't KNOW what our purpose is...or if we even have one...and what's worse is that...you're just a human being. The only tools you have...to arrive at the MEANING OF THE UNIVERSE...are your eyes, ears...you know your sensory experience...and your ability to

reason. That's it!

The fact that you're met with silence...when you ask those fundamental questions of your existence...probably means your tools aren't doing the job that well. Now you can draw any number of conclusions from this...a common one is that...maybe we DO in fact have a purpose...but TO whatever prescribed that purpose...it's just not very important for us to know for certain what that purpose is...or maybe...if we KNEW what our purpose was...it would sabotage our ability to fulfill that purpose.

For example Genesis 1:28. God tells Adam rule over all the fish and fowl and every living creature that moves on the ground. Which I just realized doesn't really cover underground animals...maybe moles are onto something...uh...point is if you believe that the purpose of every animal in the world is for us to rule over them, part of that being that God allows us to eat these creatures...A cow doesn't know it's purpose...and you can imagine how if that cow KNEW it's purpose...it might inhibit its ability to fulfill that purpose...it would be trying to stay away from us lucky humans as much as possible so it can survive. Maybe... it's the same way for human beings...maybe if we were able to know for certain what our purpose was...it would sabotage our ability to accomplish it.

Now another possibility you might arrive at when you ask these questions and are met back with silence...is that maybe...the universe has no meaning...or even if it does...maybe just because of these crude tools these eyes ears and ability to reason...maybe it's impossible for you to ever discover that meaning with certainty at all.

But you know what? when you're asking these questions...who really wants to believe all that? I'm not gonna let some existential crisis ruin my day...so you hold out hope! Maybe I DO have a purpose! After all...sure I'm just a human being...but the flip side of that is...I'm just a human being...who am I to make some proclamation about there being no meaning to everything in the universe. So you reserve judgement...keep your eyes peeled

for that meaning...and go on with your life...usually with a set of idealistic expectations about how the universe is gonna be treating you...after all...if you DO play some sort of role in the grand scheme of things...easy assumption to make from there is that the universe must have some way to protect that investment.

So you go on throughout your life armed with that set of exceptions keeping your eyes open!...and then...inevitably...the universe smacks you in the face...life happens...your sister gets hit by a car...you don't get the job that you wanted...these things happen all the time. What we see as horrible tragedies...lives are completely destroyed. Human suffering is visited on a scale that is hard to comprehend. When these things happen to us...and they DO happen just less frequently than they otherwise would because you live in the luxury of the modern world...when these things happen to us...one thing seems clear in that moment...whatever purpose the universe has for you...it doesn't seem to insure that you're going to be financially stable...or surrounded by a big family at Thanksgiving...in that moment...the universe seems pretty uninterested in whether you're going to be happy...in that moment...the universe seems pretty uninterested in you.

Now Camus says we find ourselves in these moments a lot...especially when we're young... And because we're so desperately trying to find this cosmic meaning to our life that we swear must be out there somewhere...we start to get confused and scared...we start to have this inner monologue. Why is this happening to me? All of this tragedy seems to be so random...I'm not a bad person...why are all these terrible things happening to me and this criminal over there never has anything bad happen to them...maybe the way I act doesn't have any bearing at all on whether the universe allows some tragic course of events to unfold in my life. Maybe it all is just random...But if that's true...I still have my original question...what is the meaning of my life?

Now listening to that inner monologue there...there's a lot of tension. Tension between

expectations that person has about what SHOULD be happening to them and the reality of what actually DID happen to them. Camus would say this tension...tension that he thought we all face at some point and i'm sure we've all had a similar inner monologue to the one we just heard at SOME point in our lives...that tension is explained... by the contrast between the fact that you're running around searching for some cosmically determined meaning to your life that the universe is going to guarantee for you...when the reality is...the universe doesn't seem to have a meaning...or at least if it does...we don't know what it is, and it's impossible for us to know what it is...at least right at this second.

What this means if this is true...is that all that desire to find some cosmic meaning...all of the anxiety and regret...the pain you feel when you see your loved ones in pain or however the universe decides to smack you in the face at that moment...that is the pain of you rolling the boulder up the hill like Sisyphus and watching the boulder tumble back down to the bottom...all of your efforts for nothing.

See ultimately to Camus...it doesn't matter how hard you push the boulder...it doesn't matter how much you agonize over trying to find that cosmic meaning...eventually...you're gonna die...everyone you've ever known is going to die...your name is gonna be forgotten...Wal Mart is gonna take over the world...the sun is going to inflate and explode and destroy any trace of you that could possibly be left...ultimately, because you didn't choose to be born... you have been condemned to a lifetime pushing a boulder up a hill only to find out that it was all pointless.

Now if this sounds pretty ridiculous...this is why Camus describes this existence as “absurd”. He says:

“Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human

need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”

Now if you're saying to yourself wow Camus thank you...no no thank you for that wonderful speech...you just made the whole family feel really depressed...you know call me crazy Camus...but I don't WANT to feel like this...I don't want to feel like Sisyphus pushing a boulder up a hill for the rest of my life for no reason! .. And he would probably say back, Yeah, No kidding...NO ONE DOES. You're living in a constant state of absurdity with the universe. But whether you want to acknowledge it right now or just shove your head in the sand... the fact remains you ARE like Sisyphus...and that uncomfortable feeling that you want to avoid for the rest of your life...EVERYONE ELSE wants to avoid it too! And Camus would say that people have no shortage of creative ways that they've come up with over the years...to escape this state of acknowledging the way that things actually are.

Now one of the go to ways that might come to mind is to just, to commit suicide. After all, if you're condemned to a life of the painful and agonizing work of pushing a boulder up a hill...and you know that all that pain, effort and sacrifice isn't really leading to anything...why wouldn't you just cling onto the boulder like a koala baby...and uh...let gravity do the rest. Certainly does solve your problem right? Well Camus would say, no it actually doesn't.

Somebody that commits suicide as a response to the absurdity of the world is looking at the problem in a really misguided way. The problem is not with the fact that you're alive. The TRUE problem is with the disparity between your search for meaning and how the universe doesn't seem to have one that you can arrive at. If this is truly a problem, any solution to that problem is going to have to do with repairing that disparity. All you're really doing by committing suicide is running away from the ACTUAL problem. It's like fixing a leaky faucet by moving to a different house...got news for you...that things still in

there drippin.

There must be a better way!

Now I know what you're saying...wow that was it? That was the answer to the most fundamental philosophical question? That was like three sentences! Well no. See because to Camus...that is not the only way that you can commit suicide in this existence. There's another type of suicide. The one we just talked about is what he called physical suicide...the other kind is what he calls philosophical suicide.

So at the risk of sounding redundant I just wanna reiterate something real quick so you can see just how similar these two types of suicide are to Camus. You find yourself in a state of the absurd...the reality of this world that we live in is that you want to be able to make sense of it and find meaning in it, but you don't know that meaning, you don't know how to find that meaning and it may ultimately be either entirely meaningless or impossible for you to ever find the meaning. So when you live in that world...one way to leave that world... is to commit physical suicide... but as we just talked about you don't really solve the problem...the faucet is still leaking inside of your house...you just live in a different house...Now ANOTHER way to leave this world that doesn't really solve the problem is to commit philosophical suicide...or to focus your attention on some OTHER world that doesn't actually exist...a world where this anxiety and tension that comes along with the reality of this absurdity no longer exists. This is like living in a house with a leaky faucet...and it's dripping all day...driving you insane...you can't sleep because there's this leaky faucet that's constantly dripping in your ears...so instead of fixing the faucet you put in earplugs and pretend like faucets don't actually exist.

Now, the most obvious example of this from human history would be religion, I mean, common to most denominations at least in our modern world...they literally focus their attention on another world, one devoid of anxiety, one that provides meaning to

everything you do in your life... but make no mistake followers of religion are not even close to the only people guilty of philosophical suicide to Camus. Though I think it's interesting to pause on them for a second to notice something unique about Camus.

Camus uses the word meaningless a lot...but let's not misunderstand where he's coming from. Camus doesn't see himself as some sort of...you know...anti Thomas

Aquinas...who's goes into great detail and writes entire books presenting how he has a philosophical proof of how the universe has no meaning. No, he sort of comes at it from the other side...he just tries to explain the reasons why there is such a huge incentive to create and confer that meaning onto the universe. That state of the absurd is a pretty horrible place...if somebody's willing to PHYSICALLY commit suicide...Camus would say they're DEFINITELY going to be willing to adopt some awesome meaning for their lives where they get to live forever... and then walk around with a confirmation bias.

Now as I said...followers of religion aren't the only people out there looking to another world to alleviate this feeling of the absurd. What I mean by another world is simply some pre-manufactured system of beliefs that doesn't really reflect THIS world's reality...it's really just an attempt to simplify the world down into terms that are easily understandable so that you don't have to contend with the true, unbridled ambiguity of it all.

This could be any number of things: nationalism, racism, sexism, your political outlook...even things like watching sports or playing video games with every free second. Again, the goal of committing philosophical suicide is to sort of revel in a state of certainty that somebody else gave you...a state of certainty that doesn't actually exist so that you can get rid of the uncomfortable feeling of answering those fundamental questions about your existence. Again, it's putting earplugs in and pretending like faucets don't exist...and if that's a funny visual...look around you...most people are doing it right now.

Now for Camus...this runs into the same problem as physical suicide. It doesn't actually solve the problem...it just deludes you into believing that you already know everything about existence. Now if you're out there saying, what's wrong with that? What's wrong with a little hope Camus?

Hope? Stop hoping...stop looking at some other world that doesn't exist in a TV screen or a book or in your reductionist view of the way things are...stop looking at that other world and start looking at this one! That hope, that constant looking to some other world robs you of so much in this one. Hope may be calming to that state of absurdity...but think of the cost! It robs us of the here and now. Everything we COULD be experiencing now, but aren't.

See Camus didn't think suicide was the answer to this existential crisis. Physical Suicide and Philosophical Suicide are just two ways of RUNNING from the problem...but Camus thought how bout instead of RUNNING from the problem...you welcome the problem with open arms...you EMBRACE the problem. CHAIN yourself to the problem. Find comfort in the uncomfortable.

See what Camus thought people that commit philosophical suicide never understood...is that not running from the absurd...but facing your existence head on and acknowledging it...that makes you a pretty amazing person. That's a pretty awesome accomplishment. How many other people are brave enough to do something like that? And he thinks you should think of it this way...to Camus someone that is able to be aware of the absurd and not run and hide from is known to him as an absurd hero. See because to be aware of the absurd in a strange way is to be superior to it.

Take the absurd head on...stop hoping and looking to another world that may not ever

exist and spend your time in the wealth of the here and now...which seems to Camus to be sensory in nature.

Camus talks about enjoying the little things...enjoying the company of family and friends and good food and just sort of appreciating the sensory experience we were given.

Do things that make you feel good. If you love spending time with your family...enjoy them and appreciate them...because you never know when this disinterested universe is going to take them away...Enjoy your food...you never know when this disinterested universe is going to throw a world wide dustbowl our way and you'll be fighting to the death for a bag of peanuts.

Yeah, maybe we ARE like Sisyphus...maybe nothing we do will ever live on eternally and maybe all the anxiety and regret and hard work we put into this life ultimately has no meaning. But the Gods only condemned Sisyphus to push the boulder...they didn't condemn him to resent the process. Camus says we should imagine Sisyphus smiling while pushing the boulder...understanding the ultimate futility of his efforts, but enjoying it anyway as much as he can.

This is a model of how we should live our lives. You don't have to hate or run away from the absurd...you can embrace it and smile anyway. Imagine if you were 13 years old again and your parents grounded you for staying out too late...the only reason that punishment works is because you hate the idea of being grounded, the only reason your parents use it is precisely BECAUSE you don't like it. I mean, how much sense would it make for your parents to say you're grounded...go to Disneyland! It wouldn't work. Imagine enjoying every second of being grounded. Wouldn't have been that bad! This is what we have to do with the absurd...push our meaningless boulder, but smile and enjoy it as much as we possibly can.

Now the last two episodes have been on Sartre and Camus...two people that for part of their life were practically best friends and for the other part of their life were worst enemies. The next episode is going to be on one of the most famous back and forth debates in the history of the world...between Sartre and Camus. Thank you for listening...I'll talk to you next time.

Nietzsche part 4 - Love

Episode #093

So by now you're probably realizing something about Nietzsche...you're probably realizing, if for no other reason than just cause I've... needlessly rambled about it throughout the course of this series...but what you probably realize by now is that Nietzsche's not writing his philosophy so that every single person in the world can take a little something from it...he's writing his philosophy for a select few people that are actually going to try at existence...he's writing it for a very small handful of people that aren't interested in FEELING like they know everything about the world...but people that are actually going to try to understand things deeper than they've been led to believe about things over the course of their life. I mean, at any stage of life... it's very easy to be coaxed into complacency about how you look at the world...I mean I'm sure we can all imagine some 45 year old person...listening to some passionate 21, 22 year old person with strong, reinforced convictions about how people are and how the world works and all kinds of things...and they say to themselves look, I've been there before. I too used to think I knew everything about the world...but you know what... you live a couple years longer...few failed marriages later...a few heated discussions at a PTA meeting...you're eventually going to wake up and realize how the world ACTUALLY works. Believe me...I've been where you are before. Well whenever I read Nietzsche's philosophy I always feel like he's this guy that's 120 years old and he's talking to that 45 year old and he's saying you know what...i've been where you are...but if you see a few more presidential elections...play some badminton down at the YMCA...you watch a few more seasons of the price is right...THEN you'll understand how the world actually works or maybe...you'll come to terms with the fact that this whole life thing...is much bigger than that, that maybe 100 years is not enough time to become as well versed in things as you want to believe you are. Well there are certain subjects that people like to tell themselves they've arrived at a destination about. Some subjects are more common than others. And

one of the MOST common ones...is the concept... of love. We all feel like we know what love is...we've all felt it. Powerful concept...love. Probably not a big surprise that so many philosophers over the years have tried to take a closer look at it and understand it. Given how good it feels to EXPERIENCE love...probably not a surprise that so many people build their lives around feeling or giving or spending time with the people they love...the most. Some people even take this to the extreme...some people say...that all you need...is...love. You know they look around them...understandably...and they think man...there's people stealing from other people...people are killing each other...cyber bullying is the pandemic scourge of our time...all these philosophers try to complicate things so much it's actually very simple...everyone just needs to love each other. If only we could show everyone how great it is to love everyone around you. These people say love...is some sort of panacea for all of the worlds problems. Instead of dropping nukes...we should be dropping giant canisters of DVDs of When Harry Met Sally. If only the whole world understood love like I do...then everything would be fixed. But the way you treat somebody that you love hasn't always been the way Harry treated Sally. No, the things we do in the NAME of love...have changed drastically over the course of history and they can easily change in the future. I mean 100 years ago...my kid may have...i don't know...gone down to the grocery store and bought an ice cream cone for 4/10ths of a cent without permission...and when he comes home and I see all the chocolate on his face...I may say to myself...you know what...I love this kid...I love him dearly...I am not going to allow him to become a person who doesn't understand the value of discipline for the rest of his life...I don't want to...but I have to beat him...in the name of love I have to beat him. Tons of other examples of this but the point is: the way that people treat the ones they love is highly influenced by the cultural backdrop that they were born into. St. Augustines man burning in a building comes to mind. In other words...even if everyone in the world loved each other...people might still steal from people they love in the name of feeding others that they love who are starving...people may still assault other people in the name of love...maybe love is actually a pretty complex thing that needs to be unpacked. I mean love is far from a static thing...right? We use the word love to describe

any number of different emotional states...we say things like I love my dog, I love my children, I love my parents, I love my domestic life partner, I love this pizza that I just ate from Chuck E Cheese....in all these contexts the same word is describing emotional states that are extremely different from each other...so what exactly do we mean when we say love? Maybe there's something similar about all of these different scenarios that we describe? I think when somebody says that all people need to do is love each other... its one of those statements most philosophers would hear and say it sounds great...but they probably wouldn't think it's a very useful synopsis when it comes to actually getting to the bottom of the cause of these problems or how to actually solve them...in other words in practice, how do you get... everyone in the world to love each other? I mean it's a little like walking into a hospital... and seeing all the different kinds of pain and suffering in a hospital...you know you see people in the cardiac ward, you see a guy with a broken leg, you see someone with hypertension and you say you know what? These doctors try to complicate things all the time...but in reality it's actually very simple: all these people need are drugs. All they need is drugs. Yeah, but what KIND of drugs? How high of a dose? When do they need them? Is giving them drugs really a solution or is it just temporarily masking the problem? There's more to it than just saying drugs: case closed. Well the point of this episode is to eventually talk about how Nietzsche sees love...but I think it'll give his views some context if we take a look at some other notable philosophers throughout history and how THEY viewed love...and when it comes to philosophers writing about love...by far the most famous account of love ever written has to be Plato in his work the Symposium. Now we talked a little about this on the Plato episode, but...come on...that was three years ago...I was horrible back then. I'll make it quick. The Symposium is a fictional book written by the Greek philosopher Plato about a dinner party...where various noteworthy figures from Athens at the time meet up to talk about a particular subject...apparently they DID that kind of stuff back then...and the subject of this particular night's dinner party is love. Everybody takes turns getting up in front of the group giving their thoughts on love. Now, barring the funny, pretty ridiculous theory given by Aristophanes which was probably just Plato getting back at him for

slandering Socrates in one of his plays...besides that...in terms of philosophy the book is pretty slow up until we start hearing what Socrates has to say about what he heard about love from a philosopher named Diotima. Now Diotima...nobody knows whether she actually existed...but its one of those things like: everyone else in the Symposium existed, why wouldn't this be a real person...but Diotima told Socrates about how she sees love as sort of a progression. A progression...ascending up rungs of a ladder...where throughout your various experiences with love in your life...you go through a number of phases...each one of them a rung on this ladder... where you become more and more aware of what love truly is. Seeing as how this is one of the most famous accounts of love ever given, let's talk about these rungs a little. So Diotima would say that when you come of age in this world and you enter into a romantic relationship of some sort...the first type of love that you're going to experience...the first rung on this ladder... is what she calls bodily love...now...bodily love...is exactly what you'd expect it to be...a love of someone's body...an infatuation with another person...maybe they make you smile a lot maybe you have this uncontrollable desire to touch the person when you're around them. But, either way...we all know about this one...we've all seen this one before so I won't waste your time giving examples of it...but the interesting thing is that Diotima says that once you're in this place... where you love somebody for their body...if you start to look closer at that feeling that you have towards this person...in other words if you think about what exactly it is that you love about their body...what inevitably happens is that you start to notice...the things you like about this persons body... are not exclusive to them in any way...there's a lot of other bodies out there that have these exact same qualities. You eventually realize there are thousands if not millions of bodies out there that you might potentially love. Now much like Socrates does...where he goes into the public square...asks people for their definition of courage...and he looks at all of them and tries to find out what's similar about them to hopefully arrive at a better understanding of what courage is...maybe you take a look at all of these millions of bodies and try to find out what is similar between them...and at the end of that process...you're left with a certain type of person...you know I like people with brown hair

and blue eyes...for example...a type. But remember this is only the first rung... on the ladder...Diotima says once you get to this place THEN what happens...this person whose body you're in love with...well, it's inevitable...you're gonna be spending a considerable amount of time with them. Eventually what you HAVE to realize...is that this person is more than just a piece of meat. No, they're a person...they have feelings too...they have all their own thoughts, opinions, ideas...eek. Diotima says that what eventually happens after we've had enough conversations with them about their thoughts on stuff...eventually you start to realize that love is not as shallow as you first thought it was...that body...sure it looks good now...but i dont care if you're dwayne the rock johnson...in 50 years...you're gonna look like a sun dried tomato out there...Diotima says you realize....that there's a deeper form of love available to you by loving someone's personality...or as she refers to it: the soul. Now it's in these first two stages that most people spend their entire lives. I mean you think about the progression of the average person's love life...throughout their twenties maybe they have a few debaucherous relationships...maybe they're with the wrong people personality wise but they overlook it because they think they're attractive...maybe eventually they want someone more mature...maybe they end up finding someone who's personality they admire and decide to get married to that person. But still... even if... you find yourself admiring something about the personality of someone you're married to...when it comes to most people's relationships...you still have one foot in the door of this bodily love...i mean it doesn't matter if somebody has the BEST personality in the world, most people aren't going to marry them if they look like Golem from Lord of the Rings. Most people sort of settle into a mixture between what Diotima describes as this bodily love and the love of the soul. Now an important thing to note I think is that getting stuck in any of these rungs of the ladder for your entire life doesn't make you a bad person. Plato would say, all of this love is ultimately a good thing...the question just becomes...how much of a good thing do you experience throughout your life. Because what inevitably happens once you love a collection of personality traits that somebody has...is that just like in the case of the bodily love...you realize... that these characteristics you love about someone aren't

somehow exclusive to them. No, you realize there are thousands of other people out there that embody these very same characteristics...now the GREATER implication of realizing this...to Diotima...is that realizing this... removes this visage that has been clouding your ability to move on to the third rung of the ladder...that to TRULY understand love is to understand that love is not this interpersonal exchange between two people that can ONLY exist between two people. What you realize is that what you love about this other person really has nothing to do with them as people...what you love are concepts that they embody. Now again, to Diotima, once you realize this...the next step is to realize... that person you love, wasn't born in a vacuum. This person wasn't floated down the river Nile in a basket and raised as one of their own by a pack of hippos. This person was born into a very specific cultural context by a very specific group of people who all had ideas of their own...and what you realize at this point... is that everything about this personality that you love so much really was forged by certain aspects of culture...laws and institutions that cultivated these personality traits that this person embodies that you love. The ultimate point is: the next few rungs on the ladder are loving the laws and institutions that create the people or things that you love, then a love of knowledge of those laws and institutions, then a love of knowledge itself, finally culminating in a love of the Platonic form of beauty or the good itself. Tons of interesting conversations to be had about these last three rungs but I think the most important thing that I want to repeat is that...lets say you never get to the top rung of this ladder where you understand the form of beauty itself...that doesn't make you a dumb person...that doesn't make you a bad person...Diotima's just saying that the good feelings you feel when you're experiencing love GREATLY increase with each rung that you move up on this ladder...and that much like a dog...when they've gotten a little taste of human blood...once they've tasted it...they can never go back to lamb and rice alpo. That once you've tasted that forbidden fruit of the next rung on the ladder, all the other forms of love just sort of lose their appeal they're not as good as what you've experienced. I mean I'm sure we can all imagine...if for your whole life you've just loved people for their body and then you get together with some pelican looking podcaster dude...and he dies in

some tragic podcasting related accident...after experiencing that higher level of love on this ladder, it stands to reason that having a relationship after that where it's all about the body again...it would probably feel like something's missing. At least that's what I tell myself everyday. Well as you know if you've listened to this podcast from the beginning...is that this hierarchical conception of love laid out in the Symposium paved the way for love as it was laid out in the middle ages. That love...in it's most basic flawed form... is love of the body...some people even say it can't even be considered love...it's actually lust. That moves onto a love of your fellow human beings, that moves onto a love of truth, all of which is inferior to the ultimate love...the love of God. And this became the dominant perception for what love is for quite some time, and although there was work done on love before this: something very interesting happens to the concept of love right about the mid 18th century. More specifically, with the way that you treat somebody that you love. What happened was...well, Romanticism happened. Romanticism is a cultural movement...some would even say codified doctrine of ideas...about the way human beings should be interacting with various aspects of the world that they live in...falling underneath that umbrella of course...is the way that we treat people that we love. Romanticism is often seen as a pushback to an era that came before it where there was a lot of emphasis put on reason as the way to arrive at conclusions about things. Too much reason. Maybe a good place to start is to say that: historically speaking...being in a relationship with somebody that you love or getting married...hasn't always been about...what we would often call today...romantic feelings that you have towards the other person. People used to get married for all KINDS of practical reasons...because it was financially prudent to do so...because they had a relative that could help you greatly advance your career...any number of reasons. Now in today's world... if you got married to somebody simply because it was a good financial move for you...people wouldn't really take too kindly to that...they'd tell you that you're getting married for all the wrong reasons that something's missing. Well where did that come from? A big part of it... comes from is this movement of romanticism in the mid 1700's. Romanticism pushes the idea...that it is possible...and even expected...to meet someone...get to know them...feel

these intense, romantic feelings that you often feel in the initial stages of a relationship...and you should expect this heightened emotional state to persist indefinitely all throughout the course of your lives together...a life long love story, as it's often put. That the litmus test, for who you should love or who you should marry...shouldn't be based on practical considerations like how good it is for your career or something like that...but that these initial feelings that we have will decide for us. When you meet someone, and they make you feel this way...you've done it. You have now found your soul mate. You've found the one and only someone for you...from this point forward...you and your soul mate are going to enjoy an all expenses paid vacation where every day of your lives you fall deeper and deeper in love with them with each passing day. Any boredom within the relationship, any longings for somebody else or novelty within that relationship, is not something that should be EXPECTED in a long term relationship...it's a sign that the relationship is not going well...its demon that's tormenting the relationship that needs to be exorcised. Now in many traditional conceptions of romanticism, and there's some variance here because we're talking about a very large period of time, but the general idea is that when you love someone deeply enough...if you can't accept them at their worst you don't deserve them at their best...that to truly love someone...is to be tolerant of all of their shortcomings as people...you know love is patient, love is kind, love is understanding...corinthians 13. If someone comes home from work and a lot of times they're in a bad mood and they're not really reciprocating the love in that moment...you know what...I love this person...I understand this isn't the entirety of who they are I understand this isn't about me right now...sure, the way they're treating me right now makes me feel bad, but I'm gonna go find something else to do while they work through these emotions. Another example: if someone quits their job and pursues their dream of becoming a street performer...a mime. And they go out miming the streets for three years and people just don't like their act that much...you know your box is horrible. Someone might say you know what...we may not have that much money...and yes they could easily go back and get their other job and help out, but I don't care if we have to live in squalor for the rest of our lives at least

we'll be together with these strong feelings that we have. What's interesting to think about is that many of these romantic ideas of love ask you to be TOTALLY tolerant about some things, but TOTALLY intolerant about other things. I mean if the person you love has romantic feelings for somebody else, or if they're telling you tons of things you need to change about yourself or if they're not fornicating with you on a regular basis...these are all signs that there's something seriously wrong with the relationship, not things you need to be tolerant of. Again, love should be this highly intuitive thing...this feeling that you have...you know you spent 6 years at the university learning to become a dentist...but when it comes to asking how to love or who to love or why to love or anything like that...that you'll just kind of wing it...I'll figure it out...remember romanticism was a movement that was the antithesis to a world where they thought we were reasoning too much about the ways we behave...no forget reasoning...what really matters is how you FEEL about this person. Like have you ever seen the Bachelor...I haven't of course...but if I ever had I would have to say man...look at what this show's become. Oh how the mighty have fallen. First episode. I think I could definitely fall in love with this guy. Third episode. I think I might be falling for him. 5th episode. Okay now I've definitely started the falling process, I tripped on something, I'm off balance, gravity is definitely pulling my trajectory in the downward motion but I haven't quite fallen yet...what are these people even talking about? This is what you get when you fully eradicate reason from this process...vague emotional states, waiting for some other vague emotional state to arise and people can't even tell you whether they're actually in them or not. But here's the thing...this isn't their fault! This is just what they've been told to expect when it comes to finding a life long relationship by every TV show, RomCom and Disney Movie they've ever come across from the moment they were born. Nobody should feel bad about having this expectation...it's not their fault...it's culture's fault. And even on that note, there's nothing wrong with bringing this expectation into your relationships...I just think a lot of modern commentators would say that if you DO bring in these expectations...barring a level of luck comparable to winning the lottery...you're probably going to be largely dissatisfied by your relationships...it's such a tall order to fill. Most people are probably

going to stick it out in a relationship far too long, telling themselves this person's their soul mate...and then one day when it all goes up in flames they'll tell themselves well looking back...the signs were there all along...maybe this NEXT person's my one and only someone...where's my Ryan Gosling? Either that or they'll find themselves six months in saying man...I just not getting those butterflies that I used to get...maybe they're not the one...and they spend their whole lives looking for this 60 year love affair that might not ever come. Now it's because of this, that when most modern thinkers talk about love they usually start from this point in the discussion. You know one of the most famous accounts of love ever was by a guy named Arthur Schopenhauer...he has this parable...where he compares marriage to two porcupines trying to huddle together to keep warm...and that the art of being with someone you love is trying to find the right distance where you're still keeping each other warm, but you're not SO close that your porcupine spikes are stabbing each other. You know to Schopenhauer everything is about this survival oriented will to life and that when we get married and we have these romantic relationships...what we're attracted to in someone else are REALLY what we see as our shortcomings...the hope being...that if your counterpart makes up for some of these areas that you're weaker in...that those weaknesses are probably gonna be less likely to prevent you from prospering...as a unit...you guys are better off together. This brings us to Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche's view on love has multiple layers to it, which is actually what makes it so interesting. On one hand...just like he tries to do with everything else we tell ourselves we have strong convictions about...love is no different...he's trying to show us...that when we love someone...maybe we're a little more selfish than we like to give ourselves credit for...but on the other hand, he's not denouncing anyone for BEING in love and he's certainly not saying that no one should BE in love. See, Nietzsche...as we've talked about before...huge fan of Heraclitus. Loves the idea of looking at two things that we commonly think of as opposites, and finding ways that they are actually the same thing manifesting itself in two different ways. For example, day and night. Are they opposites? Or are we talking about the same thing just in two different states. Same thing goes when he breaks down the psychology of love.

Often times people talk about loving someone...they say love is caring about someone more than you care about yourself...i love this person...i would sacrifice anything for them...i am completely selflessly committed to this other being. Now...Nietzsche would say...how convenient that this person is trying so hard to paint themselves as such a selfless person...you know what love TRULY is? When you look at it close enough...love starts to strongly resemble greed. He says: "Greed and love: what different feeling these two terms evoke! Nevertheless, it could be the same instinct that has two names – once deprecated by those who have, in whom the instinct has calmed down to some extent, and who are afraid for their 'possessions', and the other time seen from the point of view of those who are not satisfied but still thirsty, and who therefore glorify the instinct as 'good'." In other words, we love to pat ourselves on the back and tell ourselves how great we are for doing things in the name of loving this other person...and we often like to think of someone who's greedy in a negative light...but what if love and greed are the same instinct manifesting itself in different ways...that at the root of either of these words is this instinct or this desire that some thing will be ours...as he puts it "to change something new into ourselves". He says love and greed...these are the same thing...the only difference between whether we classify it as love or as greed just comes down to how satisfied somebody is with what they already have. For example, let's say you're a huge fan of italian sportcars...and you save up and you finally get one...sitting in the driveway. Somebody else comes along, maybe he likes italian sportcars too...and he wants THAT italian sportcar, yours! Let's say there's nothing he wants more in this entire world than to have your italian sportscar sitting in his half vacant warehouse where it will live out the rest of its sportcar days with this guy. But you say no, no, you love that car...you don't want it to go anywhere. Let's say this guy doesn't give up...this guys gonna write a persuasive essay to that car begging it to come to his warehouse...this guy doing whatever it takes to make it his...maybe he's trying to find some way to convince the state to take your sports car away from you so he can have it...not crazy to think you might feel like the guy was being a little greedy. Yet, being a lover of cars yourself...if in your travels YOU came across this very same car...you would certainly want it...and in THAT context

you'd just think about how much you wanted that car as your love of cars, not as you being greedy. Replace an Italian sports car with your significant other and take note of the similarities. Now here's the interesting part: even if we can agree upon the idea that love is greed...let's just say that it is...Nietzsche's not judging you for that...he's not saying this makes you a bad person for loving someone. He thinks that love, just like everything else, is a will to power....and in this case...love is sort of a mutually beneficial will to power...when two people are in love...yes to Nietzsche they are both just greedily desiring to change something new into ourselves...but greed or no greed...Nietzsche thinks love and friendship are some of the most amazing things life has to offer. He says you should find someone, love them, enjoy all the very real benefits of loving someone...just take a closer look at why it is that you're doing these things and don't try to justify your actions with a nice sounding story that you like to tell yourself about how it's really all about this other person. Now, the reason I chose love as the topic of today's episode...well...two parts to it. One, this is a perfect example of one of these concepts that everyone has strong opinions on coming into the episode that Nietzsche tries to get us to question our deepest assumptions about. And two, this is a perfect example of one of Nietzsche's ideas that if you just heard the first line: love is greed...you might be tempted to think that Nietzsche was just this empty, joyless, become powerful, take advantage of people kind of guy... but then when you understand where he's coming from, though it's still abrasive...his point is a lot more nuanced than you might first think. I think this is the reason why so many people misunderstand Nietzsche. They read a single line out of context and they make tons of sweeping generalizations about the guy as a person. This is the reason, as we talked about, why his work could so easily be distorted by his sister after his death when she was bumping elbows with Hitler and the Third Reich. But one of the most chilling passages I've ever read from Nietzsche is not from any of his philosophy...it's a line out of his autobiography. It's a line where he seems to foreshadow exactly what happened with his work after he died. He seems to predict how impactful his work was going to be. He says: "I know my fate. One day my name will be associated with the memory of something tremendous — a crisis without equal on earth, the most

profound collision of conscience, a decision that was conjured up against everything that had been believed, demanded, hallowed so far. I am no man, I am dynamite.”

Wittgenstein pt. 1

Episode #097

This is a transcript of episode #097 on Ludwig Wittgenstein. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So I want to start today by talking about a very strange ritual that all of you engage in, most of you don't even really think about it, you just do it. I've seen you. I've kept my mouth shut for a while but I'm not going to let it destroy this family. I've seen you pull out a piece of a dead tree...get your little stick with your carbon ink in it and squiggle lines on a piece of paper trying to convey meaning. Yeah, I was in the closet. I've heard you make sounds with your throat and mouth trying to take an idea that is up in your head and put it into the head of another person. I don't like to put labels on things..but I'm going to need to refer to it as something moving forward with the episode and I think I'm going to call it language. Now the good news is, you're in good company with all of this bizarre behavior. Practically every human being alive engages in the same ritual. In fact, practically every human being that's been alive for the last 100,000 years has made a similar choice, and just for the sake of the show today...there's some important figures that fall into this class of people that have chosen to use language to communicate ideas...like every philosopher we've ever talked about on this show. Just think about how important language is...whether you're Aristotle, Sir Francis Bacon, Karl Popper, whenever you are conducting philosophy, ultimately, you are a human being that is conducting philosophy from within the confines of a language. Think about it, It's really the only tool that we have to be able to communicate the ideas that are inside our head. Now, one thing that naturally follows from that if you're a philosopher, is you have to eventually ask yourself the question: what are these languages that we're all using? Where'd they come from? Who invented them? Alexander Graham Bell? Was it Tesla that did that? More seriously: was it a philosopher king... who sat around for decades pondering and assigning meaning to each and every word... which he then compiled into a giant tome that he called Webster's dictionary? No, that's not how languages form.

Language, and there's many theories about the origins of language but it's pretty clear it wasn't ever a philosopher king...generally speaking language is this patchwork of mutually agreed upon names that a group of people sort of stumble upon... mostly to be able to communicate with each other about everyday things. You know, language is great if you want to order a double quarter pounder with cheese. It's great if you want to tell someone no I would NOT like to donate a dollar to help starving lizards in the congo. But if you're a philosopher, and you're in the business of being as clear and distinct with your ideas as possible, in the business of communicating those ideas as effectively as possible. Is this language that we use, this thing really just created by a bunch of people ordering cheeseburgers over the years a thing that is constantly being tweaked...is this language necessarily capable... of perfectly describing every possible thing that can exist? Any idea a philosopher could ever have? Seems unlikely. Seems like language has these sort of built in limitations. Limitations that are almost certainly having a drastic effect on every philosopher's work having conveyed their ideas through it. Now in that world that philosophers operate in...understanding language becomes incredibly important, and philosophers over the years realized this. And even though we haven't really talked about it much on this show...there's actually been a lot of work done analyzing language. People have asked all kinds of questions...fun questions...in fact I'm gonna give you a cheat sheet...here's some good criteria if you ever want to know whether something's a good philosophical question...it has to make you instantly intrigued and want to think about it, but simultaneously it has to make some average person next to you jump off the nearest bridge. Questions like: what is a word? what is a sentence? what is a proposition? what does it mean to mean something? Well another one of these questions that philosophers have asked over the years trying to get to the bottom of language is how do words get their definitions. Who or what assigns these definitions? What criteria do they use to know whether something is a complete definition or not? Today we're talking about Ludwig Wittgenstein...and around the time he's coming of age in the world...early 1900's...the prevailing theory when it comes to this question of how we arrive at the definitions of words... is that the definition of a word is discovered when you understand

the conditions for what's called both necessity and sufficiency. Or when you understand the necessary conditions and sufficient conditions that makes the thing whatever it is that you're talking about. For example...a necessary condition is some thing that needs to be present in order for a thing to be whatever it is...for example...a necessary condition for being a triangle... is that you must have three sides. If you don't have three sides, you're not a triangle. You're just a jealous parallelogram...get some therapy. That's a necessary condition...a sufficient condition... is something that is sufficient for a thing to be whatever it is, but it's not a mandatory property. For example, having an RSS feed that is posted to the podcast section of iTunes is a sufficient condition for being a podcast, but it isn't a necessary condition because somebody could easily create a podcast, upload it to Spotify, Google Play, Soundcloud but just never upload it to iTunes. So again the prevailing theory around the time Wittgenstein started doing his work was that if you understood all of the necessary and sufficient conditions of any one thing, you'd be able to provide the definition of that thing. Well Wittgenstein didn't agree. But to understand why he didn't agree with this...I think it's important to have a little context. It's important to understand how fascinated he was with mathematics. So if you look at the life of Wittgenstein, very early on in his life he is fascinated with mechanical engineering...actually starts going to school thinking THAT's the field he's eventually going to work in...but then something happens...Bertrand Russell, another philosopher, publishes a book in 1903 called The Principles of Mathematics that was so influential...that it changes Wittgenstein's entire outlook on what he should be doing with his life. That's how big it was. He quits mechanical engineering...transfers to Cambridge so that he can study under Bertrand Russell who was teaching there at the time. Trying to think of where to start. When you think about it, math is a pretty fascinating thing...especially if you're a philosopher. I mean, it's not a coincidence that so many of the great philosophers throughout history have also been mathematicians. Think about what you're doing there. When you're doing math...you have these propositions that you can state...and you can say these things with about as much certainty as you're ever going to get as a human being that's making propositions. For

example, $1+1=2$. You can say, with pretty much complete certainty, that $1+1=2$. To doubt the validity of that statement, is to either be mistaken or to not understand the definitions of the things being questioned...to not understand the definition of, for example, the concept of "one" or "addition" or "resolving an equation". Now the thing that's so interesting about math...the thing that's typically intriguing to philosophers about math...is that... here we have this equation...this equation that we can state with absolute certainty...yet when it comes to things that actually exist in the real world...what is the concept of one? I mean what is that...what is the concept of three...where is that? Is that down there in that crack on the driver's side between the seat and the door where everything else gets lost? Where is this concept of three located? No, the concept of three doesn't exist physically, we can't hold onto it or empirically study it...so what happens is...math becomes this very strange realm where we can arrive at certainty about stuff...but it's all stuff that doesn't actually exist in the world we navigate our lives through...but...as I'm sure you can imagine...if you're somebody that's interested in arriving at certainty about things that DO physically exist...a promising place to start... might be to try to emulate what people are doing in mathematics...to try to apply that process to things that DO physically exist...and see if we can get the same level of certainty. This has been tried dozens of times all throughout history, but it's still an intriguing prospect in 1903 when Wittgenstein reads Bertrand Russell's book on the principles of mathematics. Now the problem with mathematics just by itself... is that it's kind of its own institution...it's not really useful at informing decision making or helping us think correctly or anything like that. However, Wittgenstein thinks that there's something else... that we do... that has to do with human thought...and when you put it side by side next to mathematics...starts to look incredibly similar. The thing he's talking about...is formal logic. Think about it. In the same way we can arrive at certainty about the notion that $1+1=2$...we can arrive at certainty about the notion that if all men are mortal, and Socrates is a man, then Socrates is mortal. If all A's are B's...and some B's are C's...then Some A's must be C's. Logic provides us with parameters for our thinking so that we can be sure that we're thinking clearly...but on the other hand when it comes to

math...really, when was the last time...barring you working in some sort of profession that requires advanced math on a daily basis...which I respect tremendously...tremendous amount of respect for those good, good people...you wouldn't believe how much I respect these people it's incredible...barring that, when was the last time you ever used anything beyond basic arithmetic in your every day life? When was the last time you triangulated the position of the oatmeal in your pantry?Point is, it may not often be very practically useful to know that the circumference of a circle is πr^2 , just like it may not be very useful to know that some b's are c's and some A's must be c's...and logic and math may resemble each other in this way, but a key difference between them...is that unlike math, at least logic can be applied directly to our thinking and help us determine if we're thinking correctly.Now what naturally follows from this...when you say something like all men are mortal, socrates is a man, therefore socrates is mortal...the thing that is implied when you say that is that there must be some sort of fundamental logical structure to all thought. Otherwise what are we referencing when we use formal logic. And what follows from THAT if you're wittgenstein...is that if there's a logical structure to all clear thinking, there must be a logical structure to communicating those thoughts. We have a name for this logical structure of communication...it's called language.This is the central task of Wittgenstein's entire body of work...to try to understand how language is even possible between human beings. To understand the function of language, to understand errors that people make in communication that inevitably lead to errors in their thinking. But in order to fully understand these things, you can't just look at language. Not only do you have to look at the relationship between language and the things it's describing, but also the relationship between our thoughts and language.Wittgenstein has two major works that cover this territory...one published after he died called Philosophical Investigations and one published earlier in his life called the Tractatus. Just to give you an idea...despite the fact that his later work tries to refute a lot of the stuff he laid out in the Tractatus...despite the fact the Tractatus is only 75 pages long...if you had a list of the top ten greatest works in history on the philosophy of language, both of these books would be on that list.So in the

Tractatus, Wittgenstein lays out what is more commonly known as the picture theory of language. Famous story...apparently he had kind of a Eureka moment when he was reading the paper about a court case where they were going to reenact the scene of the accident using fake people and fake cars to give the jury the clearest picture possible of what happened. It was in that moment that he realized... that the function of proper, effective language is descriptive. It describes states of affairs occurring in the world. See, practically everybody doesn't use language in a way that's as precise as Wittgenstein thinks is necessary in the Tractatus. Most of us just sort of, cavalierly throw around words and never really think about it because it does the job well enough. For example, I could be telling you a story about how I was walking through the park the other day and I saw this naked dude wearing a sandwich board that had "capture nicki minaj" written across it, and he was screaming about how she is an ancient shapeshifting mythical creature that has lived for thousands of years and terrorized every society that has ever existed and now she's doing it to us. We gotta stop her. Picture that scene. Now consider the fact that every person who just pictured that scene pictured a scene that was similar to others in some ways, but very different in others. And the reason there's so much variance between the pictures that I put in your heads is because I didn't respect the function of language, which is descriptive. Think of how many details I left out. Was it night time or day time? What was the weather like? How tall was this man? What color was the sandwich board? Are the police officers that are arresting this man state patrol or local precinct? I told you a story... and the arrangement of words I used worked well enough to relay to you a fun, educational anecdote about Nicki Minaj, but imagine somebody much more skilled than I at describing things that was capable of using the exact right words in the exact right configuration that could put the exact picture they have in their head into yours. In this way, language when used properly, PICTURES the world into somebody else's head. Wittgenstein thought if you analyze any sentence closely enough, you could eventually break it down into two primary parts...things he called "names"...which are terms that describe things in the world...things like the sandwich board, the trees and grass in the park, the police officers cat-o-nine-tails

whip...whipping him into submission...and the second part is how these names are specifically configured within the sentence. He thought that in same way there is a logical structure to the world and our thinking, whats the relationship to language? There must be some logical way that we can configure these names, some order, that directly mirrors the relationships between what actually happened in reality. Thereby, creating a PICTURE of the scene. But it's not enough just to know how reality actually is, we want to be able to speak clearly about every possible way that reality can be, right? So what follows from this if you're Wittgenstein, is that whenever you state a proposition, anything...it falls into one of three classes. If the proposition does picture reality as it truly is, then the proposition is true. If it doesn't accurately describe reality but describes a state of affairs that is theoretically possible, say that it was a girl wearing a sandwich board...then that statement is false. If the proposition describes something that is impossible or goes beyond the limits of language, the proposition is meaningless. Now Wittgenstein writes this 75 page book...and does he kick his feet up on the desk and have a keg party like every other philosopher does...no...he publishes the book...and then proceeds to quit philosophy. He quit because he thought the book solves every philosophical dispute that had ever existed. See people have been wasting their time in his eyes. From the very beginning people are asking questions like what is the meaning of my life? What is a life well lived? What is beauty? They've talked about this stuff they've argued back and forth and they cant seem to come to a consensus on any of it. Well, what if the reason this has always been the case... is because philosophers are using the wrong tool for the job? Asking things like what is beauty? What is the meaning of my life...these are transcendental questions. You're trying to use language...this thing designed to describe states of affairs in the world...this thing haphazardly thrown together by people ordering cheeseburgers over the years, you're trying to use language to contemplate what the meaning of your life is? Remember, language wasn't created in a lab by a philosopher king who made sure to include all kinds of neat words to be able to describe anything regardless of how transcendent it is...what if language is just incapable of describing these things...what if the reason "what is the meaning of my life" is such a perplexing

question, is because we're always trying to find an answer to it while using language? It's just not the right tool for the job...it's like trying to hammer in some drywall with a water bottle. It's just not gonna work. It should be noted Wittgenstein thinks you CAN find an answer to the question, "What is the meaning of my life." it's just not going to be through language, and you won't ever really be able to describe it through language. If it's possible to get an answer, it's something you have to experience. He says in one of his most famous lines: "The truth shows itself. It is not said or even expressed in thought. What can be said can be said clearly. Whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent." That's his famous line...and so many people out there hear it out of context and they think he's just saying, Well if you don't know what you're talking about you should probably keep your mouth shut! No, he's not parroting some warmed over truism there...he's saying that language is insufficient at describing these transcendental concepts, and that all these questions that philosophers have been agonizing over like what is the meaning of my life...this is just a result of their thinking being tangled up and confused about the limitations of language. The question what is the meaning of my life...is nonsensical to Wittgenstein...it's completely devoid of meaning. To even ask a question like that, to someone that truly understands the limits of language...would just confuse them. For example...when I say $1+1=4$...people that understand basic math instantly know that something is wrong there. Like I said before, for me to say something like $1+1=4$... that implies that I am either mistaken or don't understand the definitions of what I'm talking about. To Wittgenstein, asking a question like what is the meaning of my life is like asking a question like: How much red paint would it take to be funnier than sound waves? It just instantly shows the person's hand as someone that is confused about the limitations of language. And just how if I asked you that ridiculous question, you wouldn't respond back with an answer to me...oh it's gonna take a half gallon of red paint to do that kinda job!...no, you'd be like wait what? what are you talking about right now? Funnier than sound waves? In other words, you'd ask questions and try to clarify and unpack this very tangled, confused view that I have about the limits of language. This is the role of philosophy to Wittgenstein, to undo these misconceptions that people have

about the limitations of language and what happens at the end of that process, as the famous line goes...is that you are like a fly being let out of a fly bottle. Don't worry I didn't know what a fly bottle was either. Apparently it's a really old way people used to trap flies and then they sit there and watch it in its little prison as entertainment. Watch it do pushups. Sometimes flies group together and form gangs. We're trapped in a metaphorical fly bottle is what he's saying, philosophy's job is to show us the way out. We eventually realize that all these things we used to agonize over like what is the meaning of my life aren't actually problems that need to be solved at all. So as I said before, Wittgenstein writes the Tractatus... and then quits philosophy thinking that he had solved every major philosophical problem. Later in life he came to believe that he had drastically oversimplified what language is in the Tractatus...I heard it said beautifully once...in the beginning of Wittgenstein's life he was concerned with the relationship between language and reality...and towards the end of his life he was more concerned with the relationship between language and us as human beings. Probably one of the biggest changes between Wittgenstein in the Tractatus and Wittgenstein in his book Philosophical Investigations comes down to how he views the definitions of words and where words derive their meaning. What did people used to do when they were trying to get to the bottom of a definition? Well, let's go back to our old pal Socrates...he would go into the public square asking people to give him a definition of the word beauty or justice...he'd have conversations ad nauseum with his fellow philosophers trying desperately to get to a perfect definition that includes any example of beauty you can come up with. If you remember, so often in these dialogues a person will TRY to give an example of a perfect definition, but Socrates is somehow always able to find an example that doesn't fit the definition, or an example that fits the definition that no one would agree should be part of it. Wittgenstein would see Socrates spending his entire life looking for these definitions as yet another example of someone wasting their life because they didn't understand the nature of language. Wittgenstein would say that the meaning of words...it just doesn't work that way...that if Socrates lived a thousand lifetimes he would always be able to point out these exceptions to these strict definitions

that people like to throw out. He uses the example of the word "game". What is a game? Can we get a definition? Is it a competition between two or more people? Well solitaire's a game. Is it just a fun activity someone engages in? Well, riding a roller coaster is fun, but we wouldn't call THAT a game really. What criteria do we use to determine what a game is? Wittgenstein would say that the problem with us looking for this strict definition of the word game, is that we're looking at definitions in the same way that people have for centuries...we're trying to find necessary and sufficient conditions that define every example of a game that we can possibly think of. But what if it doesn't work that way? Wittgenstein would say, stop trying to find a perfect set of necessary and sufficient conditions...you're never gonna do it...and instead reflect on the strange fact...that everybody knows what a game is. When I said solitaire, somehow everybody knew it was a game. When I said going on a roller coaster, somehow everybody knew that shouldn't be classified as a game. What does that mean? How is that possible if we don't have the definition somewhere up in our heads? What it means to Wittgenstein is that the meaning of a word comes down to how it is being used in a particular linguistic community...and that unearthing the meanings of the words we use is a process of observing the way that people use the word. The meaning of a word isn't something that can be simplified into necessary and sufficient conditions...language is a complex, vibrant, living organism that's constantly shifting and changing. And that if literally everyone literally started using the word literally to just mean the same thing that "seriously" means. The meaning of the word literally would change entirely. In this sense... it's impossible... to ever come up with a dusty tome filled with the end all be all definitions of words...a perfect definition for the word game...for instance. But that what actually happens is we see things like basketball and bowling and call of duty and hopscotch and we hear the people around us use the word "game" to classify all these different activities...and our brain at some level recognizes similarities between all these games and we can sense it. Wittgenstein calls these "family resemblances" between things. Kind of like how you might look like your mom but not really your dad, or your second cousin might look like your uncle but not your mom, or your grandpa may have

the same male pattern baldness that your sister has...there are very distinct differences, but you guys all share the same family, and even if you don't look like your dad, you look a lot more like him than I do, coming from a different family. Same thing goes with the meaning of words to Wittgenstein. It's not that there's a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions that describes every game out there...there are just some games that resemble each other more, like some family members resemble each other more.

Basketball, Football, Baseball...all very similar. Two teams play against each other and they have a ball. Monopoly is also a game...there's no ball in it, but it shares certain characteristics with Football right? Like millionaires fighting against each other. What Wittgenstein's trying to do is illustrate how crucial culture and people are in the process of forming or developing a language. He thinks Descartes sitting around wondering if anybody else exists is absolutely preposterous...because to even be able to articulate yourself through language is evidence of a giant gift you've inherited from many people before and around you. He has a famous example called the Beetle in the Box Analogy. Do you have any friends or coworkers where you guys have inside jokes and refer to things as a code name? If anybody else heard you talking about it they would be confused, but it has an established meaning between the two of you? This is a perfect example of how meaning is derived from use...and that a language can't be created in a vacuum by a single person, because words get their meaning from an understanding between speakers. He goes the other way. He says imagine everybody in the entire world had a box that they carry around. Inside of this box is something everyone refers to as a "beetle". Problem is, no matter what...no one can ever look inside of anyone else's box and see what they're referencing as a beetle. In that world, there's no way for you to ever be able to use the word "beetle" in any sort of meaningful way. You have no idea what they refer to as a beetle, and they have no idea the meaning you attach to the word beetle. So what happens is...the word beetle just becomes kind of meaningless. You need at least one other person who knows what you're referencing when you say beetle for this language you've come up with to get off the ground. Anyway, hopefully some thought provoking stuff for you this week. Thank you for your patience regarding the infrequency, and the

abrupt ending... just got done moving. I won't take up any more of your time. Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you next time.

Schopenhauer pt. 1 - Metaphysics and Love

Episode #098

This is a transcript of episode #098 on Arthur Schopenhauer. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So today is the first episode in a series on Arthur Schopenhauer. Notoriously a guy that thinks this world is a pretty miserable place, notoriously a guy that sees our everyday lives as similar to being on a sunny plain with a dark cloud over your head that follows you around...you see the sunlight all around you and you try to get to it but you never will...he's notoriously a guy that sees the pinnacle of human virtue...or a sage in his philosophical system is someone that rejects any sort of worldly, human desire and spends their days living like an ascetic monk...depriving themselves of everything. Now I'm going to go out on a limb and say that the majority of people listening to this, probably don't view their lives in the same sort of pessimistic way that Schopenhauer does...probably a little confused right now. Why... would he say that? In this series we'll ask the hard hitting questions: Is Arthur Schopenhauer just a drama queen...is this the world's oldest thirteen year old kid that didn't get an iPad for Christmas? Or is there maybe something...that Schopenhauer presents as a foundation for why all these things aren't as dramatic as they might initially seem? Quick spoiler...uh one of the things that makes Schopenhauer super interesting when it comes to the history of human thought... is that he's the first major philosopher to use only the work of western thinkers before him and independently arrive at conclusions... that start to look eerily similar to the conclusions laid out in the lot of eastern philosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the like. So anyway...probably the best place to start is to talk about the sort of... metaphysical bedrock that he builds this philosophical system on top of...and the way he CONSTRUCTS this foundation is by building off of the work of someone I'm proud to call a friend...friend of the show, love to have him on again sometime to catch up...I'm of course talking about Mr. Immanuel Kant. So, Kant's big famous distinction that he made. I get it, we probably talk about it a little too much on this show and you can always go

back to the Kant episodes if you want a more comprehensive refresher course...but just in case this is the first time someone's ever listened to the show...really briefly I want to go over it again. Look around you right now. Look at the world around you. What exactly is going on for you to be able to have these images inside of your head, this picture of the world that you have? Well if you're Kant...what's happening is your senses are receiving raw information...you're seeing things, hearing things, smelling things...and you're filtering this raw information through your brain that organizes and makes sense of it by using various mental faculties. Cause and effect, Space and Time, how things relate to each other. In other words, your senses and mental faculties come together in a coalition...and combine their forces to be able to create for you the crude map of the world that allows you to navigate it. But is this crude map of the world a total picture of reality? For example, you can have experiences with things...you can be walking through the park and come across a rock...right? You can pick that rock up...you can turn it from side to side, look at it...you can smell it...spread some breadcrumbs on the ground...throw it at a group of pigeons...save some money. You can do all kinds of different things with a rock, but your human experience of that rock... is not the totality of what that rock is. For any number of reasons, for example you certainly wouldn't deny that while you see the rock as a solid, static and unchanging thing... if we took that rock and looked at it under an electron microscope... you'd see that it was actually 99.9% empty space and constantly moving. Point is... there's a disconnect between this crude map that we draw in our human experience of the world... and how things actually are in reality. There's something out there that is feeding our senses that raw information. Raw information that is then filtered through our mental faculties and transmuted into this picture of the world that we have, so what is it? Kant says that there are two worlds...the world of human experience...that's the world that you see around you that we have access to...and the world of what he called "things in themselves" or the way that reality is... independent of human experience. Now if you're Kant...no matter how hard we try... we will never be able to directly access this world of things in themselves...all we'll ever be able to do is understand our human experience of that world. Now if you're

Schopenhauer on the other hand...you agree with Kant to a large extent...but Schopenhauer thinks Kant's making a few brazen assumptions... that might be preventing us from knowing more about this other world out there. First of all...Kant...when you say something like, The World of Things in Themselves...isn't that sort of pidgeon holing it a bit? Isn't that sort of... shading the way that we think about this other world out there...isn't that sort of biasing us towards assuming that whatever it is that does exist out there... is a collection of things? Seems like a harmless assumption to make...but it's a good question: Is what lies on the other side of this veil of perception... a collection of things necessarily? I mean, certainly in our human experience of the world we see things like dogs, trees, people, rocks...and certainly whatever it is on the other side manifests itself in our human experience as a bunch of things...but isn't that just another way we categorize things in our human experience of the world? Why does that say anything for certain about this other world? Schopenhauer would say...think about what you're implying when you say Things in themselves. You're sort of assuming... that plurality is a thing in this other world. You're assuming that all these things that seem to be separate in our human experience of the world...rocks, trees, people...are actually separate in this other world. But can we safely assume that? Couldn't it easily be that this other world is made up of one singular thing. A singular thing that we humans just mistake as a bunch of separate things because... that's just how our brains can make sense of it? See it's so tempting to only look at what Kant's saying through the lens of materialism...to hear this distinction about how limited our human experience is and to be like you know what...he's right. I admit it. oly oly oxenfree!...I am but a feeble human...my senses and mental faculties are horrible...but you know...maybe this is just a crude map of what actually exists...but lets just be real...when I'm looking at a tree...whatever it is on the other side pretty much looks like a tree. Right...I mean sure maybe if I had some better eyes... I could see it different?...sure if I had the eyes of a pelican I'd be able to see things a little better congratulations...you know maybe if I had some super human level of mental faculties...if I had the mental faculties of... Captain Crunch...you know if I was a Captain Crunch looking...pelican

seeing kind of guy...maybe id order things a little more clearly...but ultimately...if I somehow had access to this world of things in themselves...trees would still pretty much look like trees...they just wouldnt be the crude outline of it that I have right now...But Schopenhauer would ask...why is that necessarily the case? And doesn't that just sound like what a human being would tell themselves if they wanted to feel super special? Like if they wanted to tell themselves that these senses and mental faculties... that really only depict the world in the way that they do because they gave some mutated fish with a gimp leg a reproductive advantage in a completely random set of atmospheric conditions...yeah, these senses must have just a vice grip on the fabric of reality...right? Starts to make you wonder about what this world of things in themselves is like. What might it be like? Another question...how strange of a place might this be? Given the fact that we're really only basing what seems likely aabout it on our human intuitions.Again, Kant thought we'd never be able to directly access this world of things in themselves...we'd only be able to access our human experience of it. And again, Schopenhauer agrees with Kant to a large extent...but he thinks Kant's overlooking something that is extremely importantthere . See, philosophers since Kant have all tried to figure out stuff about this world of things in themselves by studying things in our human experience...they'd look at things like rocks, and trees and people...you know all these external things that appear to be seperate from eachother in our human experience of then...and a common strategy is they try to somehow subtract... our human experience from them...goal being to hopefully learn something about the things in themselves. But Schopenhauer thought, instead of looking outside of ourselves to find an answer...why not look inside? Why not turn inward... and try to understand something that we have a much more intimate understanding of than anything outside of ourselves.

Our...selves.He says it here:"Consequently, a way from within stands open to us to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate from without. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that cannot be taken by attack from without."Schopenhauer would want you to ask yourself...what are you at your core? Look inward. When you truly...endeavor

fearlessly into understanding the nature of your being...what do you come face to face with? What are you? Well you seem to be... a bag of skin and bones...but it's a bag of skin and bones that seems to be animated by something, right? Now, he's not talking about a soul or a spirit or anything here...he's an atheist...what he's saying is that from the moment we come out of the womb... for some reason...there seems to be this force...that's directing us...a force that 99% of us take for granted because it's the only life we've ever known...but it's what he calls this sub conscious...restless...striving for things. This restless striving for your next meal...or a new car...or a better job...if you're a baby it's for your next bottle...or to roll across the room and stick your maraca toy into a light socket, they seem to like to do that. Point is, why does the default state of human being seem to be animated by a constant restless striving for things? Always wanting...always reaching and trying to get something. You get your new baseball hat...and then what? You're done? You just spend the rest of your life sitting around staring at it and stroking it...like you're Golem? No, you find something else to restlessly strive for. We'll talk a lot more about this dynamic next episode, but the explanation for all of this restless striving if you're Schopenhauer...is that the world of things in themselves...is not a world of things at all...that what exists on the other side of this veil of perception... is a single force that he calls the will to life. Sometimes he just calls it Will. Personally I don't really like calling it that...little bit misleading...reason being...in the philosophy departments of major universities calling it Will in that context just makes it kind of confusing because that's the great philosopher Jaden Smith's dad's name. And everybody gets confused. What follows from this if you're Schopenhauer...is that what you are...what you've always been...is a manifestation of this force. A thing cast into this realm condemned to restlessly strive. And what follows from THAT if you're Schopenhauer... is that it's not just you...everything in the ENTIRE UNIVERSE is also a manifestation of this force. An asteroid has a will to be an asteroid. A raccoon has a will to be a raccoon. Although in our human experience of the world we make sense of things by thinking in terms of things being separate from each other, space, time, cause and effect...although we do that...that's only the way we make sense of it from our point of view and that the

reality is that everything in the entire universe is actually one... we're all one thing...a force...that's manifesting itself in countless different ways in our human experience. Now at first glance you may think: Hooray! We're all one! I knew it! What an amazing thing to believe! Now we can all start being nice to each other. Uh, no. Think of the implications... of the metaphysical picture Schopenhauer just laid out. If everything in the universe is one...and everybody has their own restless striving that they're working on...I gotta eat eventually, don't I? Slowly the reality sets in that an inexorable part of my existence... is that I must destroy another thing that is restlessly striving so that I can continue restlessly striving. In other words...I'm a manifestation of this force...this plant is a manifestation of this force...we are one...that means I have to cannibalize myself in order to continue restlessly striving. In fact, that's not even the word for it...what's the word for when you eat yourself? Actually if you know the answer to that question...please please...do not send me an email I want to stay as far away from you as I possibly can. Now imagine what our lives navigating this universe become if you're Schopenhauer. We essentially live in a giant realm, directed by this constant desire to restlessly strive for things, living alongside everything else in existence that also is restlessly striving for things. Now imagine there's no divine providence. It's easy if you try. In other words imagine there's nothing governing the universe that cares whether you get hit by a commuter train, or whether your mom gets her medication or whether an asteroid the size of Europe wants to occupy the same place in space Europe wants to occupy. For all intents and purposes...we exist in a massive completely disinterested realm with a veritable infinity of wills that are potentially competing with ours. We're condemned to a life of neurotically, restlessly striving for things...forced to self-mutilate just for the luxury of being able to continue restlessly striving for things. To top it off...once you're aware of the reality of the fact that we're all one...now you get to look around you and see the massive amount of suffering that's visited every second of every day and you realize that that's ultimately YOU suffering. Schopenhauer asks...what thing what person would ever choose to live in such a miserable place? Yet we persist because of that force we're all manifestations of...it's too strong...most people go their entire lives not even

considering it...just restlessly striving until they die one day. He actually thinks it's being aware of how miserable this universe is that ultimately prompts people to do any kind of philosophy. He seems to think there's some kind of connection between how miserable you think the world is and your level of intellect."The lower a man is in an intellectual respect, the less puzzling and mysterious existence is to him. On the contrary, everything, how it is and that it is, seems to him a matter of course."In other words if you're Schopenhauer, you spend your entire life wrapping your head around this force that we're all manifestations of, while some other dude just never even thinks about it...or I guess a better example...if you're of a high intellect and existence is mysterious and interesting to you you seek out stuff like the philosophize this! podcast with stephen west...while everyone else sits at home slowly dying watching Larry the Cable Guy.Now some of you are probably saying aw come on Schopenhauer...it's.. not... that.. bad...the world is not some miserable place necessarily...what about all the good stuff? Maybe you're miserable...maybe you didn't design your life in a way where you have amazing people and things surrounding you all the time...but I did...and I can tell you from experience the universe is not a miserable place.To Schopenhauer...we do this don't we? We plan and design our lives around trying to drown out that constant hum of misery that's in the back of our minds. We sit around and think about what we think's gonna make us happy...and we tell ourselves that we ultimately do the things we do because we think it's going to make us happy. Now what's a really common prescription that somebody writes very early on in life about what is going to make them happy? What is a common thing that people want at some point in their life that they think is going to fill their life with joy? Well I want to graduate college, I want to get a job, live in the city...I want to meet somebody...fall in love...get married...have kids and live happily ever after.Now if you're somebody listening to this that has this dream of falling in love getting married and having kids...or if you're somebody that has had this dream at some point in the past...Schopenhauer would probably ask you...why do you think you have this dream? Specifically...this one in particular? Why do you think so many other people have this very same dream? Why are you so sure that getting married and having kids is going

to bring you happiness? And intuitively as human beings the answer seems pretty straightforward. Companionship, someones always gonna be there for you, you have these rugrats running around with mammilian brains...they can't even choose to hate me if they wanted to. Sounds like a pretty good deal.Schopenhauer would say that that may be the story you tell yourself in your head of why you want love in your life but it's not why you're actually doing it. And look love to Schopenhauer is no question one of the greatest things in life...he's just saying understand...the TRUE reason...you have such a strong desire to fall in love during your lifetime. He's thinks that love is an elaborate scam. Run from the altars! Call the Attorney General! You're being CONNED people. You're not getting married and having kids because you think it's going to make you happy...no, the will to life...this force we are all enslaved to... is subconsciously compelling you... to want kids... for the sake of the propogation of the species.Just think about the decision to have kids. Think about ALL the costs associated with it. The financial cost, diapers are expensive. The emotional cost, cleaning crayon off the wall. The opportunity cost, all the things you could be doing. The cost of sleep deprivation. The cost of fearing for their safety. The cost of getting frustrated with them. Having a kid is an absolutely MASSIVE responsibility to take on, nobody would disagree with that.Schopenhauer thinks... that if you truly considered all the costs associated with having kids before having them...no rational being... would ever have kids! No person thinking clearly would ever trade 10-15 minutes of feeling good for a lifetime of costs and responsibilities. He says that the will to life REALIZES this...and it needs some powerful feeling that it can evoke in you... and make you into a completely irrational person for a short period of time so that you will have kids and keep the species going...we call this feeling of irrationality...love. Love feels so good and people want it so badly in their lives...but to Schopenhauer it is the vehicle driving you to commit some crime that you'll later plead temporary insanity to.I mean think of all the irrational things people have done in the name of love. Think of the blinders they put on. Think of the stories they tell themselves the games that they play. They're sick people. Now some of you may be asking ok Schopenhauer...if Love really is just a force that's enslaving me with the sole

task of propagating the species...why don't I love everyone? Couldn't I have kids with basically anyone walking down the street barring them having had some sort of tragic, tragic accident? Well yeah, you could. But the propagation of the species is not just concerned with sheer numbers, there are other criteria involved...and that whether you realize it or not...the reason you fall in love with the people you do...is not because you actually like things about their personality or feel comfortable with them...it's because you're subconsciously reading something about them. You're reading that they have strengths in areas you have weaknesses, and they're reading that you have strengths where THEY have weaknesses. Aspects of your character and appearance balance out each other...the end product of this entire exchange being...more balanced and healthy children that are more likely to go on and reproduce. Schopenhauer thought that people who are tall tend to end up with people who are short. People who are meek tend to end up with people who are more courageous. Even though to you it feels like you are making a free choice... and that you just really like this person...what is actually going on is that you are being sub consciously manipulated... by the will to life to be attracted to a person that will create balanced children. Now this really just leaves one question...if you're someone that's unfortunate enough to be a person that is a 1 out of 10 on the attractive scale...where are these hoardes of supermodels that are helplessly attracted to me schopenhauer...where are they?! I'm walking proof you're wrong Schopenhauer...but he does bring up an interesting point. Maybe this is the reason so many people have the experience where they meet someone fall in love get married have kids...and then either get divorced or remain emiserated in a relationship for decades staying together for the kids. Why is that such a common thing that people do? Schopenhauer says getting married is like grasping blind into a sack of snakes and hoping to find an eel. This is a passage from his work *The World As Will and Representation*: "A girl who rejects the proposal of a wealthy and not old man, against her parents' convenience according to her instinctive inclination, sacrifices her individual welfare to that of the species. But on this very account, we cannot withhold a certain approbation; for she has preferred what is more important and has acted in the spirit of nature (more precisely of the species),

whereas the parents advised her in the spirit of individual egoism. In consequence of all this, it seems as if, in making a marriage, either the individual or the interest of the species must come off badly. Often this must be the case, for that convenience and passionate love should go hand in hand is the rarest stroke of good fortune."What he's saying is, if you're with someone...in his view you're with them because the will to life is subconsciously coercing you into having balanced children and propogating the species. And that may render you in a state of temporary insanity...but just know that once you have that kid...you aren't with somebody that is necessarily emotionally compatible to you...once you propogate the species...once that haze of insanity lifts off of you...you very well may find yourself in a relationship with someone that you actually despise. One things for sure to Schopenhauer...MUCH of the time people find themselves fighting a battle to stay together... and that it is EXTREMELY rare to have happened to fall in love with someone that you're compatible with...because...the criteria you were using initially had nothing to do with compatibility.Anyway, Schopenhauer was a huge fan of love despite not having much of it himself throughout his life. I think the key thing about love he'd want people to realize preferably as early in life as possible...is that we often sit around thinking about how our lives are going to play out...we know that we want to be happy...and we often mistakenly conflate falling in love and being a happy person. We often think that there is some sort of direct connection between the two. Schopenhauer wanted us to realize that the process of falling in love and the process of being a happy person are COMPLETELY seperate from eachother. You can be happy without love and you can love someone without being happy. Understand love for what it truly is...an extreme feeling that is needed to temporarily convince perfectly rational beings to do the most irrational thing they could ever do in their lives. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Schopenhauer pt. 2 - Ethics

Episode #099

This is a transcript of episode #099 on Arthur Schopenhauer. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So last episode Schopenhauer presented us with a picture...a picture of what he thinks is the metaphysical reality that we all navigate. Turns out it's a pretty grim picture...scary picture...not exactly the kind of picture you're gonna be posting up on Instagram. ...uh...I mean, you have a bad picture on Instagram it's easy...you just put 18 filters on it until it looks halfway decent. There's no filter that fixes this picture...you can have the worlds greatest filter...you can have that one that superimposes bunny ears on everyone...you're not posting this picture...look, if you post this picture you're getting three likes...your mom, your dad and some 80 year old dude that liked it by accident. I mean, think of what Schopenhauer is saying! Although things appear to be separate in our human experience of the world, the reality is we are all manifestations of a single thing, a force, that he calls the will to life. We exist in this realm... with a subconscious motor constantly driving us forward where... the only way TO move forward... is to interfere with or destroy the other manifestations of this force that surround us. As I said last episode: We're condemned to a life of neurotically, restlessly striving for things...and we're forced to self-mutilate just for the luxury of being able to continue restlessly striving for things. This is the picture of your life. And Schopenhauer thought...many of us may tell ourselves a story...we may even put our very own Instagram filter, or 10 filters on this life to try to make that picture look better to us...but the reality is, figuratively speaking...you do have dark circles under your eyes, your skin DOES look disgusting in that picture and the whites of your eyes do look like you have jaundice. It's a bad picture. Speaking from personal experience there...anyway so Schopenhauer paints this picture of our lives...but we haven't heard much about what he thinks this means in terms of how we should be behaving...and I think a good place to start is to take a look at how most of us typically behave...talk about why Schopenhauer THINKS we behave this

way...and then talk about what he thinks is the greatest way to live. So let's do it! Schopenhauer thinks that because we're all manifestations of this will to life...from the moment we come out of the womb...we're in this constant state of restlessly striving for things. Now it's one thing to speak about it with generalities...but in practice...what does this restless striving for things actually look like in our everyday experience of the world? Well the good news is: everybody listening to this can relate...because everybody listening to this is currently restlessly striving for something...and if you're somebody out there that DOESN'T think you are...you know that guy...look even if you're some monk listening to this on top of a mountain while you dust off the giant Buddha statue, extend an olive branch...you can at least look around you and relate to the fact that people don't spend their lives in some perpetual state of contentment. No, human beings live their lives moving from one state of discontent to the next. This is nothing new...we've talked about it several times on this show before. Everybody listening to this currently wants something that they don't have...and MOST people listening to this tell themselves a story, maybe not consciously it's not like a mantra you're repeating to yourself everyday...but at some level most of us believe that once we get enough things that we want... or we achieve some level of status in the world...then I'm gonna be satisfied. Then I'm going to be happy and just live out the rest of my days smiling constantly...you're gonna have a six-pack on your cheeks because you never stop smiling. There's almost endless possibilities of how human beings engage in this behavior. Some people do it with material possessions...once I get my dream car...I'm done. I'm just gonna spend the rest of my life driving around in my car waving at people...that will be my legacy...once I complete my extensive collection of Star Wars memorabilia...I'm just gonna sit around...the rest of my life looking at it saying things to myself like well, would you look at that. People do it with jobs, friends, romantic relationships, weight loss goals, Twitter followers...people will do it where they'll close their eyes...and they'll imagine the best version of themselves they can imagine...and they'll say if only I can get rid of these bad habits that I have and replace them with this ideal collection of good habits...then I'm going to be totally satisfied with the person I am. Once I get to that point, I will be so

proud of what I've accomplished... I won't ever feel the need to improve anything ever again. But what actually happens? Again, it's nothing new, but what actually happens is you get the dream car...yeah...you ride around in it smiling and waving at people for a couple weeks...but then it just becomes...your car at a certain point. Then inevitably...there's something else that you're desiring every day. You improve things about yourself as a person... and yeah you feel proud for a couple weeks...and then inevitably...there's something else you want to improve about yourself. You could have it all...you could have used your brains, cleverness, pattern recognition, relentless hard work and you could have killed it in the private sector...sitting out on your yacht with a glass of chardonnay just gazing out at the world that you essentially just conquered. But is it enough to essentially conquer the world...no...at that point you have to run for president and ACTUALLY conquer the world. This is what we are as human beings to Schopenhauer...manifestations of this will to life... that are constantly restlessly striving for things in a perpetual state of discontent. Schopenhauer compares it to running through a sunny field...there's sunlight all around you, but there is a single dark cloud in the sky that is hanging directly over your head. You can see sunlight in every direction...you can see happiness...it seems within reach, but no matter how fast you run this dark cloud is going to follow you around and you're never actually get to the sunlight. This is what it means to be a human being in our default state to Schopenhauer. Now some of you may be asking really Schopenhauer? Nobody ever gets to touch that sunlight? Even for a very brief period of time? I mean maybe you're right that I just have these goals that I'm restlessly striving for that are never going to bring me long term happiness...but the fact is...when I get my dream car...I really DO feel great for a couple weeks. Aren't I experiencing happiness for whatever little amount of time I can in that scenario? Schopenhauer would say no, you're not...look, your default state is to suffer and restlessly strive for things. When you get the car...you haven't ascended to some new plane of existence known as "happiness"...it's that suffering has been temporarily removed from your life as you normally experience it. That really great way that you feel when you're in that place...getting your dream car...feeling on cloud 9...Schopenhauer

thinks that's the way you might POTENTIALLY be able to feel like all the time...if the reality of your existence wasn't that you are a manifestation of this will to life condemned to restlessly strive and suffer. It's not that happiness has been added...but that suffering has been subtracted. Now another thing you might be saying is OK, so I suffer. OK, so I'm condemned to a life of restlessly striving for things...but I'm confused

Schopenhauer...why don't I feel as miserable and you're making me feel like I should be? What if I LOVE my life. This suffering that you're talking about...this isn't something I'm thinking about on a daily basis. Why am I not miserable if I'm truly in this dark, depressing universe that you're talking about? Well imagine a war vet...stepped on a bouncin' betty in WW2...blew part of his foot off. He gets medically discharged, sent back to the states, gets surgery...doctors do all they can...but there's limitations, of course. Let's say there's permanent nerve damage...and let's say no matter what they do...for the rest of his life whenever he puts weight on that left foot of his...whenever he takes a step...there's just going to be a little bit of pain in that foot. Can't fix it. Well what does the veteran do in that situation? Does he sit around for the rest of his life agonizing about it? Does he hyper focus on the pain every time he takes a step? Does he let this injury make him miserable every day of his life? No, he just accepts the unfortunate condition that he's in...and tries to sort of just tune out the pain as he's walking...eventually gets to the point... that he doesn't even notice it anymore...it's just what life is to him. But is that pain not there just because he's taught himself a neat trick where he doesn't pay attention to it? Of course it's still there and Schopenhauer thinks we're not so different from this war vet. Just because this suffering is the only life we've ever known and we've learned to accept it and not allow it to make us miserable...doesn't mean that the suffering isn't there. Most of us are so good at tuning it out that we just accept it as the only way life could ever be. But just imagine if it was possible for you to feel the way you feel when you first get your dream car or accomplish some lofty goal...what if it was possible for you to feel that way a lot more of the time, or all the time. This contrast just goes to show... how much suffering we all accept as just the only way life can be...it's just this hum in the background that we've learned to deal with like the war vet has learned to

deal with the pain in his foot. Now the LAST thing I want to do when talking about Schopenhauer's philosophy is to alienate someone out there. There's a type of person that we haven't talked about yet, a type of person that's probably feeling a little left out right now. Thank you Mr. Schopenhauer for taking my question. What about me...what if you're somebody that doesn't have any goals or the slightest inclination to strive for anything really...and pretty much just a general feeling overall that you don't care about anything or anyone on this God forsaken planet and that all of this is meaningless? What about me? Schopenhauer would say, Yep, that'll happen. That will happen. Especially in these modern times... when we have this cushy thing we call civilization... that makes it so that we don't really have to strive for anything if we don't want to...didn't always used to be that way. In hunter gatherer times...if you're not restlessly striving for something, you're dead in a week. Nowadays... it's an option as a human being to just...not have any goals...or to sit around lost... wondering what you want in life and never really take action on anything. Schopenhauer says what this type of person's life becomes... is a life of boredom...or depression...or anxiety. They're bored because they're manifestations of this will to life...and they don't have anything to restlessly strive for...they're not doing the very thing they were put into this universe to do. They're depressed, because, again, they don't have anything to strive for. There's this sense of purpose that's missing when you don't have any goals that you truly care about. They're anxious...because instead of striving for some goal they want to achieve, they just sit around this engine that's redlining...subconsciously this will to life is making them feel like this meth addict...ooh I gotta strive today I gotta strive!...and when they don't have anything to put that energy into they end up turning that energy inward and restlessly striving over all these little things that they have no control over. People find themselves in this situation for a lot of different reasons, but I guess the point is...after you've worked hard and achieved some goals... and expected happiness to be on the other side of them and you don't get it...an alluring trap to fall into is to just not do anything...what good is doing all this work anyway? Schopenhauer says the only way out of this trap... that's available to the general public...is you have to find some way to go back...you have to find some way to delude

yourself into believing that once you accomplish some goal that you have, it's going to make you happy. Now, the good news is, no matter how extreme of a case you are in this place...there's hope for you because remember...you are a manifestation of the will to life...you at your core WANT to restlessly strive for things...it's part of your nature...you just have to be open-minded and actively search for things that you want. You grind long enough, you stay open minded enough and eventually you're going to find something...you're gonna come across a picture of a white sandy beach with beautiful people frolicking around and you're going to say you know what...it has been ages since I've had a good frolic. I want to do that. And off you go. So two broad classes of people. You have the people that are going to ceaselessly strive and desire things for the rest of their life and try to tune out the suffering the best they can...and you have people who don't have meaningful goals that are going to end up bored, anxious, depressed, many turn to drugs to try to soften the sting of that suffering. Schopenhauer thinks 99.9% of people are going to find themselves in these two categories and they're going to die in these two categories. We've talked about his prescription for the people who are bored... but he also has a tactic for the other group... if they ever want a temporary respite from the otherwise constant suffering that they're going to be experiencing on a daily basis. I want to ask a question...and bear with me at first this question may seem kind of tangential, but I think it's a good way to illustrate his point here. Why is it... that pretty much unanimously every human being loves a good view? Why do we pay so much more for property that has an amazing view in the back yard? Why do we love going on a hike, coming to the edge of a ravine and looking out at a vast expanse of trees and lakes and snow capped mountains...people call it breathtaking...why? Why does it do that to us? Now there's a lot of different theories about this. Some philosophers say... that everything we think is beautiful is ultimately derived from some aspect of nature...and that when we find ourselves on the edge of a cliff...from a vantage point that human beings don't typically get to see nature...we're hit with this tsunami of beauty and it just becomes kind of an overload to our systems. But there are other theories...heard a theory on a podcast once and thought about it for a long time...the theory was that maybe the

reason we all love a really nice view is because...we have these reward systems set up in our brains...maybe over the course of hundreds of thousands of years of our ancestors trying to subsist...we've inherited a feel good response when we come to the edge of a ravine and see the fresh water and the trees and life flourishing...that whole scene giving our ancestors the message in theory that they're going to live another day. But that's not entirely consistent, right? There's places like the Red Rock Conservatory in Nevada...undeniably gorgeous views...it's a barren desert wasteland though...life isn't flourishing there...if I got lost and went on a 20 minute nature walk out there I'd come back one giant freckle. But it's still a beautiful view. Schopenhauer would say that the reason we all love a good view is not for any of these reasons, we love it but because it allows us...if only for a couple of minutes...to escape...this state of constantly striving and desiring and reaching for things. Think about it, when you're on the edge of that cliff...and you're looking out at this amazing view...what are you thinking about in that moment? Are you thinking about getting that promotion? Are you thinking about the leopard interior that you want in your dream car? No...you are totally consumed by that moment. Totally present. We love a good view because for just a couple minutes...we're not thinking about anything but the beauty of what is in front of us. But Schopenhauer didn't think we only have this sort of experience when we're staring at a beautiful view outdoors...he thought we could have this moment... with ANYTHING beautiful enough to captivate us like this. Music, have you ever had a song where you're feeling it so much you're not thinking of anything but the song and singing into your hairbrush in the mirror? Or how about a great movie that you feel just totally immersed in, you almost forget that you're in the middle of a movie theater. Even our super modern forms of art...how about a video game that's so good you can't put the controller down. It's in these moments, to Schopenhauer, that great art and even great philosophy can captivate us to the point that we can briefly escape this otherwise constant striving for things that is our default state as a manifestation of the will to life. You know it's funny...culturally...at least in the United States...working really hard every day striving towards your goals... that's one of the most virtuous qualities you can have. Somebody

that spends the vast majority of their life... listening to music and watching movies and playing video games...when that person arrives at the end of their life... and they're 80 years old sitting around the poker table at Shady Acres...talking about what they did throughout their life...that's not a person their peers are going to have a lot of respect for. Here's Schopenhauer saying maybe there was some wisdom in that kind of a lifestyle that might not be immediately evident. Another interesting thing to think about is...you know in the same way we shouldn't relegate our teachers to people that work at a university or people that look or talk a certain way...and that if you're looking for it...theres wisdom in every situation that you're in...I mean the other day I learned something from Sesame Street...that's right..the great philosopher Big Bird gave me an insight that really made me feel great about my life...you know in the same way there is wisdom in every situation...there is beauty in every situation, again, if we're willing to look for it. Now, if by appreciating beauty we can temporarily escape from this default state of restless striving...is it maybe possible...that if someone had an extreme hypervigilance towards the beauty in every moment...in other words...if they actively sought out and appreciated the beauty all around them every second of every day...could they maybe permanently escape this default state that Schopenhauer talks about. Just interesting to think about. So that's your lot in life, people. Get over it. Sorry it wasn't the answer you were hoping for...but the reality is 99.9% of us are going to be stuck in this type of existence... until we die someday. But what is this .1% of people we keep talking about? Who are they? Schopenhauer thinks there is a third type of person out there...an extremely rare type of person...I'm certainly not one of them...it's a person that is so special that they are capable of living a life that is in keeping with what he sees as the pinnacle of human virtue. A sage in his philosophical system. This sage is somebody that uses their intellect to arrive at several conclusions that naturally follow from each other, if you're Schopenhauer...conclusions that lead this person to a single lifestyle... that they share with other sages. To Schopenhauer, the first reality that a sage has to arrive at... is that everything in the universe is ultimately one. And when you arrive at that conclusion...what happens is you take a look around you...and you see all of these

individual aspects of the will to life interfering with and encroaching upon... OTHER aspects of the will to life. You see a cat eating a mouse...you see a mother and her baby getting hit by a drunk driver...you see an asteroid hitting a planet...you see... the absolute maelstrom of suffering that is visited every day in this universe...and the sage realizes something...they realize that this suffering...is ultimately them suffering, because we're all one thing. From this point, the sage searches for what is causing this suffering so that maybe they can do something about it. What is the force responsible for this entire existence and all of the suffering within it? The Will to life. From there, there's only one path forward. Much like waging an inner-Jihad against vice or not being the best person you can possibly be...Schopenhauer says that the sage wages an inner war against the will to life...totally rejecting all the things it compels people to do. Never having sex...not eating good food just for the sake of it being good tasting...living in solitude...denying any desires for fame or fortune...the sage in Schopenhauer's system... wages a war against the will to life by refusing to participate... in the game that it put us here to play. The life of this sage, as you can imagine, starts to resemble the life of an ascetic monk. This, is the pinnacle of human virtue to Schopenhauer...now did HE live this way? No, but he did live more this way than most people do...he DID famously live out the rest of his life alone in an apartment with his pet poodle. Now regardless of how you feel about never having ice cream again, selling all your stuff and spending the rest of your life sitting in your empty living room resisting this urge to strive for things...Schopenhauer does make some really valuable insights. Yes, he uses some melodramatic language to express himself at times, and yes, if you accept his world picture you may not feel as excited as you are now about getting dressed up in your suit and tie outfit and going and giving a presentation on Monday...but I think Schopenhauer DOES do a really good job of pointing out how easy it is for us...to be like that war veteran that we talked about. To find ourselves born into this existence... where suffering is an inexorable part of life... and to just tell ourselves a story... and try to do our best to forget about how much suffering we're actually going through. Should we be just accepting it, or should we be doing more to try to eliminate that suffering? Should our ultimate goal in life be to never

experience any suffering, ever? Now on the other hand, if you're Nietzsche...who spent much of his work responding to the work of Schopenhauer...Nietzsche agrees that suffering is an inexorable part of life, but he has a different view of it. Like we talked about on the Nietzsche series, the goal shouldn't be to completely rid yourself of any kind of suffering...you should EMBRACE suffering...if you're someone that's been through a lot of bad stuff in your life...feel privileged to be a person fortunate enough to have gone through that immense suffering...because you are now a more powerful person than someone else that just had it easy their whole life...instead of getting rid of suffering recognize it for what it truly is...as his famous line goes, "That which does not kill me makes me stronger." But anyway, whether you agree with Schopenhauer's pessimistic worldview or not, he does a great job I think of getting us to think about our human experience of reality, our place within the universe and I guess I'll close with my favorite Schopenhauer quote that I think just encapsulates his work...he's talking here about the biggest assumption, the biggest error that he thinks people make when they're looking at their existence: "There is only one inborn error, and that is the notion that we exist in order to be happy. So long as we persist in this inborn error...the world will seem to us full of contradictions. For at every step, in great things and small, we are bound to experience that the world and life are certainly not arranged for the purpose of being happy. That's why the faces of almost all elderly people are deeply etched with such disappointment." Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Heidegger pt. 1 - Phenomenology and Dasein

Episode #100

This is a transcript of episode #100 on Martin Heidegger. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). April 14, 2017 Philosophize This! with Stephen West Episode 100: Heidegger Pt. 1

Hello everyone! I'm Stephen West. This is Philosophize This! Thank to you to all the people that support the show on Patreon. Thank you to the people who go through the Amazon banner. By the way, if you are one of the people who've had trouble with your browser and the link to banner on the website, I finally got tired of waiting for the web person to fix it and I just paid somebody else to fix it. So, it's back up. Now, look, I understand, the Amazon banner's down. Things can get a little lonely for ya. Look, I get it. You may have been hanging out with some of the other Amazon banners in the interim. I get it. But ya know what? I'm back now. And I'm not leaving you again. It's time to come home! Thank you again. I hope you love the show today. So I want to begin the episode today by telling you all a very famous story from the history of philosophy. It's an old story, passed down from generation after generation, from one philosopher to another. And here I am today passing it on to you. It's a story about a day way back in antiquity, in Athens. Plato and his fellow philosophers are all sitting around talking about stuff, as they normally would, questioning the definitions of things--popular thing to do if you're a philosopher back then. I mean, afterall, how can you ever philosophize about something meaningfully if you don't have a solid grasp on the definition of the thing? Now the topic of this particular day's discussion was the question, "What is a human being?" What does it mean to be a human being? How can we define that? Well, they sit around, they talk about it for a while, throw some theories around, and eventually they come to a conclusion that they're all pretty satisfied with. Sitting there, nodding at each other, "Mmm, yes! Yes! Jolly good!" Their answer to this question was, "A human being is a bipedal animal that doesn't have feathers." After all, an ostrich has feathers; a toucan has feathers. A human being seems to be the bipedal

animal that doesn't have feathers. So they're all sittin' around patting each other on the back, loving this definition, soaking in the glory, when all of a sudden Diogenes the cynic bursts in the door with a chicken he's just plucked and he says "Hey everyone, look! I present to you a human being!" Everybody starts screaming. [laughs] Diogenes, I miss that guy. Remember he's kind of a character from this whole time, lived in a tub. Alexander the Great famously took a liking to him. Says to him, "You know what? If I were not Alexander, then I would want to be Diogenes." Diogenes says back to him, "Ya know, if I were not Diogenes, I would also want to be Diogenes!" Anyway this whole story depicts one of the first times philosophers started asking questions in what would eventually become a massive branch of philosophy known as ontology. Ontology is the branch of philosophy that would ask the kind of question "What does it mean to be a human being?" Not just that though, ontology would ask, What does it mean to be a thing at all? What is existence? What does it mean for something to be? At what point does something exist, versus not exist? For example, let's say one day you went down to the petting zoo, you met a goat there, and you fed it some alfalfa pellets. Now there's a lot of people out there that would look at that goat, and they would take the existence of that goat to be a self-evident thing: It exists. And, for the sake of the discussion today, let's just say fine, that goat definitely exists. It is! But then ontology steps in. What does it even mean to exist? What do we mean when we say that something exists? What criteria do we use? This leads to other questions: What is the nature of existence itself? Is existence a property of that goat? This leaves even more questions: What foundation if there even is one makes it possible for that goat to exist in the first place? These are examples of common ontological questions. But even this is far from the end of ontology. Like how 'bout this: What if you leave the petting zoo, and later on you're thinking about that goat. Ya know, what if you really like thinking about this goat? What if you fell in love with this goat? And now, gosh darnit, you're daydreaming about it all the time. No matter what you do you can't get that goat out of your head. Now, would you say that that thought about that goat exists? When you're no longer having the thought, does it not exist anymore? Are thoughts just patterns of, ya know, fleeting electrochemical activity?

Or do thoughts exist as beings in the same way that a goat is a being, or a rock is a being? I mean, think about it. What really is the difference between that thought and that goat? You may say, “Okay, well, they’re different to me, because I know one’s just a thought and that it’s not real.” Okay, well what if you took PCP, and you hallucinated that you and the goat ran off to Vegas together to get married, and when you’re walking down the aisle with that goat it feels as real to you in that moment as it did back at the petting zoo? Question is: When you eventually stop hallucinating, and you’re hearkening back to your memory of your honeymoon in Guam with your new goat companion, can that whole experience be said to have existed in some capacity? We’ve all been here before. Not the goat. We’ve all been up in our heads asking these kinds of questions about what constitutes something existing or not. And philosophers all throughout history have been here as well, in this field of ontology. Now, there’s definitely some of you out there that hear these sorts of questions being asked, and they just don’t really do much for you: “Look, I love learning about the existentialists and their approach to life. I love learning about the Nicomachean ethics, that’s interesting. But ultimately, I like learning about philosophy that’s actually going to enrich things in my life. What possible benefit can I get from waxing poetic about whether this hypothetical goat exists or not? Look, personally, it’s this weird thing about me--I like to learn about stuff that’s actually going to be important to me.” Well the guy we’re going to be talking about today thought that these ontological questions are not only important, they are the most important and simultaneously the most neglected questions in the history of philosophy! His name is Martin Heidegger, and for me to explain to you why he thinks these questions are so important, it’s going to take an entire series. But! I promise you, by the end of it, you won’t just have these obscure questions to think about. You’ll have an approach to life that he lays out that some consider to be the greatest existentialist approach to life ever produced. But, the journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step! Question is, where do you put that foot first? It makes sense to me to begin where Heidegger began, at the beginning of his career. Because to understand where he’s coming from with all these innovations in the area of ontology, we have to understand the revolutionary method

that was invented by his teacher, a guy that couldn't've cared less about ontology. His name was Edmund Husserl, and his revolutionary method that he invented was called phenomenology. Husserl was like a mad scientist. This mad scientist that emerges at the beginning of the twentieth century just wreaking havoc on everything in philosophy. I guess technically that makes him a mad philosopher. But make no mistake! He is to philosophy and traditional philosophers what a mad scientist would be a science and traditional scientists. He's like a mad scientist because--Yes, he still gets dressed up in the lab coat, he still conducts experiments. But they're not the same kinds of experiments that a traditional scientist would conduct. He's conducting these experiments in this bizarre place deep within his own mind; almost like his own personal underground lair. And, I guess most of all, he's not doing these experiments for the same reasons a normal scientist would be doing them. One of the things I love most about Edmund Husserl--just as a character within philosophy--is the way that he approaches his work. He's not concerned with things like what is the meaning of my life, or how we should be behaving, or what the best form of government is. No, Husserl is a mathematician turned philosopher. And, while he thinks ultimately his work is gonna go on to give answers to these kinds of questions, he's personally interested in one thing and one thing alone in his work: Certainty. See, Husserl noticed something. He noticed, all these philosophers throughout history, trying to find a way to get objective truth about things--Yeah, how's that going for you guys? I haven't checked-in in a while. How you guys doing over there? He realized that they all have basically the same strategy for doing this. They all come up with their own unique, creative ways of looking at the world in a slightly different way than the last guy did; the goal being to correct the assumptions of the past and get us a little bit closer to certainty. But maybe their lack of success can be explained by the fact that their strategy for accomplishing this massive task has been wrong from the very beginning. Maybe instead of looking at the world differently, we should be looking differently at the way that we look at the world. Here's where he's coming from. Remember Kant? Remember Hume? Remember talking about how we get to our human experience of the world? The senses pick up a flurry of seemingly random, raw

phenomena that, by themselves would be pretty chaotic, but we filter those phen through various mental faculties, categories of the mind that help us categorize and make sense of them. Things like space, time, cause-and-effect, many others. This is what makes up our subjective human experience. Well, one thing's for sure, if you're Husserl: If we ever arrived at something method that does give us objective truth about things, it's ultimately going to have to be filtered through this very narrow, subjective human experience that we have. Husserl's method of phenomenology, is not about looking at the world differently--it's not about looking at the world at all, necessarily. It's about taking an exhaustively close look at the lens that these objects of our experience are always seen through: Human consciousness, or our subjective experience of the world.

Phenomenology is a method, designed to better understand the underlying structure of human thought; the hoping that we can, one day, not just merely have an understanding of these objects and our thinking that we typically call the world--the strategy of so many philosophers before him--but instead, maybe we can arrive at certainty about these raw phenomena and how they relate to each other by understanding all of the ways that our human experience of the world distorts reality. [9:45] In other words, all these philosophers over the years have tried to arrive at objectivity by sitting on the sidelines, approaching it like they're some objective third party looking at the world. But human experience is not objective. Here's Husserl saying that you're never going to be able to arrive at certainty about anything unless you have a much deeper understanding of that subjective lens that you're looking at everything through. The big maxim here that I like to underscore, the question central to phenomenology that's going to help us understand why Heidegger did what he did, is the question: Is it possible that we're so familiar with this daily process of just perceiving the world that that familiarity is clouding our ability to see the world clearly? Now, thinking about that possibility is not really the default state we find ourselves in as human beings. Right? I mean, most of us don't sit around thinking about the underlying structure of human thought. We just think about stuff. Most of us aren't searching for the objective truth about things, like a philosopher would. We just sort of have beliefs. If they work, they work. If they don't, well, what really

happens as a consequence of them not working? What, you go into your thinking closet and turn off all the lights. “Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!” And then what happens? You emerge from the closet and revise your beliefs into another flawed interpretation of the world and go on about your life until you have to revise them again. This whole idea of just sort of blindly accepting from birth that there’s this other world out there, separate from us; that it’s our job to uncover the truth about that world by reading more books and having more conversations and many other base assumptions that go along with this deeply flawed attitude that we seem to have of taking so many things for granted--this whole approach is what Husserl refers to as the natural attitude. This is where most people spend their entire lives. But, it’s not a death sentence, don’t worry. Husserl thinks it is possible to develop over time a phenomenological attitude of the world. We can do this by suspending our belief in the natural attitude. He calls it bracketing. The main point is to recognize the natural attitude for what it truly is. It’s a belief. A set of beliefs. He’s not saying to not believe the natural attitude. He’s just saying, Put it in check for a bit, and recognize that this default state, this natural attitude, might not be the only way of looking at things. And realize the very serious possibility that this might be an area where we’re coming to the table with a lot of assumptions about beforehand. This is where Husserl starts to sound like a mad scientist, right? This is where his hair starts to stick up like he’s Bozo the Clown. Husserl thinks that when you start to examine the natural attitude closely enough, you start to see a lot of biases and assumptions. Assumptions that stem from the way the human mind categorizes and makes sense of everything. When you find these biases, he’s a fan of noticing them, acknowledging them, and then marking them with a sort of philosophical reflector tape, to help draw attention to them the next time you’re thinking about things. He says you do this for two reasons: You’re much less likely to make the same sort of natural attitude mistake the next time; When you start to get enough of this philosophical reflector tape cordoning off areas of these raw phenomena into different portions of thought in your mind that we’re trying to look at... Eventually what happens is the reflector tape starts to show a pattern. It starts to show you the boundary of where the natural attitude ends, and the raw phenomena

begin. It's inside of these cordoned off areas, Husserl thinks, that we can more closely focus on the stuff that we're really concerned with: the aspects of our experience that are necessary and unchanging. In other words, the essence of our experiences, devoid of all the value judgements we place on experience after the fact. Now, when you're in this place, deep within your own mind... When you're in the lair of the mad scientist... there many methods Husserl uses to try to arrive at the essence of any given human experience. I can't really go through all of them here, but I do want to talk about one of them, because I want you to feel this strange world that Husserl's operating within when he does his philosophy. This bizarre method he's using to arrive at certainty that would eventually go on to deeply influence Heidegger and the way that he conducts his work. One tactic is called using an eidetic reduction. [15:0] An eidetic reduction is just one type of strategy Husserl would use to try to arrive at what the essence is of any given experience. Now how do we search for the essence of a human experience? Well, we've searched for the essences of things on the show before, right? We just did it with objects, not human experiences like Husserl's doing. Let's talk about the process: Famous example passed down from Descartes is to try to find the essence of a piece of wax. You can imagine in front of you a red, cylindrical piece of wax sitting on a table. Now let's break it down. What is the essence of a piece of wax? Well, this particular piece of wax has certain properties, right? It's red. It's cylindrical in shape. It may be shiny. He could've just bought it at the store. Then again, it may not be shiny. It could be one of those Korean War surplus candles your grandma has up in her attic. This wax has a certain way that it smells, it has a certain way that it tastes. But are any of these properties necessary and invariable--two words that are incredibly important in phenomenology--necessary and invariable components of that wax? Well, we can take away the redness. Still could be a piece of wax without being red, right? The wax could smell different and it could still be a piece of wax, right? I mean, what if it wasn't a gift to your grandma from General Douglas MacArthur? Still would be a piece of wax, it just wouldn't smell like the 1950s. You could apply heat to the wax and it would melt down into a shape that wasn't a cylinder anymore; it still would be wax. To find the necessary

and invariable components of this wax is to find the essence of the wax. An eidetic reduction is a particular technique where you use something known as imaginary variation, where the act of creatively varying different components of something, say, the wax, in order to get closer to those necessary and invariable components. For example, asking questions like, What if the wax was blue? Still's a piece of wax. What if the wax smelled like a gingerbread man? Still wax. What if the wax was made of water? Okay there! Stop! Something changed there about the wax. Now it doesn't appear to be wax. Now can we try to figure out what specifically needs to be replaced for it to be classified as wax again? I.e. The necessary and invariable components. Now imagine conducting this whole process not on the piece of wax, something we're all very familiar with. Imagine conducting it on an experience that human beings have. And instead of considering things like color and shape and how it smells--things, again, we're all very familiar with changing--imagine the equivalent are the ways that your brain organizes and makes sense of that experience. You imagine that, and you can get a rough idea of this strange, mind-bending world that people like Husserl and Heidegger used to operate within. (And you can definitely get an idea of why it would take an entire series to fully explain what Husserl thinks he's doing here.) But all that doesn't matter. All that doesn't matter. All you need to know to be able to understand where Heidegger's coming from are the basics of this newly, introspective way of approaching philosophy and phenomenology. Keyword: Introspective. Again, instead of trying to find a new, creative way of looking at the objects of our experience, like so many philosophers have done in the past, instead, let's take a deeper look at what that experience is at its most fundamental level. But along comes Heidegger, student of Edmund Husserl, who begins his career a card-carrying phenomenologist. It's right here that he sees phenomenology eventually running into a lot of very serious problems. First of all, what exactly is it that you're trying to do, phenomenology? You're trying to get an exhaustive understanding of the structures of human thought? You're gonna arrive at the structures of human thought? Heidegger thought, isn't that kind of an extension of a mistake philosophers have been making all throughout history? Like David Hume. When David Hume writes

An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, who really is to say that if David Hume lived for another few years, and could publish another book, this one called An Enquiry Concerning Squirrel Understanding, or Raccoon Understanding, who's to say that it wouldn't have been the exact same book? In other words, how can we know for sure that the underlying structure of human thought is not the underlying structure of mammalian thought? Or all conscious thought, for that matter? And it goes the other way too! What are we using to be able to arrive at these conclusions about the architecture of human thought? Oh yeah, our subjective experience of the world. Let's say we arrived at a conclusion. How can we ever say that we're positive that this is the way every human being that's ever gonna live structures their thought? Or even every human being that's alive today for that matter? I mean, is it that inconceivable to think that maybe something like your level of intellect effects the structure of your thought? Or, even the culture that you were born into, or the values that you possess? Is it crazy to think that those might have a drastic effect? Now, if these weren't problems enough, Heidegger thinks there's an even bigger mistake Husserl's making, and that, even though he's an undeniable brilliant thinker, and recognized a mistake that so many philosophers have made in the past--Even though he recognized the fact that we shouldn't be caring so much about the objects of the world before we have a true understanding of the lens that we view those objects through--Heidegger thought there was something massive Husserl himself was overlooking. Husserl may have understood what underlies the objects of our experience, but what underlies the ability to be able to study the structures of human thought at all? Existence. What does it mean to exist? What does it mean to be a human being? These ontological question we were talking about. Heidegger realized the answers to these questions drastically inform these other two areas that philosophers engage in. Like just imagine for a second, if every philosopher we've ever talked about on this show wrote their work from the ontological perspective of Plato and his buddies that we talked about at the beginning of the episode. Like, what would Kant's work look like, if he just blindly asusmed from the beginning that a human being is just a bipedal animal with no feathers? What if there was no Diogenes to embarrass everyone and keep the

conversation going with a plucked chicken? No question about it, things would look very different. Now, when Heidegger takes a look at the history of ontology in the western canon of philosophy, of course there's variation among the philosophers, but he notices something. On one issue in particular, there seems to be this mutual consensus among practically every philosopher that's ever lived, and man does a consensus like that start to look rather suspicious to Heidegger. This concept goes way beyond philosophy, by the way. I mean, if you're somebody that's interested in making novel social commentary, or even just being the person at the party that has the most interesting take on the world, here's a tip from your Uncle Steve: You don't want to focus your time studying the things that everybody's arguing about. No, don't do that. You want to focus your time studying the things that everybody pretty much agrees on. Because, it's in those areas that people's ideas are the least challenged. I mean, everybody knows their position on abortion and why they feel that way about it. But it's when you start to ask questions that people tend to agree on, like, Why do you structure your relationships the way you do? Or, Why does this never-ending task of finding somebody to love you seem to be an imperative in your life? These are the kind of questions that create progress in our understanding of the world. The questions you never think about. Because, what happens is, you and your group of friends all agree on X, Y and Z, so you end up never really examining your beliefs that much about X, Y and Z. I'm talking about the beliefs that we just sort of off-handedly spout off at a party not even really thinking about it, because people around us all just hold their red cups and smile and nod in agreement. Well guess what, folks? Heidegger's throwing a party. And practically every philosopher that's ever lived is on the guest list right now, smiling and nodding at each other about a certain ontological bedrock that they're all built their systems on top of. And Heidegger's here to stop smiling and nodding. What is it to be a human being? It's always been some variation of generally the same thing: We're a rational animal, a conscious agent, temporarily and restlessly navigating this realm, this external world that's existed for billions of years and will continue to exist with or without us. [22:50] Now, it just so happens that in this realm, having a more comprehensive understanding of this external

world leads to a lot of very real benefits. So, philosophers traditionally, from Descartes to Locke to Kant all the way up to Husserl, they've all dedicated a considerable amount of time to trying to understand this external world. But what if this whole idea, this idea that we're this human being thing, this conscious agent navigating this realm that's separate from us, this subject-and-object relationship that exists--What if that's been a giant assumption philosophers have been making from practically the very beginning? What if that's the case? Heidegger thinks, Yeah, that's weird, people all seem to be agreeing on that. So he goes back and he looks at all the arguments people give to justify this sort of ontological position. People like Descartes, for example. Descartes, we all know the story, tries to doubt everything he possibly can about his existence, and he famously arrives at the conclusion that although you can initially doubt pretty much everything about the existence of the external world, one thing is for certain by virtue of the fact that I'm thinking: I am a thinking thing, of some sort. That's the fundamental thing that you can know about your existence, that he's going to use as a foundation for his entire philosophical system. But Heidegger says, No, hold on a second, Descartes. You skipped over something massively important there. The first thing you experience about your existence is not that you're a thinking thing. To even be able to make an abstraction like that about what you are presupposes that something has to come before that. No, the actual first experience that you have when you exist is just, sort of, being there. Like, "Here I am, guys. Existing. Being there." Heidegger has a word he uses to describe this state: *dasein*. Now, the literal German translation of *dasein* is "being there." Though, it should be said, Heidegger creates a lot of words all throughout his philosophy. And he's not doing it because he gets some creepy pleasure from people using the words he invented. He's creating words because he's literally talking about things that no person has ever talked about before, and he doesn't want the biases and connotations that come along with conventional words to cloud people's understanding of the concepts he's talking about. That said, even with something as simple as the concept of *dasein*, so many different interpretations of Heidegger's work. And I think my job here is not to lay out every possible interpretation of Heidegger in existence, it's to hopefully

pique your interest about his ideas enough that you go on to read more, and have your own interpretation of his work. Anyway, this concept: Dasein: being there. Existence. Here's where he departs from all the other philosophers. See, because Husserl makes a claim that he's studying the underlying structure of thought we use to experience this world that's separate from us. But Heidegger thought, What if this whole notion that we're subjects navigating objects, that we're conscious agents navigating an external world, what if that's wrong? Afterall, our experience of the world before we even arrive at an idea--like that we're a thinking thing navigating something--is just, being there? Dasein? Being, in the world? Well how 'bout this idea guys? What if being and the world are a united thing? That being can't exist without the world, and the world can't exist without being? In the English translations of Heidegger, being-in-the-world is hyphenated together, because he sees these two concepts as fundamentally inseparable. This is an odd thing to consider at first for a lot of people. But, just like in phenomenology, where we become so familiar with perceiving the world every day that it's inhibiting our ability to see it clearly, is it possible that we've become so familiar with being that that familiarity clouds our ability to see it clearly, too? See, to even try to begin to describe this concept Heidegger's talking about while using western languages, that's an uphill battle in its own right because the way our languages typically structure sentences are in terms of subjects acting upon objects! That's how deep this goes. In fact, Heidegger, in his later work, actually advocates poetry as the best form of communication. Not these sentences that continually reinforce this distorted, subject-object false dichotomy. These sentences reinforce the idea that being-in-the-world is existing within some spatial dimension that's separate from us. Heidegger often talks about the overemphasis so many people place on the idea of something spatially being. What if being-in-the-world is not being within a spatial context, what if it's more like being in love? Being in love is it's own thing, right? Maybe being and the world are inseparable from each other for them to be what it is. Being is something that we're engaged in. When you remove the languages, when you remove the intuition, when you look at being in a phenomenological way, this is what you find: Being

is something that we're engaged in. Being is something that we're all engaged in: every person, every animal, every tree, every rock. We're all united under this larger umbrella of being. We're all on the same team. And Heidegger thinks we should think about it that way. (#TeamBeing, people!) Now, if this is kind of tough to wrap your mind around, don't worry. More explanation next episode. We're going to talk a lot more about what it means to be beings engaged in a world as such. But just know this: I've talked to a lot of people about Heidegger. Lots of fans of philosophy all the way up to philosophy professors. And a common experience people have when they first hear about this concept of *dasein*, is they have this sort of strange moment where they think, How in the world did nobody ever think of this before? And what's even more interesting to think about it is, what if Being and Time--Heidegger's primary work early in his life, where he lays out these ideas--what if that was the magnum opus of Thales? What if this was the initial ontological starting point that philosophy began on? How different would philosophy look today? How different would the world look today? How different would the world look today? That's a nice segue, I guess, because if this series is me ultimately trying to convey why Heidegger thinks these ontological questions are so important, that question sort of brings me to the first point Heidegger would make about these kinds of questions. It's so easy for us as individuals--as individuals that don't write philosophical treatises, but just people that look to philosophy as a practical guide to life and how to think more clearly--it's so easy for us to think of these questions--like, What does it mean to be? What does it mean to be a human?--as again sort of these redundant self-indulgent exercises, right? Like, short of you being a professor that's going through some sort of Rocky style training to become the most obscure and unrelatable professor on the face of the planet, why would you ask these questions? Why not ask some real questions? Why not ask questions like, How do we get the ice caps to stop melting? Or, How do we fix widespread poverty? Or, How do we get people to stop killing each other? Real questions! Heidegger would say, those are all really great questions to ask. But, are we sabotaging our ability to ever be able to arrive at an accurate answer to any of them by ignoring questions that make those questions even possible? Not only that, but is it our

lack of answers to these ontological questions that's responsible for creating all those problems in the first place? The state of the world is contingent upon the state of human thought that came before it. When you really consider that, again, think about how much changes about, for example, Nietzsche's philosophy, if he spends his entire career with the ontological outlook that we are agents of God's will. Think of how much changes about every single question he thinks is worth asking, and every answer he thinks is reasonable. Think about how much changes about the political philosophy of John Locke, if, for his entire career he holds the ontological position that a human being is a featherless, bipedal animal. See, because Heidegger would point out that whether you're asking geological questions about rocky beings or anthropological questions about cultural beings, or scientific questions about scientific beings, we're all ultimately asking questions about beings. And that, maybe, if we took a closer look at these seemingly meaningless questions, and we all understood what it means to be a human being a little bit better, maybe we'd better understand why we have these sorts of problems. Or even, whether they're problems at all. Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you next time.

Heidegger pt. 2 - Science and Technology

Episode #101

This is a transcript of episode #101 on Martin Heidegger. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So just like last episode, I want to begin today all the way back in antiquity. Back in the days when it all began...the days when Heidegger thinks so many of these wrong ways of looking at...the world...and our existence and so many other things...this is back when the seeds were planted for all of those ideas that eventually got us so far off track. Now let's assume for a second... that Heidegger's right... and that philosophers have been making massive assumptions from the very beginning that have been clouding our ability to see existence clearly...you know...shame on you Descartes...but should we really be shaming Descartes? Should that be our attitude? Looking back, can we really be so disappointed with these thinkers and the conclusions that they arrived at? Quick thought experiment: put yourself in the open-toed sandals of somebody living all the way back in antiquity. What would that be like? What would it feel like to be a human being back then? When you're in a thinking mood and you go on a walk... and you look around yourself pondering all things existence. Think of how absolutely chaotic and random the natural world might seem like to you not knowing what we know now. On the other hand, think of how well-ordered and obviously governed... the natural world might seem like to you. You know it's so easy to conflate our experience of the world in 2017 with theirs in 400 BC...it's so easy when you try to imagine yourself as someone living back in antiquity to just assume that what it would be like for me to live in ancient Greece...basically the same as my experience of the world right now...except I'd be an olive farmer...or working at one of them gyro stands. But seriously put yourself in the shoes of Plato and Aristotle for a second...they don't have encyclopedia Britannica, they don't have Google when they're confused about something, they don't even have Plato and Aristotle. No, what happens is they just find themselves... immersed in this profoundly mysterious, enormously complex framework of existence...of being. So...what

do they do about it? What are you gonna do if you find yourself in this place...sit around and marvel at it the rest of your life? Well what THEY did...is they created these very human methods of being able to make sense of what we're all experiencing....things like philosophy and science...and over the years up until Heidegger...people have all had pretty much the same sort of strategy...and while on one hand... science is great at making sense of things and helping us feel a little less confused about the universe...but considering that it's a method created by humans...is it a method of inquiry that's necessarily...capable of fully understanding this, again, profoundly mysterious, enormously complex thing known as being that we find ourselves in? Well if the answer to that question's even potentially no...doesn't take away the value of science as the best thing we've come up with so far...doesn't inspire vitriol towards Plato or Aristotle or anyone else throughout history that's used science and philosophy to try to make sense of things. But I'll tell you what it does inspire...it inspires a thought in Heidegger's mind...that in the beginning...in a desperate attempt to try to make sense of all the mystery of being...people just did the best thing they could think of...they created things like philosophy and science and conducted these traditional philosophical and scientific experiments...the goal being to try to understand the world around them in this... existence thing that they're a part of. And they measure things and they find out what this thing's made of and how it relates to that thing over there and they record the shapes of things and the mass and the volume... and all sorts of other stuff... and then all of that's combined into an ever-changing, ever-evolving scientific picture of being. But Heidegger would ask: is there something more to being than just how much something weighs or what velocity it's traveling..is what were doing truly understanding the totality of being? Or... is this us conferring some cold, mathematical human method of inquiry in a desperate attempt to try to make sense of the mystery out there not unlike a Plato or an Aristotle? Is science really helping us understand being? Or is it just giving us this temporary set of empirical facts that make us FEEL like we understand being more? Again, love me some science. Nobodies saying we shouldn't do science, but we have to understand what we're doing when we conduct science. Science...and philosophy

as it's conventionally been done... have certainly produced useful results in their own way...but in terms of truly understanding existence or being...all they've really done to Heidegger...is produce this set of facts... you can tell kids in school that give them this false sense that we've come so far in our understanding of being... hey, because look! now we understand how entities relate to each other...in other words Heidegger thinks...science and philosophy... the longer they've gone on... have progressively alienated us from that original state where we questioned the true extent of the mystery of being...and they've replaced that state with a state of...sort of arrogance clinging on to the rudimentary description of being... that science and traditional philosophy can give us.You know as we talked about last episode...throughout the history of science and philosophy...existence has pretty much always been looked at as this spatial and temporal realm that we all exist in that's FULL of entities...entities like buffalo and mountains and nebulae... all spatially and temporally relating to one another...the strategy for understanding existence...was to try to understand everything about... these entities and how they relate to each other.Now traditionally, to be a human being was to be just another one of these entities in this realm spatially and temporally relating to things...and TRADITIONALLY...this assumption... has raised a lot of questions about this mysterious thing that we often refer to as consciousness...in other words...if what existence is...is just a bunch of spatio-temporal entities relating to each other...where does consciousness fit into that? Is consciousness an entity? Are thoughts entities?These questions... have been mysteries in science and philosophy from the very beginning...and look, it doesn't really bother the average person that consciousness doesn't seem to fit that paradigm...you know it's easy to tell ourselves...look, scientists are out there...they're working on it...alright, they're gonna figure it out eventually...you know, deepak chopra and eckhart tolle are gonna have a baby and it's gonna solve all the mysteries of the universe...first word's gonna be quantum. But Heidegger would ask: What if this idea of existence being this realm of entities relating to each other...you know an idea that at one point... it was just some human being coming up with it desperately trying to make sense of things...what if that's wrong?See, Heidegger never uses words like consciousness...or

subjective experience...because to even use words like consciousness to describe what we have... is to imply that consciousness... is it's own thing separate from the world...no being and the world are a united thing...dasein...and that if we're going to try to understand the answer to this question: what is being? Maybe we shouldn't be trying to come up with an objective, mathematical way of looking at the entities of the world coming at it from an outsiders perspective. Maybe we should approach it from a more insider's perspective...instead of analyzing entities...maybe...as the famous line goes "We are ourselves the entities to be analyzed." Again, instead of asking a question as an outsider like philosophers have always done...asking a question like, "What is a human being?" A more insiders approach...a Phenomenological approach to answering that question would be to ask, "What is it like...to be a human being?" In other words, what is it like to be the being for whom being is an issue at all? Now this question is much easier asked than answered. We're all human beings, we all feel like we understand what it's like to be a human being. But when you ask that question it's so easy to confuse what it's like to be a human being with what it's like to be you. To think it's asking...you know...what kinds of activities to you like or not like to do...or what do you think right and wrong are?...you know these things that have been culturally conditioned into us since birth that wouldn't apply to all human beings that have ever lived. Now, make no mistake...understanding that cultural context that you're born into IS extremely important to Heidegger, we're going to talk about it next episode...but when you remove the culture...when you remove all the conditioning...what is common about what it's like to be a human being between someone born today...versus the 1200's...versus 10000 BC? What is the Dasein that underlies all of the other stuff? Now an easy assumption to make is to say, ok well the way I live my life right now isn't tantamount to what it's like to be a human being...I'm just one iteration of what it's like to be a human being...but look I'm still a human being...all I gotta do is look at the person from 10,000 BC...find the similarities between us... and I will have arrived at what it's like to be a human being. But Heidegger thought this was a mistaken way of looking at it because it doesn't account for the possibility of you being robbed of what it means to be a human being. Heidegger

thought...that there are various aspects of our modern world... that have rendered us... kind of sick at the level of being...not well...and I'm not calling out any particular way of looking at the world or lifestyle or set of behaviors...but you can at least look around at people in the modern world... and you can see that often times the behaviors that people engage in seem to be trying to fill some void that they have...as though they're not living the sort of life they were intended to live and there's something missing. They seem sort of spiritually sick. Most of us seem sick to Heidegger...and because I'm doing this episode in 2017 and not in 10,000 BC...before we even BEGIN trying to talk about the nature of Dasein and what it's truly like to be a human being...I need to explain to you why Heidegger thinks our modern societies have alienated you... from what it is to be a human being...one of the primary culprits to Heidegger: our immersion into and fixation with Modern Technology. Few common ways of looking at modern technology that Heidegger wouldn't agree with...one's the sort of techno-Jesus attitude of, well we have all these problems as a species...people are killing each other, widespread poverty, ice caps are melting...but you know what? I have faith...there will be a second coming of Steve Jobs...and given enough time technology and the internet will save everything. Heidegger wouldn't agree, in fact... he'd think that in a weird way...technology's a co-conspirator when it comes to why we have these problems in the first place. Another common way of looking at technology's that it's not inherently bad not inherently good...technology's sort of this... neutral, disinterested thing that happens and that technology can be used for good or it can be used for evil, our choice..our job's to try our hardest to make sure it's used mostly for good. Heidegger wouldn't agree with that either. To understand why he doesn't agree with these outlooks on Modern technology...we have to understand a distinction he makes right there...between technology in general...and MODERN technology. So I guess the place to start is just to ask the question: what is technology? Well when we think of it we think of iPhones and rocket ships and nuclear power plants...but it really goes all the way back to the very first crude tools that human beings created...Heidegger says the sort of agreed upon definition about what's similar between technology like the wheel and technology like the

computer...is that all technology... is a tool that provides a means to complete some task...and means to some end... usually having to do with human activity. A cup, for example... is a piece of technology...and you can use it as a means to bring about various sorts of ends, most commonly... to drink liquid out of it, but you can do other things too...you can stack things on top of it, you can roll it down the driveway, anything you wanna do with that cup. In fact if you're indoors right now...look around you and just consider for a second...practically everything you see at one point... was cutting edge technology. Most of us live our lives completely immersed in this soup of technology without even realizing it...we're absolutely surrounded by things that are means to bring about some end for us. But that said...important thing to realize: just because a chair's a tool that provides a means to complete some task... and a computer's a tool that provides a means to complete some task...that doesn't mean that they're the same type of thing. No, Heidegger thinks there's something VERY different... about these two types of technology...and while he would agree with that definition... that technology's a tool that's a means to carry out some task... that definition may be correct...but it's not complete... it's not sufficient...and that to understand why Modern technology... is so different from other technology... and's ultimately contributing to a sickness we have at the level of being...we have to look deeper...we have to look at what the ESSENCE of technology is. Heidegger says that where ever you have the notion of something being a means to some end...one presupposition there is the notion of causality. In the case of technology: Something causes some technology to come into being... and that technology's used as a means to some end. Now for Heidegger's next trick: to try to dismantle YET ANOTHER assumption about the world... that seems to stem from the time period of Descartes...if you remember it was right around that time that people largely stopped thinking about causality in terms of Aristotle's four causes... and started thinking about it only in terms of the efficient cause of things. For example. If there was a cup. Sitting on a table in front of you. And I asked you what is the cause of that cup...the vast, vast majority of us would say...well, it was whoever or whatever made the cup. In other words... we would point to only one of Aristotle's four causes... the efficient cause...

or the thing that brought the cup into being. The other three causes that we're leaving out would be the material cause, or what the cup's made of...the formal cause, or the appearance or shape of the cup...and the final cause or the function or purpose the cup was created for...but we don't really think of these other three causes as...causes...right?I mean, first and foremost we have the efficient cause...the dude that whittled this cup out of wood. Then in the middle we have these formal and material causes but these aren't causes...what the cups made of and what form it takes didn't CAUSE that cup. And then beyond that we have the even MORE distant FINAL cause... which really doesn't have anything to do with the physical cup at all...it's just the reason... the efficient cause decided one day to cause this cup to come into existence. But Heidegger would say, hold on...think about what we just said there. If it wasn't for the final cause...the efficient cause would never have had the slightest motivation to bring this thing into being... in other words...if you weren't able to drink liquid out of it or stack stuff on top of it or roll it down your driveway...what person...no matter how crazy they are whittling wood in 2017...what person would ever whittle something into the shape of a cup?Point is, in a strange way...in terms of what caused the cup to be...the final cause starts to seem more important than the efficient cause...but... this isn't the point Heidegger's ultimately trying to make...he's saying that it's insufficient to only think about that cup in terms of its efficient cause... and that if you look closely at all four of these causes...not only are all of them necessary but there's an interconnectedness to them...they're all "responsible" for each-other he says and that in a world before cups ever existed, it wasn't until... a Dasein conceived of the final cause of a cup... in correspondence with the formal and material causes...it wasn't until that coalition of four was born... that the idea of a cup... was revealed... as something that can potentially be.This is an interesting way to think about it. I mean look around you at all the trees, all the metals...all the rocks. Look at this stuff all around you and consider the fact that lying latent within all of these things...lying latent within nature...are seemingly endless potentialities to be revealed. I mean consider the fact that at one point in history in fact the MAJORITY of human history...nobody ever looked at a tree...imagined the final cause of a rolling pin...and then transmuted it

into being from the tree. For the vast majority of the time human beings have been looking at trees...the final cause of a wooden rolling pin...wasn't even on the table...yet at some level... that rolling pin has always been a possibility...at some level the potentiality for a piece of that tree to become a rolling pin... has always been there hidden within nature. Also consider the fact...that in the extremely unlikely event we don't destroy ourselves in the next 300 years...think of how much more we're going to be able to do with trees that we have no idea about right now...think of all the possibilities that are latent, hidden within these trees all around us. Now I chose a tree as an example on purpose...it's a bit of foreshadowing of what's to come and let's be honest...none of you people ever get emotionally attached to rocks...you're just not as compassionate no matter how delicate of a geode it is...although to Heidegger there is an attachment we should feel with both rocks AND trees all of us united under the common umbrella of being....but anyway, we've arrived at the essence of technology in the sense of the Greek word *Techné*...the essence of technology is revealing...revealing the things in the world that already do exist and can potentially exist in the future...technology is the art of bringing forth... the potentiality of the wooden rolling pin latent within the tree...or bringing forth... the potentiality of the marble statue latent within the giant piece of rock. This is as true of the wheel as it is of the iPhone...but something's very different about this process of revealing in modern technology. Heidegger writes: "The revealing that holds sway in modern technology does not unfold of a bringing forth in the sense of *Poiesis*." *Poiesis* is a Greek word derived from the term that means "to make". And the distinction that he's marking there is he's saying that for the majority of human history, the relationship between human beings, technology and nature... has been almost like an artisan producing something...it's a craftsmanship. A *Dasein* will have certain raw materials...they'll have a certain final cause in mind...and they'll arrange or dissect these raw materials in order to bring about a chair or a cup or any new piece of technology. There was a special, personal relationship between *Dasein* and tree where the tree was looked at in a particular way as a being. But in the case of modern technology, we've fundamentally shifted the way we look at the natural world...when it comes to modern

technology...Heidegger says:"It's a challenging...which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and stored as such."and that Science and technology:"Sets upon Nature... Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield oxygen, the earth to yield uranium... Even the Rhine itself appears to be something at our command ... the revealing that rules throughout modern technology has the character of setting upon."In other words...Heidegger's not against modern technology like he's your grandpa saying in my day you looked a man in the eye when you face timed him...no he's saying modern technology has fundamentally shifted the way that we look at and ACT UPON the natural world.Remember at the beginning when we talked about science being something that no question makes the world a much more intelligible and understandable place...but the more we measure and weigh things and understand how entities relate to each-other...the more we have this false sense of understanding of what being is and the more progressively alienated we become to the true mystery of being...modern technology to Heidegger.. can be seen as a natural byproduct of that process. We've assigned such a cold, detached value to these other beings like rocks and trees and the oceans...that we don't even look at them as beings anymore... we look at them as just...objects...that we can study...and manipulate and then exploit for commercial purposes. Technology CHALLENGES nature in a way.He says:"The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field."And what he's pointing out is that we used to have a much more respectful, almost symbiotic relationship with the world whereas now we "enframe" the world...that's the word he uses and it means to look at the natural world only in terms of how much utility it has for human purposes...don't worry about the soil...question should be how can I process this soil so that it produces the maximum YIELD for me as a human being. The world is valuable only insofar as its valuable to human beings.We turn the natural world... into what he calls a "standing reserve"...or a sort of back-stock of inventory just sitting there waiting to be used and consumed by human beings. Now you may be saying, well what's wrong with that? We're human beings...fact is.. we have to consume nature to survive...whats the problem with having a

little extra lying around? Heidegger would say there's nothing wrong with it...no question a peasant probably has a little extra firewood than they need...it's the way we're LOOKING at the natural world that's the problem...the peasant looks at that additional firewood and sees it as pieces of a tree that bring warmth into their existence...modern technology looks at that tree... and goes, okay is there any way we can grind the tree up, cut it with some baking powder and get 612 IKEA coffee tables out of it instead of only 588? It's seen MERELY as a resource at our disposal. And while I don't think Heidegger ever explicitly predicts this happening, you can kind of see where this is going. If we were willing to look at the natural world as merely a resource at our disposal...aren't human beings... a part of the natural world too? Doesn't this outlook on being get us uncomfortably close to treating human beings as merely an exploited resource? Don't we see glimmers of this already... when it comes to how some companies view an employees work and production? Is it that crazy to think it might one day extend onto humans beings as people? This is another example of how the answers to these pointless, completely academic ontological questions about being...have VERY REAL impacts on the way that human beings are treated and engage with the world. Now when it comes to science and technology being a 2000 year process of alienation...there are of course philosophers who disagree with this. John Dewey, contemporary of Heidegger's...little bit older than him...he sees the progression of technology not as a process of alienation, but one of LIBERATION! You know, where was your bleeding heart when we were being controlled by NATURE. Remember my grandma's feet? Black from frostbite? Yeah, rubbing them together really fast didn't work. Nature did that. Look...the metaphysical reality of nature... is that it can be studied, understood and manipulated for strengthening human potential! That should be exciting to you! Look at how much more we can do! Look at the infant mortality rates! Look at my phone! I have instant contact with practically anyone in the world...I can call my grandma... on thanksgiving...I can have the same disingenuous conversation with her for the four hundredth time...I don't even gotta get off the couch. That's incredible...Heidegger would agree...all that stuff is pretty incredible...he'd agree that technology has liberated us from the shackles of

nature...but at what cost? Yeah, technology's liberated us from nature...but it's also liberated us from a piece of what it means to be a human being. Not all liberations deserve a statue in their honor. Heidegger thinks that at our core we are ontological beings...we're the kind of beings that ask questions about what it means to be or why things are the way they are...we've all been there before. We've all been out on a walk...stopped...looked at a mountain...or a lamppost or something... and just been smacked in the face by the profound mystery of being. Why things are the way they are...why things exist at all...how we fit into that picture...we've all been there. So let's return to the example at the beginning of the episode: if you lived in antiquity as opposed to 2017...in fact let's go back even more just to further illustrate the point...if you were a human being born in the year 10,000 BC and you find yourself thrown into this...thing that were all thrown into called being. Your experience of being...in a pre-science, pre-philosophy world...would be MASSIVELY different than your experience of being in 2017. Think about it...when you're walking along one day... and you look out at the horizon... and suddenly there's this giant explosion and lava is spewing everywhere or giant columns of ash are shooting into the sky and blotting out the sun...10,000 BC...you can't just go to google and type in what in God's name was that? When you're sitting around and it's pouring rain...and all of a sudden this giant bolt of electricity shoots down from the heavens and destroys a tree right in front of you and you can smell the ozone. 10,000 BC...You can't just go down to the library and ask, what did that tree do wrong to deserve that? In a pre-science, pre-philosophy world...your existence would be a constant face to face encounter with the profound mystery and enormous complexity of being. And faced with that mystery, by default as an ontological being, you would ask these sorts of ontological questions. Maybe this is what's missing, maybe this is part of the reason we seem so sick. We've forgotten to be engaged in the world and aware of the profound mystery of being that is all around us, constantly, and we've replaced it with 2000 years of philosophical speculation and scientific measurements. Maybe the reason we seem so sick is because instead of seeing ourselves as beings in the world... a world full of other beings that we are fundamentally united with under our common being... a

world with deep mystery that goes far beyond mass and volume and velocity and cogito ergo sum...maybe instead of that world we've been born into a world that tells us we're a consciousness...navigating a seemingly disinterested universe...full of entities...entities that are separate from us... objectified entities that we study and manipulate for whatever we humans want to do next. If you're young and you look at a tree and your confused about some element of it don't worry...don't sit there in that confusion don't go too deep down that ontological rabbit hole...here's how much it weighs, here's what color the leaves are and hey here's a family of trees that we've decided it's a part of! Maybe the way we look at being...changes everything. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Heidegger pt. 3 - Authenticity

Episode #102

This is a transcript of episode #102 on Martin Heidegger. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So the last couple episodes have been setting the stage for this one.

Descartes...whose by no means the only guy responsible for this...but in the sense he's the Godfather of philosophy proper...in the sense that so many subsequent philosophers commented on his work and responses to his work...you know...in the sense...Heidegger thinks...that he essentially just took a medieval, Dualistic way of looking at being, threw a little pizzazz on it...added some sprinkles and called it Cartesian subjectivity...in that sense Descartes is sort of the poster-boy for this subject/object way of looking at the world and all the assumptions about how to look at things in the world that come along with it. He took things off the rails...Heidegger thinks...and it eventually led to all kinds of different outcomes...from thinking about ourselves as agents fundamentally separate from being...from treating these entities within nature as merely resources at our disposal as human beings...but one of the most important assumptions...an assumption that may not seem very sinister on the surface...is the assumption... that this realm that we all seemingly navigate...is primarily...just something to be known. The world is something to be known. Our job is to look at the world, examine it, study it...and arrive at knowledge about it. You see this way of thinking all throughout the history of science...you see the history of philosophy filled to the brim... with these elaborate, analytical systems produced by philosopher after philosopher trying to get at the foundation of what grounds knowledge, what makes knowledge possible, how do we use the faculties of our human minds to get to this knowledge about things in the world. And the cool thing about Heidegger is that he doesn't have a problem...with this whole process that people are entranced by that they'd call arriving at knowledge about being...he certainly thinks this is one TYPE of way that you can look at a single PIECE of being...but he returns to the question: is this the totality of what being is? Do these facts

answer the question: what is being? Well what IS being, Heidegger? Unfortunately we can't really science this question away quite yet...I mean, you don't point the hubble telescope towards the andromeda galaxy... and when you look through it you don't see some fluffy cloud with a smiley face, Hey Guys, I'm Being! Wanna study? No, so the question becomes...how DO we study being? Well Heidegger thinks because there's no fluffy smiling cloud, you don't study Being...you study beings. And again, the best way to do that is not to come at it from an outsiders perspective and ask a question like, "What is a human being?" The better way is to ask the question from a Phenomenological perspective...a question that's more like: What is it LIKE to be a human being? Well to begin to answer that question, Heidegger would want us to look at what is unique about our situation as human beings. What is it about the being of a Dasein...that distinguishes it from all the other types of beings out there like rocks or trees or anything else. There are two... primary features of a Dasein that distinguish it from other beings... and the beautiful thing is that these two things... do this whether that Dasein's living in 2017 or 1492 or 10,000 BC...here it is a Dasein...Heidegger says is a being that one..."takes it's own being as an issue." or takes a particular stance on its being. In other words, a Dasein is fundamentally an ontological being... or the type of being that asks questions about its own existence... and then all the other questions that sort of blossom out of that pursuit...that's one...and two...is that to be a Dasein...is to be a being constantly engaged in tasks or activities that we care about. Now we're going to unpack this further...but let's just talk for a second about this concept of being constantly engaged...you know...just like Husserl and many others talk about consciousness...and they say that there's no such thing as some neutral, disinterested consciousness floating around out there...that consciousness is always what they call actional and referential...or that consciousness is always doing something and pointing toward something. For example, throughout the years philosophers have often times looked at consciousness like it's this empty, container that we sort of fill up with perceptions...you know the theory being that you're in a room...you engage in the act of analyzing the room around you...your senses pick up information and sort of populate this otherwise empty container of consciousness. But

these phenomenologists realize something as they start to take a closer look at consciousness...they realize that consciousness doesn't seem to be like an empty container that you fill up with perceptions...it seems to be something that you're engaged in...that when you're engaged in the act of analyzing the things in the room around you...your consciousness is always actional...doing something...in this case analyzing...and it's always referential...or pointing towards something...in this case the things in the room. Well obviously Heidegger doesn't believe in this notion of consciousness...but here's him saying in a similar sort of way...that there's no such thing as some neutral, disinterested Dasein out there...there's no human being that's just completely devoid of intentionality...an empty container...you know backlit at a museum exhibit somewhere for scientists to study what a human being is at its core. No, to be a Dasein is to always be doing something and pointing towards something...more specifically, to be a being that is constantly engaged in tasks or activities that we care about. This relates back to that notion that the world to Human Beings is NOT primarily something to be known. Heidegger uses the example of a hammer. When we look at a hammer...is our initial experience of that hammer to analyze it and break it down into what elements it's made out of and how much it weighs and what color it is? No as human beings, our base level experience with a hammer is to look at it as...equipment to be able to carry out tasks. It's not until, as he says, the hammer breaks...that we start thinking about it in terms of being a separate thing that we can arrive at knowledge about...in other words, we weren't able to engage in the process of knowing things about that hammer... if we weren't already, more fundamentally being in what it's like to be a human being, to be engaged in tasks. Now if we accept this premise...if we accept the premise that a Dasein is fundamentally an ontological being that is constantly engaged in tasks that it cares about...then what explains the vast chasm of behavioral differences between someone born in 10,000 BC...you know...literally sharpening their teeth with rocks...and someone born in 2017...sharpening the contrast of their pictures on Facebook? What explains it? After all, we're both ontological beings...we're both beings constantly engaged in the world....turns out it comes down to the last part...ontological

beings constantly engaged in tasks...that we CARE about. The things we care about...and the various things that dictate the things we choose to care about, many of which that are ENTIRELY out of our control...this overall concept of "care"...becomes a central focus in Heidegger's philosophy. And the way he breaks down what a Dasein ultimately chooses to care about is commonly explained in terms of three major factors, the group of which is sometimes called: The Care Structure. What a Dasein ultimately chooses to care about comes down to three things: its Facticity, its Fallenness and its Existentiality. Now understand that when Heidegger uses the word care...he's not talking about care in the sense that... you know you care about your new born baby or you care for your Grandma Beatrice when she gets the chicken pox...no, when you love something...you care about it. when you hate something...you care about it. when you're envious of something you care about it. The scope of what Heidegger means by care is much wider than the way we might conventionally use the word...and as we discuss each of these three major things that structure what it is a Dasein cares about and is ultimately going to be constantly engaged in...try to think about how this applies...to you, try to think about how your individual Facticity, Fallenness and Existentiality SHADE what it is that you care about. So the first one...is a Dasein's Facticity. Heidegger would say, look...it's not like before you were born you found yourself on some cosmic game show where you got to pick when and where you were born, who your parents were, how tall you were...no what happened was one day you just found yourself sort of...thrown...into existence. Thrown into a particular historical context, a particular cultural context, a particular socio-economic class, a particular gender...none of these things are things that you explicitly chose...but ALL of these things DRASTICALLY influence the tasks you care about enough to be constantly engaged in. This collection of things about your individual being that you had no control over...you know, the fact that you are born in 1975...the fact that you have a giant nose that scares small children...the fact that your mom and dad secretly hate each other and that you grew up in a loveless home...whatever it is that you are...these facts and many others like them individual to you...make up the Facticity of your existence, and again this Facticity strongly influences what things you decide to care

about. For example, for a Dasein living in 10,000 BC...just based on the facticity of that Dasein's being...there will never be point where that Dasein cares about going down to the local gym and training vigorously for two years, flying to Nepal, climbing to the top of Mt. Everest and taking pictures of how awesome their life is. Now in the same way...for you...just based on the Facticity of your being...there's never going to be a point in your life where you feel like going out into the woods, covering yourself in mud with nothing but a spear...trying to take down a predatory buffalo or two...just playing the odds here. Point is: Heidegger would say often times the tasks we decide to be constantly engaged in...have very little to do with us...they're sort of decided for us by the particular Facticity that we were born into. So the first one's Facticity...the second one is Fallenness. Fallenness is one of these concepts...where depending on how you're interpreting Heidegger...it can be perfectly clear what Heidegger means when he's talking about it...or it can start to take on a bit of a mystical feel where you GENERALLY get the points he's making about it but it always feels like there's some other...more spiritual layer to it where you don't ever fully feel like you're grasping the entirety of what Heidegger's getting at...least that's how it's always been for me...and in the commentary I've read I've never seen someone articulate it in any sort of clear way...but again this show isn't the place to lay out every possible interpretation of Heidegger, so I'll go with the more common...explanation of Fallenness. You know...because a fundamental aspect of Dasein is to be engaged in tasks...we're always being TOWARDS something...and because there's no Pow Wow where you, your family and your friends all sit around a fire discussing EXACTLY what tasks you're going to engage in down to the tiniest minutia...as Daseins, as human beings...we sort of fall, into tasks by default. Where do we get this default set of tasks to be engaged in? From other people around us...who tell us how we should be behaving. You know there's that quote you see every now and then goes something like: Get a job. Go to work. Get married. Send your kids to school. Follow Fashion. Walk on the Pavement. Save for old age. Obey the law. Now repeat after me: I am free. Heidegger thinks there's so many things about our modern, technology focused, consumer driven societies that make it easy for us to just fall into a set of tasks predetermined by how

other people tell us to behave. To become not one's own self a Dasein...but a "theyself" Das Man he calls it...He's critical of this very modern idea of people being looked at...of human beings...being looked at as primarily...just consumers...consumers of nature...he's critical of this strange virtue of just living your life...consuming more stuff all around us. He writes in one place:"The circularity of consumption for the sake of consumption is the sole procedure which distinctively characterizes the history of a world which has become an unworld."and this whole process of consuming for consumptions sake is sort of being bankrolled by nature, he writes elsewhere:"Nature becomes a gigantic gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry."What he's saying is...given the particular Facticity that we were all born into...it's really easy to just fall... into this role... of being a modern technologically minded consumer...waiting around for the next thing to consume...seeing yourself as separate from the world, separate from nature, this whole way of being by the way... propagated by what Heidegger sees as the most elaborate and powerful propaganda machine in the history of the world: that magic box sitting in your front room. Or that magic screen in your hand that tells you all the stuff you need to be consuming, all the life choices you need to be making...all the tasks you need to be engaged in...as a Dasein.He writes about it almost explicitly as it being a form of slavery, he says:"Hourly and daily they are chained to radio and television. ... All that with which modern techniques of communication stimulate, assail, and drive man --all that is already much closer to man today than his fields around his farmstead, closer than the sky over the earth, closer than the change from night to day, closer than the conventions and customs of his village, than the tradition of his native world."Keep in mind Heidegger's not writing an ethical doctrine when he's talking about this idea of Fallenness. He's talking about one part...of the nature of what it is to be a Dasein. Fallenness is an important part of being a Dasein, and while we may not like to admit all the ways that we're behaving simply because other people have told us to...make no mistake, we're ALL doing it at varying levels. We've all, in a sense, fallen into tasks... as Daseins it's part of our nature. So the first thing that has an effect on the tasks we decide to care about was our Facticity, the second thing was our Fallenness, and the last piece of

this... care structure... is our Existentiality. Now another way of putting this is to say that the first thing that has an effect is the reality you were thrown into...the second thing is, what other Daseins are already doing around you...and the last thing are the possibilities that you have at your disposal. The reality of being a Dasein...is to be a being...that has possibilities. What Heidegger's saying is, look. You are a Dasein. You are a particular kind of being that has possibilities. You're not a rock...you're not a tree. You know, a rock can't just decide one day it's gonna pack up it's suitcases and it wants to live at the Grand Canyon cause it's like Mecca for Rocks. No, a rock is a particular type of being...and you...as a Dasein are ALSO a particular type of being...a type of being that has, by its very nature, possibilities. Now when you consider these three parts of the care structure, Facticity, Fallenness and Existentiality...when you arrive at this place of realizing how they drastically effect the way you're going to be behaving...Heidegger thinks at this point you're left with a choice. It's a choice of living a certain way on a giant spectrum between what he calls: Authenticity on one end and Inauthenticity on the other. Now the sort of quintessential example of an Inauthentic person is someone who really only embodies the first two parts of the care structure...their Facticity and Fallenness. They're thrown into existence and fall into the tasks that other people around them tell them to do, never really considering the possibilities at their disposal about other ways to live their life. Now as you can imagine...the antithesis to that...living Authentically...is to radically consider the possibilities you have and live in a way that brings about what he calls "Dasein's own potentiality". To be deeply engaged in asking these ontological questions about being...to examine and understand your own Facticity including...the cultural and historical context you were born into...to realize the tasks that you've FALLEN into simply because somebody else told you to do it. To be truly authentic...is to fully embody the statement..."being one's own". Now as you can imagine...this is far from a dichotomy. It's not like you're either you know, a mindless drone going on with whatever other people tell you to do...or, Oh! I don't just go along with what everyone else does...I must be AUTHENTIC! No, we all exist on different points along this spectrum of Authenticity. And even if you're self aware enough to have corrected some of the things along the way

that you realized were just... the way other people told you to act...what most people do... is they get to a point in their life where they feel they're living Authentically enough...and then they just sort of... stop asking these ontological questions...they stop trying to arrive at a deeper understanding of the culture and time period they were born into...they stop actively examining their behavior trying to identify the things they do just because someone told them to do it...in practice what most of us do...is we arrive at these sort of rest stops on this giant road trip of life...and living out the rest of our lives largely inauthentically...while telling ourselves stories like, well I'm more authentic than that person over there. And the interesting thing to think about...is that this too...is part of what it is to be a Dasein. Again, Heidegger's not writing an ethical doctrine here...he's talking about the nature of what it is to be us. He never says that living authentically is BETTER than living inauthentically...though you get the sense when you read it...that to live inauthentically is to essentially leave out the entire.. existentiality part of the care structure...you get the sense that when you're living at one of these authenticity rest stops along the highway, that you're missing out on basically a third of what it is to be a Dasein. But anyway, to truly be authentic, to truly be one's own...is a lifestyle. You don't dabble...in total authenticity. And Heidegger says what happens when you start living this lifestyle of authenticity...certain things start to happen. When you're considering possibilities and asking these questions...IF you're a Dasein like we are immersed in this modern culture...you start to notice... all the symptoms... of us being these modern Daseins immersed in a world 2000 years sick and alienated from being. You start to see scientific inquiry...you know weighing and measuring and examining things as more like, curiosity than it is actually understanding things. Curiosity vs. Understanding. You start to hear the way people talk to each other...Well, I took timmy down to the pool, we got in the water and would you believe it...there was a flip flop floating in the water. I mean, who is this person? Is there a person walking around the world right now with one flip flop on? That reminds me...the other day at the store...I had a coupon and the machine was just not taking this coupon. This is not a long winded joke by the way...this is actually how a lot of people talk to each other...and Heidegger thinks when you live

authentically...you start to see this sort of conversation as more idle chatter than actual speech... the same way you see science as more curiosity than understanding. Tons of examples of these symptoms of our modern sickness of being...probably the most famous is the distinction he makes between thinking and calculating.You know...in this modern world...you may be an app developer. And you may go to work day after day making that app, programming, planning, designing, troubleshooting and you may use your brain all day long and people may deeply admire...how you use your brain all day long...you may do all that... and think of yourself as a thinker...you may even say that you think for a living...but Heidegger would say in actuality...you're not really thinking...you're doing something different, you're sort of calculating thing. Again, Heidegger thinks...this calculative type of thinking...is a direct result of modern society and how disconnected we are from being...and as harmless as it may seem on the surface, he thinks this type of thinking could lead to a place where:"the approaching tide of technological revolution in the atomic age could socaptivate, bewitch, dazzle, and beguile man that calculative thinking maysomeday come to be accepted and practiced as the only way of thinking."So when you live this truly authentic lifestyle...and you pull yourself out of this process of sitting at a rest stop being authentic enough just engaging in one task after another...you start to see the modern world for what it actually is...a world that is thousands of years disconnected..almost hopelessly disconnected... from being. This is why Heidegger uses so many Greek words throughout his philosophy...he's returning to these ancient languages that were used to describe aspects of being...before we were so disconnected from being.So when he looks at the Greek word for technology...Techne...and sees that it means revealing...if I came to your house and you asked me what technology was and I said, mmm technology is revealing...you'd look at me like I was crazy...at the very least like I'm some insecure person that's trying to sound deep. Heidegger would say, that the reason I sound so crazy is because of how alienated we are from technology as an aspect of being. How convenient, he would say, that when we search for the essence of technology like we did last episode, we realize that technology IS the art of revealing. In other words, by studying these ancient languages Heidegger thinks we can gain an

insight into the true essence of various aspects of being. So living authentically...let's go back for a second to the road trip example...some people never even leave the house on this road trip of authenticity...most of us find ourselves at various rest stops along the way satisfied with how authentic we are...and the further you travel down this road...the more work you put into being authentic...makes sense...the fewer and fewer people you're going to see camped out at these rest stops. Well I've got a bit of a problem Heidegger. Where is all of this going? Because as far as I can tell I'm going to keep putting in the work...I'm going to keep heading further and further down this road of authenticity until eventually one day I find myself at a rest stop...and nobodies around me. In fact, nobodies around me for a hundred miles. In other words, what if I continually work on myself I am engaged in these ontological questions, I'm listening to that voice inside of me that tells me that I can be something better, I'm learning about my Facticity and Fallenness...what if I do all that and then one day I look around me...and I feel alone. I look around me and it feels like nobody in the entire world is like me. I put in the work...and now I just see most people as willfully inauthentic Daseins...passively going along with a culture and a historical context that...now that I understand it REALLY is just arbitrary...engaging in rituals and behaviors that they DON'T really understand and aren't bothered by that...is this really the life that I want Heidegger? To look around and feel alienated from everyone? Why not just camp at one of these rest stops with people that I like and call it a life? Now I'm sure there's a lot of people out there...where maybe you don't feel completely alone...but you can certainly relate to this sentiment, right? Just being the kind of person that seeks out new information or tries to think as clearly and distinctly as you can...there's probably already moments that you have where the average person weighs in on their thoughts on a particular matter...and it's some variation of "it is what it is" or they parroting some talking point they heard on TV...and it's not crazy to think you might feel a little bit alone. Well imagine this taken to the absolute extreme. You know we can look at this same situation in a Nietzschean way...Nietzsche... huge influence on Heidegger. And if you want the full explanation go back and listen to the episode on Thus Spoke

Zarathustra but I feel like most of you will know what I'm talking about when I reference his different stages of development between the Camel the Lion and the Child. We're all born camels, most people die camels. Beasts of burden told where to go loaded on our backs are all the cultural expectations of how we should be behaving. Then we transform into the Lion...we scream out the great existential NO!...we say NO to these ways of behavior, realize them for what they are, the way everybody else does things, nothing more nothing less. Our goal eventually is to slay the dragon thou shalt, where written on every scale of the dragon is some way that we must be behaving...after slaying that dragon our goal is to transform into the child...or a state of being where we can CREATE our own values CREATE our own meaning...pick and choose which of these cultural norms we want to go along with the point being that now WE chose how to behave, it wasn't something loaded onto our backs from birth.And while Nietzsche would no doubt have solutions...you can at least imagine going through this entire transformation... and arriving at the end of it feeling kind of alienated from most people. After all, most people are born and die camels. Once you see them as the passive beasts of burden that they are...mindlessly going along with an arbitrary culture...is it really enough to tell yourself for the rest of your life that I'm just so awesome and so much more transformed that I can't help but be fulfilled.Well Heidegger has a solution to this feeling of alienation. Once you arrive at a place of true authenticity, once you ask the ontological questions and understand the Facticity you were born into and the Fallenness all around you...now it's time to go back. Now it's time to realize... that a fundamental aspect of what it is to be a Dasein... is to be born into a particular Facticity...more specifically a historicity...a historical context, a cultural context... with rituals and traditions...this is part of what it is to be a Dasein.Our job at this point... is to re-immense ourselves within our particular culture or set of traditions, embracing that Facticity, enhancing the whole process by looking at it through this authentic perspective that we've developed. If you live in Ancient Athens that means to embrace the legal system and become an olive farmer...if you live in 1930's Germany, it's to become a Nazi. Which is exactly what Heidegger did.There's some people out there that think Heidegger's Nazi life should've been an

entire episode in this series...what he did to Husserl...what he did to other public intellectuals...I don't know to me it's always seem like a bit of a fallacy...I mean the ideas either have merit or they don't I don't really care much about the mouthpiece they come out of. But I understand the other side too...the guy was a Nazi. But anyway I want to close out the episode today with one of the most famous ideas from Heidegger's philosophy. It's a way of looking at your life that naturally arises out of the process of living authentically...it's the idea of Being unto Death. So a fundamental aspect of being a Dasein, and a crucial aspect of living authentically, is the process of looking into the future and considering different possibilities that you have. Well what's the ultimate possibility that we all have to eventually deal with? We're all going to die. You're going to die, I'm going to die. Really think about it...you..listening to this...you are oing to die. Now why is that so weird when I say that? If I was talking to you about something you wanted to do in five years and I asked you, what if you die before you ever get to do that...I would be the weird one for asking. If I was at a Q&A; with a WW2 vet and he's 117 years old sitting on stage and I get up in front of the room and ask, when do you think you're gonna die? I would be the weirdo. But death...is a certainty. If you're living authentically, you realize that it's an inevitability. What if I brought up some other inevitability of being a Dasein...we're all eventually gonna be hungry. You're gonna be hungry I'm gonna be hungry. Why is that not weird to consider? Why is one of those weird to talk about... and the other one sounds like the beginning of an Applebees commercial? Heidegger thinks... that most people think about death in this disconnected, sort of abstract way...they say, yeah I'm gonna die one day...can't live forever. But do they ever stop and really consider the weight of that reality. In a strange way we live our lives as though we're NOT going to die, but is that for the best? Heidegger thinks many modern cultures do everything they CAN to allow us to never have to think about the fact that we're going to die someday. You're not supposed to talk about death...it's a very personal thing...it's Taboo. When somebody dies that's the absolute worst thing that ever could have happened to them. We relegate death to these distant buildings called hospitals and morgues so that nobody ever has to stare the reality of it directly in the

face.No we just sort of forget about it...go along with our lives...you go to a party and somebody asks you who are you...tell me about yourself! And what do we say? We say things like I'm an IT Consultant...I'm a psychology student...or I'm a wife or a husband...but are these things really who you are or are these just roles that you play within society? So who are you? Oh, well I'm a good singer...I'm quiet...I'm a handsome man...but aren't those just roles you play within society too...considering the fact that when you say that someone's handsome or pretty...all youre really doing is comparing them to how handsome or pretty every other member of society has been that you've seen so far. So really...who are you? Oh, well I have values...principles. Who I am is somebody that cares about people...I believe in turning the other cheek...yeah but if you took away those values...you'd ostensibly still be someone, right? If you got fired from your IT job if you got expelled from school...if you got divorced from your wife or your husband, you'd still be someone, right? Who are you really...underneath all this other stuff?When you truly face death...most of us only do it when we're on our deathbeds...it's only in that moment that you think of your life as a whole. It's so easy to get lost in the every day of just being engaged in task after task that we care about. To think of death as this distant thing that we'll start thinking about when we're 80 years old. But truly facing the reality of death, Heidegger thinks, makes us into true individuals. Because when you're on your deathbed you're not thinking to yourself, Here is the demise...of an IT consultant...a man who loves chocolate bars. No in the moment of death, you're given a new perspective...you have a wholistic view of your life...one that can be subdivided into chapters and themes...in the moment of death you don't think about yourself in terms of the social roles that you played...you don't think about some job that you had...for the first time you're thinking about who YOU are...for the first time you're living for yourself, not spending so much energy trying to get everyone's approval about who you are. In 1961 in a lecture, somebody raised their hand and asked Heidegger one thing we can do that would help us on our ongoing quest of living with authenticity...and he said back: spend more time in graveyards.Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Sartre and Camus pt. 4 - The Quest For Certainty

Episode #103

This is a transcript of episode #103 on Sartre. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So if you don't follow the show on Facebook or you don't follow me on Twitter you may be a little out of the loop in terms of the requests I've been receiving and what this show's gonna focus on for the next several episodes. So I wanna fill you in. You know, at the end of one of the Heidegger episodes I said that the state of the world is always contingent upon the state of human thought that came before it...and what I meant by that was...whether we realize it or not...every single one of us exists...as a single point...on a massive continuum...known as the history of human thought. Whether we realize it or not...so many of the strong convictions that we have... things that we think are parts of our personality and the personalities of people around us...have been shaped and in many ways determined... by the history of philosophical insights within this history of human thought. You know everybody has a particular way that they look at the world...a way that they look at economics and government and human psychology and God and relationships...and if you're an honest person this way of looking at things is always changing it's always growing...but the fact remains...at any one point in time... we all have a particular way that we look at the world that we've deemed to be a sort of best practices in that moment...and for years of MY life, at least, whenever I thought about this particular way that I looked at the world...I walked around talking about it like I had come up with it. Like it was all me, like as if at some point I locked myself in a closet and just thought about stuff REALLY REALLY hard for twenty years... and then emerged with MY way of looking at the world. But what I realized is that so much of the way we look at the world is actually this complex...patchwork...of philosophical insights that we've gleaned from the books that we've read, the teachers that we've had, the people that we've met, tons of different things, the point is...whether we realize it or not...we were all born into a particular philosophical...Facticity like we talked about last

episode...and this Facticity greatly influences the way that we look at the world. Now maybe you've listened to this show before...maybe you've come across some thinker that embodies some aspect of the way that you look at the world, you know a single piece of that complex patchwork of ideas that you have. But just statistically speaking...if you're a human being alive in the year 2017...a significant portion of the way that you look at the world is going to be based on the main philosophical lines of thinking that occurred throughout the 20th century...and when you understand the origins of these philosophical lines of thinking...you're given...a pretty substantial gift that is two fold at least that's how it was for me. First of all I felt humbled...because finally I didn't have to look at my set of beliefs as this elaborate art project I've been working on for twenty years...and if somebody criticizes my beliefs... they're essentially criticizing me...and second of all I felt this weird sense of clarity...because when you turn on the TV...and you see the way that people are behaving...and you take a step back in Plato's cave and you see the shadows on the cave wall for what they are...when you see what's going on as a sort of a ripple effect of a... philosophical stone that was thrown into a pond last century...it starts to all be way less confusing. This is the gift that I would like to give to you over the course of this next series of episodes...and when I thought about where to begin...the first thing I realized we're going to need is a much deeper understanding of Sartre...much deeper than we got on the...you know, the one episode I did on him where I touched briefly on Freedom and Responsibility. Look bottom line is, to fully understand his concept of radical freedom and responsibility, we have to understand his Phenomenology...to understand his phenomenology we have to understand Husserl and to understand Husserl...we have to understand a long standing, quasi-annoying tradition in the history of philosophy, that people were starting to get very skeptical of around the time of Sartre and Husserl. This episode is a story from philosophy that I'd like to tell you. It's a story to bring context to everything we've learned so far...context I could never give when I was just doing an episode on these thinkers in chronological order...but nonetheless it's context we NEED...to be able to understand the questions that Sartre thought were worth answering during his time. The story begins with

Descartes...godfather of modern philosophy...now in many ways, the story of Descartes is as old as philosophy itself...he's a mathematician turned philosopher...a mathematician fascinated by the level of certainty we can have when we say things like $1+1 = 2$, and he wants to try to emulate this process of mathematical certainty and apply it to thinking the goal being: to arrive at certainty about things. You know, in his book *Rules For The Direction of the Mind*, he talks about taking clear and distinct propositions and linking them together in the same sort of way a mathematician might say something like: ok well $1+1=2$. Alright now $2 + 5 = 7$. we know that. Ok now $7 \times 4 = 28$. Alright now lets bracket all these clear and distinct propositions together that have allowed us to progress up until this point...now imagine this same method... applied to thinking...except instead of chaining numbers, you're chaining together clear and distinct ideas arriving at a level of certainty comparable to $7 \times 4 = 28$. That was the goal...at least. See it's important to understand where Descartes coming from with all this...Descartes takes a look back at the almost 2000 years of philosophy that had been done before he was alive, and he's embarrassed..quite frankly. Nobody agrees on anything...nobody has any sort of solid foundation for what they're writing...it's all just a bunch of smart people spewing out volume after volume of unverifiable speculation about things...is this really what we want philosophy to be? Descartes thinks that where these philosophers all went wrong is in their method...and by the way this same exact sentiment applies more generally just to us in our personal lives...but he says that it's so easy to fall into the trap...where you're super interested in something...you want to feel like you know about a topic so badly...that you research it and think about it for a while and you talk to people about it...and then this strange, very human, thirst for knowledge... takes over...you want to feel like you know about it so badly that you end up getting impatient... and just ASSUMING that you know everything about it when there was really a lot more to consider if you dug deeper. You know to continue the math metaphor...this is like you want to be done with the test so badly.. that you just write a bunch of answers that seem like they're about right, but you don't actually go through and show your work of exactly how you got there. Well, enough of that. Enough speculation, enough chaos in philosophy, we need CERTAINTY about

things. And Descartes thought if we are ever going to arrive at certainty about things...we need to be taking a much more RIGOROUS look at the METHODS that we're using to arrive at it...he even uses that word, you know he often talks about how philosophy should be looked at as what he calls a rigorous discipline...and what we've been doing so far...uh, it's been FAR from rigorous. So Descartes lays down the gauntlet. From this point forward...let's all just agree on a couple things. Under penalty of being laughed at, cast out of the room and relegated to the children's table at the next family reunion...a philosopher truly concerned with the quest for certainty shall henceforth never make any claim that is not: 1, so clear that there is nothing obscure about it and 2, so distinct that there is nothing confused about it. Clear and distinct. As clear and distinct as $1+1=2$...you know you can imagine some of these hypothetical chains of ideas linked together by these earlier philosophers...you can imagine propositions within their thinking that look to Descartes like $2+2=5$...and then what happens is all the rest of the ideas that are built on top of that proposition.... come crumbling down. This is what has happened all throughout history...this is the world Descartes is living in...and here's him throwing down the gauntlet... trying to make sure it never has to happen again. We need to arrive at certainty. But here's the thing about certainty...it's no joke. It's not enough to just say $2+2$...is basically 4.01...no, there's no close enough when it comes to certainty. And if we were TRULY going to be rigorous...if we're going to arrive at a philosophical system based on certainty...we need to build it completely from scratch we can't assume ANYTHING about it... just as a given. Descartes says we need to doubt everything even things... that may seem a little bit silly when you're initially doubting them...things, for example, like whether or not we actually exist. Can't even take THAT for granted. And lucky for Descartes he gets past that one pretty easily with his famous I think, therefore I am. See if you're Descartes... and many philosophers before him for that matter... the criteria for knowing something clearly and distinctly... lies in whether we have direct awareness of it, rather than some secondary level of awareness of it... given to us by some other source, For example. To Descartes...when we ask the question whether or not we actually exist...simply based on the observation that we're thinking about anything at

all...to him, at the very least, we must be some sort of thinking thing that exists...in other words...we have this sort of... direct awareness of our existence present within our minds. But as you can imagine...not everything is this straight forward...even things that may seem...very straightforward. Because on the other hand, to Descartes, take something like the existence of the physical world,...I mean, sure it looks like there's a physical world out there full of things that we're interacting with...but can we be certain... about the things that we're looking at? After all, we know our minds trick us all the time...right? I mean you get stranded in the desert long enough...dehydrated...it happens...you start hallucinating...you start seeing a McDonalds on the horizon...that McDonalds isn't actually there...you put a stick in some water, the stick looks bent, but the stick isn't actually bent. The conclusion here, Descartes says, is that when it comes to the existence of the external world...we're not directly aware of the things that exist in the world...we're only directly aware of the way that they appear to us...or the phenomena as they appear to us...important word there...in this story from history...phenomena. In other words if we want to stay in keeping with this rigorous criteria that Descartes laid out trying to get to certainty about things, all we can really give with certainty... is a description of the phenomena...not the actual external objects of world. Though, Descartes himself never talks about this process of describing phenomena, he just marks the distinction between phenomena and the objects of the world...that's his contribution...Now this idea...that we are something that's aware of our own existence that can't be certain about anything else OUTSIDE of our own existence...is a textbook example of way of looking at things that in philosophy is referred to as Solipsism. Now Descartes never would have looked at himself as a champion of Solipsism...he has ways around it...he had an argument where the existence of God was a certainty and that therefore, God would never deceive us by putting all these thoughts in our heads about a world existing if there wasn't actually one...but, uh...everyone else wasn't buying that. And I guess the important part is: Descartes got us back on track...he laid down the gauntlet of certainty. Finally, for the first time ever, philosophy had been turned into a truly rigorous discipline...and yeah, maybe Descartes didn't get too far at arriving at these clear and distinct propositions, but

at least now, we're on the right track. Right? Well the story of philosophy goes on...time goes on. Thinkers come and go presenting theory after theory...and they certainly make some progress when it comes to these things that we can say with absolute certainty, but the next big breakthrough occurs... when a guy comes along that we've talked about many times on this show before: Mr. Immanuel Kant. Again, for the full explanation go back and listen to the Kant episodes... but because most of you probably already know what I'm talking about, here's the lightning round edition just to frame things in this discussion: All of us listening to this look at the world around us and see a world that is solid, static and unchanging...when in reality if we put that table in front of you under an electron microscope you'd see that it was 99.9% empty space and constantly moving. What this tells us... is that our senses... weren't necessarily evolved to be able to understand the fabric of reality itself...but really... just to be able to create a map of reality that does a good enough job that we can survive and reproduce better than others in a particular set of climate conditions. See, Descartes made a mistake in Kant's eyes. Descartes made the assumption that the mind didn't contribute anything to the phenomena it was looking at...he saw us as kind of passive observers just taking it all in. Kant on the other hand says that when you take a closer look at the mind... how it receives these phenomena, the mind actually contributes... a LOT to them. Kant says that for all intents and purposes...there are two distinct worlds that exist. There's the world of things in themselves...or the world out there...beyond our basic map of reality that we are reading with our senses...and then there's the world of human experience...which is our map of the world...or a world where our senses perceive these things in themselves and create phenomena that we organize through various mental faculties to be able to make sense of them...this whole process producing for us...our human experience of the world. In other words, we are ACTIVE observers organizing and governing the raw phenomena, not just taking them in...and to Kant, we can never know anything about this world of things in themselves...only the world of human experience. But the NEXT chapter in the story... is that you have post-Kantians coming along saying, ok...well if we can't ever know anything about this world of things in themselves...how can we know for certain

that there's more than one thing responsible for all these phenomena? How can we know that these things actually cause the phenomena...isn't causality a category of the mind? Actually...how can we know for certain that this world of things in themselves exists at all? And the answer is folks, at this point in philosophy: we can't. This is why Kant is referred to as a Transcendental Idealist...he's one of the first members in the long standing tradition in philosophy known as Idealism...or the idea that all of reality, or at least as we can possibly know it... is non-material and a construction of the mind. In other words: We can't know for certain...we can't just assume that there are these material objects existing in some hypothetical external world... that are causing the phenomena we're experiencing. All that we can be certain about...is going on in our minds. Again, CERTAINTY is what we're going for...we have to adhere to this rigorous set of criteria descartes laid out. Now at this point some of you out there might be thinking...ok...what are we doing here? What EXACTLY are we doing with philosophy? Look, when Descartes questioned whether we really exist or not, it was a fun thought experiment...when Kant did it...I respected the mans tenacity. But at a certain point...what we can't KNOW whether physical things exist in the world? How ridiculous is that? What, did Kant's dad never take him aside sit him down and say son...you're upstairs in your room all day doing your fingerpainting questioning whether the world actually exists...news flash...it does...look see table...its real hey NEWS paper! look it's the classified section...now you can get a REAL job! oh it's real...you like THAT don't you! Now of course this isn't how it went...but it can start to make you think...look I admire the whole quest for certainty thing...I understand what you guys are trying to do and I appreciate it...but at a certain point: I have a life to lead. I have kids to play football with...I have a job to go to. I can't sit around all day wondering whether a material world actually exists or not...look I'm all for certainty...and I understand you may be right, we may only have our thoughts...the universe itself...may in fact be just one giant thought...but the fact that it's been this long and you can't even confirm.... one of the most intuitively obvious things about existence...I'm worried you might be wasting your time and more importantly...I'm worried you might be wasting MY time. Now if any of you have ever felt this way over the

course of listening to this show: you're not alone. Because as the story continues...right around the 19th century thinkers started to emerge that were very skeptical of... not only this longstanding tradition of looking for certainty about things...but more generally... this long tradition of philosophers assuming that it's possible to use reason...to just...reason our way to the solutions about every problem we could ever face as a species. Reason to certainty about things, reason to the ideal form of government, reason to a complete scientific world picture. There was a sense at the time that this kind of thinking was... sort of outdated, kind of nostalgic, old philosophy...for so long we've tried to reduce everything into these pre-packaged little rational categories...and we've done it so much that these categories have become more important to philosophers than the things that make them up...even human beings for example...I mean, along with this old philosophy went an outdated way of rationally categorizing human beings...this long tradition of seeing people as merely aspects of some larger whole...as merely children of God's kingdom...or merely members of a state...out went that way of thinking... and we started to see thinkers emerge like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche... that looked at what it is to be a human being much more in terms of what it is to be an individual...a relatively modern concept in human history. Now of course this wasn't the only way people were looking at the history of philosophy, but this is the way Sartre was looking at it: there was this feeling... that maybe this trajectory of philosophy brought about in the 17th century... had been off the rails for a long time and was utterly devoid of value...there was this feeling that if we ever wanted to make ANY sort of progress in the future we needed to do something radical...something fundamentally different than we have been doing. Then along comes a character into history to shake things up...the mad scientist philosopher Husserl...early in his career on the same page as these 19th century thinkers that believe something radical needs to be done...and this is EXACTLY what he's trying to do with his early work. He's not SATISFIED with idealism being some sort of final destination...he wants to tweak our methods of looking at these phenomena, study the very structure of consciousness and arrive at a certainty that includes an external, physical world among other things. In other words: this rigorous discipline of philosophy... just got an extreme

makeover. And yeah Husserl would agree...you definitely don't want to spend every second of your life doubting whether the external world exists or not just because philosophers haven't arrived at some definitive proof of it. That'd be ridiculous I mean just think if everybody adopted that strategy...nobody in that history of the world would have ever conducted a single scientific experiment...how can you do an experiment on a world that you have no reason to believe actually exists? Think about that...just imagine if we never conducted science just because philosophy had never arrived at a method that was going to guarantee we were never mistaken. No, science doesn't agonize over the idea of never being mistaken like Descartes did...science isn't in the business of certainty...it's in the business of coming up a yes largely incomplete, tremendously flawed but PROFOUNDLY USEFUL set of insights that help us understand things a little bit better. Just because it's not certainty doesn't make it not useful...and again in a weird way... if scientists WERE out there looking for complete certainty, they wouldn't be able to get anything done. Husserl makes a distinction between these two very different ways of orienting yourself to the world...BOTH OF WHICH are useful in his eyes. On one hand we have the Phenomenological attitude sometimes called the philosophical attitude...this is Descartes Gauntlet...this is the rigorous method of looking for certainty that Husserl's made drastic improvements upon...the, I guess, 100% honest way of looking at things doubting everything including your own existence and then proceeding with caution from there...there's that and then on the other hand we have what he calls the Natural Attitude...or the sort of default way of orientating yourself to the world...the way of looking at things that all science is conducted through...or as Husserl says the way of looking at things that starts with several big presuppositions but nonetheless allows us to continue on with our daily lives or scientific inquiry without being paralyzed by this quest for certainty. These are two different ways of approaching the world. Scientists don't doubt the kind of things Husserl doubts when he's looking for certainty... they don't doubt things like whether there's actually a correspondence between the thoughts they're having and the object they're perceiving...they don't DOUBT things like whether the mind is the kind of thing that's even capable of arriving at OBJECTIVE FACTS...yet they

conduct scientific experiments assuming these things are in their favor...and it makes sense...Husserl would say... that it's just simply not useful when you're doing a scientific experiment to doubt whether the mind is something even capable of arriving at objectivity...if you get too caught up on certainty...it sabotages your very ability to do science. Science is not certainty. This is the point Husserl's making. The phenomenological attitude and the natural attitude are mutually exclusive. You can't look at the world in both ways simultaneously. For example, a normal everyday person immersed in the natural attitude... might go down to the library pick up some Husserl...they might read him... they might contemplate how they can know anything for certain...maybe they even employ a few of his methods and take a sort of recreational swim in the Phenomenological attitude. But when they're done reading the book, they leave the library and go on about their day...they're not still doubting whether the world actually exists or not. On that same note...even the most die hard Phenomenologist...let's say you work 9-5 as a professional Phenomenologist...the second that bell rings and you take your union standardized break...you're not sitting around the break room wondering whether the vending machine is just a mental construction or not. Practicing Phenomenology is practicing a new way of seeing the world and the things that make seeing the world possible at all...and Husserl would say...yeah it's possible for someone to get too far down the rabbit hole of the philosophical attitude...sitting around all day yellin' at people, well YOU don't even know if any of this stuff exists...so PROVE it! YOU don't even know if YOU exist! And that certainly would be a waste of time...but be careful cause you can go too far in the other direction too...you can spend your entire life writing off these sort of... pointless armchair philosopher questions and going on for the rest of your days...never really considering all the presuppositions that come along with the natural attitude.. and honestly believing that what you're looking at as you walk around every day is OBJECTIVE reality. There are people that talk about what we see as human beings as though it is...objective reality. Example everyone will know: there are certain big famous, celebrity proponents of science who are.. by their own admission...proudly willfully ignorant of philosophy who say that philosophy is essentially useless in today's

world..because it's been replaced by a better, more dynamic system called science... that does everything philosophy used to do except better. These people are a perfect example... of what it looks like to go way too far down the rabbit hole of the natural attitude...I mean does Bill Nye realize that if it wasn't for philosophy he would just be Bill Nye...the guy. I mean seriously. But Bill Nye, NDT, Stephen Hawking, all these people that are proud of the fact they've never read philosophy... and they cavalierly just in normal conversation throw around these terms like Objective Reality and Objective Truth and Facts...one of a few things has to be true about them...either they've never considered the limitations of their own senses...the limitations of human knowledge...the assumptions present in the natural attitude...which given how little philosophy they've claimed to have read is worrying...or the more charitable reading of this...the reading I force myself to believe as I sit in the corner and neurotically rocking...is that maybe they have considered all these boundaries between themselves and objectivity...but they use words like Objective Truth because they see themselves engaged in a war against religion and they feel like they have to be a direct substitute to it. In other words...maybe it's all a strategy...maybe they're not so lost in the natural attitude...maybe they see that human beings are really attracted to this idea of having all the answers and of harnessing objective truth...and religion tells them they can find those answers in the book of genesis...so in order to compete with that...let's sort of gloss over all the limitations of science and the human beings that ultimately have to conduct science and let's proceed as though our method is the REAL method of arriving at Objective truth. What I'm saying is...when you go too far down this natural attitude rabbit hole and you start looking at this stuff as though it's objective truth...it starts to look eerily familiar. You know in the 1400's you had a priest that wore a big robe and conducted a ritual at an altar spoke to God and told you what the objective truth of the universe was. In today's world you have a scientist...wearing a big robe (labcoat)...conducting a ritual (experiment) at an altar (a laboratory) speaking to the universe and telling you the objective truth about it is. You never go full Natural Attitude...is what I'm saying. But back to the story...as you can imagine...when word gets out that Husserl's come up with a new

method of Phenomenology that may give us certainty about an external, physical world and much more by the way...it attracts a lot of aspiring philosophers that see it as one piece of this radical change that we're going to have to make in philosophy if we want to move forward...one of these thinkers that became a student of Husserl was named Martin Heidegger...another was named Jean Paul Sartre.Now... in an unexpected turn of events...a turn that many of Husserl's students couldn't even fully understand...right around the middle of Husserl's life he does sort of an about face with his Phenomenology...he takes it in the same direction so many other thinkers before him took it...he loses faith in his work and becomes an Idealist.Now some students followed along with Husserl adopting his new work...but other students were like, mm..no. No, no. Sure, Husserl this early work is far from perfect...but look all it needs is a little more development in this area and some further clarifications over there... and then...then it's gonna be solid. Two of the thinkers that were part of this group...were Heidegger and Sartre.Now Heidegger...as we talked about...disagreed with some pretty critical aspects of Husserl...not the least of which was the entire idea of consciousness at all. Again, why do we need to think about ourselves like Descartes did back in the 17th century? Like we're subjects acting upon objects...or a more modern spin...consciousness acting upon things in the world? No, to Heidegger... we have no reasonable basis for making that sort of assumption. Being... and the world... are a unified thing and are fundamentally inseparable from each other.Well Sartre reads Heidegger and he's convinced...Heidegger's right... we have no basis for assuming that we're subjects acting upon objects...he's right that being and the world are a unified thing...but Sartre leaves room for consciousness. To Sartre...it's consciousness...and the world...that are fundamentally inseparable.See Sartre takes a look at this long history in philosophy we've been talking about for this entire episode and he realizes something...the problem everyone seems to have... is being able to explain how things work up in this strange...box inside of their head that they seem to be trapped in. They have this factory up in their heads called consciousness or whatever word they use for it...and they have this receiving dock that takes in these semi-trucks full of phenomena... and these

phenomena are sent down conveyor belts and the disenfranchised blue collar workers organize them and categorize them and turn them into this crude map of the world that they ship out the other side of the factory to us so we can perceive the world. But think about what we talked about last time...consciousness is not some empty container...or some empty factory up in our heads waiting to be filled up with perceptions. The more these Phenomenologists look at consciousness the more they see it more of an activity than a thing up in our heads...remember consciousness is always actional (doing something) and referential (pointing towards something)...there's no such thing as some empty consciousness out there. See Sartre is different from Husserl. When Husserl does his Phenomenology... he's super focused on the task of figuring out what everything is...and the way he DOES that is through various methods like the Eidetic Reduction that we talked about on Heidegger part 1. What... Husserl's interested in doing...is describing things in the world in terms of these universal essences that he arrives at through the Eidetic reduction...but remember... Sartre doesn't come from that school of thought he would see this whole process as just a misguided extension of this outdated, old philosophy where we thought we could think about everything in terms of these neat categories and universals. No, Sartre's more focused on the individual...and he thinks you can't ever know everything about an individual simply by looking at them in terms of what universal essences intersect by them. For example...you know it's so tempting to think that if we figure out the essence of something...we know what it is...that if we had a piece of wax...we did the Eidetic reduction and arrived at it's universal essences...that we have essentially figured out...what it is to be that thing. But Sartre says, this never tells us the full story. Sartre has a famous argument in his most famous work Being and Nothingness... where he quotes a passage from the biography of the French Author Gustave Flaubert...and here he's pointing out how ridiculous it is that the biographer is trying to explain the psychology of Flaubert, the psychology of a human being by using this sort of process...by just appealing to a bunch of universals. He says:"... A critic, for example, wishing to explain the "psychology" of Flaubert, will write that he "appeared in his early youth to know as his normal state, a continual exaltation resulting from the

twofold feeling of his grandiose ambition and his invincible power The effervescence of his young blood was then turned into literary passion as happens about the eighteenth year in precocious souls who find in the energy of style or the intensities of fiction some way of escaping from the need of violent action or of intense feeling, which torments them." So you can see what the biographers trying to do here... he's trying to give his own psychoanalysis of Gustave Flaubert and the things that happened in his youth that caused him to get into writing. Sartre goes on: "In this passage there is an effort to reduce the complex personality of an adolescent to a few basic desires, as the chemist reduces compound bodies to merely a combination of simple bodies. The primitive givens will be grandiose ambition, the need of violent action and of intense feeling; these elements, when they enter into combination, produce a permanent exaltation." Listen to that... look at that comparison he draws... we're trying to break this person down... the same methodical way a chemist reduces compound bodies to merely a combination of simple bodies. He says: "At each state in the description just quoted, we meet with a hiatus. Why did ambition and the feeling of his power produce in Flaubert exaltation rather than tranquil waiting or gloomy impatience? Why did this exaltation express itself specifically in the need to act violently and feel intensely? Or rather why does this need make a sudden appearance by spontaneous generation at the end of the paragraph? And why does this need instead of seeking to appease itself in acts of violence, by amorous adventures, or in debauch, choose precisely to satisfy itself symbolically? And why does Flaubert turn to writing rather than to painting or music for this symbolic satisfaction; he could just as well not resort to the artistic field at all (there is also mysticism, for example). "I could have been a great actor," wrote Flaubert somewhere. Why did he not try to be one? In a word, we have understood nothing; we have seen a succession of accidental happenings, of desire springing forth fully armed, one from the other, with no possibility for us to grasp their genesis. "This... brings us to the end of the story... to the place Sartre is writing his philosophy from. What if this old style of philosophy was severely misguided? What if understanding the universal essences of things isn't enough to fully understand them? What if we don't have some consciousness

factory up in our heads with these mysterious phenomena that leave us unable to be certain about anything but ideas? What if consciousness and the world are a unified thing fundamentally inseparable? And when you think about it in that way...what if consciousness...is like shining a flashlight into a dark room revealing only a small portion of what would otherwise be concealed. Except it's more than that...imagine there was no flashlight causing the light rays. Metaphorically speaking...what if what we are...are the light rays...revealing a portion of an otherwise dark room? Pure awareness of things in the world...what if the idea that we needed a flashlight or that there was a barrier between us and the world...what if that was an assumption we'd been making all along? And as we prepare for next episode when we'll talk more of the details of Sartre's phenomenology and more importantly how it effects how we should look at our selves, our lives and the things we care about...Sartre would want us to consider... what if we are consciousness...and what if consciousness...IS... radical freedom and responsibility. Thank you for listening, I'll talk to you next time.

Sartre and Camus pt. 5 - Consciousness is Freedom

Episode #104

This is a transcript of episode #104 on Sartre. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Hello Everyone, I'm Stephen West. This is philosophize this! Thank you to everyone that supports the show on Patreon. I could never do this without you, thanks for making it possible for the show to continue. To people that buy things on Amazon, there is a banner located on the front page of the website philosophizethis.org that you can click through that in absolutely zero way, supports me or this show. Just saying...it's there. Today's episode is number five in a series on Sartre and Camus. I hope you love the show today. So consciousness...is freedom. What exactly was it that Sartre meant... when he said that because it's not obvious, right? I mean it sounds like one of those things you'd say Consciousness is Freedom and people would be like, hmm yeah no I totally get where he's coming from there....but do you really? Do you? Let's talk about it for an episode and let's also talk about...if Sartre is correct here...that consciousness is freedom...how do human beings typically respond to that reality and what does it mean...for us personally...when it comes to how we approach the world? You know we talked about a LOT of stuff on the last episode but I hope one of the major takeaways was that throughout the history of philosophy...we've had this pretty stubborn recurring problem that just doesn't seem to go away. Turns out it's a little more difficult than you might initially think to actually prove the existence of the external, physical world. Tons of thinkers have taken a crack at it but their problems all seem to begin at the same exact place, the problem is: once you make that distinction between consciousness and the world...it becomes extremely difficult to say with any level of certainty...that what you're perceiving is really the world... and not just the world as it appears to you. Remember Descartes...talking about how our senses often deceive us...the stick in the water looks bent...we don't have a direct awareness of the objects of the world, just how they appear to us. And this has created this dynamic throughout the history philosophy... where

philosophers are kind of like these prisoners in a cage trapped up inside of their own minds. Imagine a prisoner in a cell, right outside of this cell are four walls so you can never directly see what's going on outside of the cell, but in the floor of the cell there's a hatch that opens up once a day and gives you a newspaper that tells you everything that's going on in the world outside. Solipsism would say, wait a second. How do we know this newspaper is fair and balanced? How can we know this is an accurate representation of what's going on and not written by somebody that's just trying to deceive us into thinking what they WANT us to think out there? We can't know ANYTHING about what's going on outside these four walls...An Idealist might say something like, alright... well maybe we can't be certain about what's going on, out there...but one thing we can be certain of is the fact that we have this newspaper. Let's make sure we're careful, let's make sure we understand the biases we're bringing to this paper as the prisoner reading it...let's make sure we try to understand the biases of the people writing the paper...the ultimate point is: let's take this newspaper seriously...because at least we have a newspaper... and it seems like the contents of it may be all that we ever have access to. Husserl would be doing some psycho thing...maybe studying the structural integrity of the cell...what holds it together...he'd be studying the hatch in the floor that delivers the newspaper...Well Sartre would be the guy on the prison monitor looking at them through a security camera wondering how they all don't see the key hanging around their neck. Because see, TONS of thinkers over the years have tried to come up with ALL KINDS of prison break techniques to get out of this cage...but Sartre would say what if consciousness is not some realm or some cage we're trapped in up in our heads...what if we don't have some secondary level of awareness of the things in the world, what if consciousness and the world are a unified thing and when you LOOK at consciousness closely enough...this is his way of escaping the cell...what if consciousness is essentially... nothingness. Again, it's not exactly obvious what he means when it says that, but it's the reason he calls his seminal work Being and Nothingness. To understand what he means by consciousness is freedom, we have to understand what he means by consciousness is nothingness...so let's get into it. So part of the reason there's so much word play and qualifying going on here is

that Sartre's trying to do something really difficult...he's trying to merge these two ways of thinking we've been talking about on one hand... delineating things in a very Cartesian way between consciousness and the world... while also trying to preserve Heidegger's point that being and the world are a unified thing. Now just living in the western world...we're a little bit sabotaged when it comes to understanding this concept...and it makes sense, when you live in a world where every sentence you say is structured in terms of subjects acting upon objects...where every piece of information is framed in these subject/object terms...this whole concept that Heidegger introduces about being and the world as a unified thing can be kind of confusing to wrap your head around, but try to think about it like anything ELSE that's fundamentally interconnected. Not that this is a perfect metaphor, because it's certainly NOT what Sartre and Heidegger are saying...but just to get us thinking in these terms...think about the way people conventionally talk about the mind and body as being interconnected. You know you can meditate...and your body feels relaxed. You can constantly focus your mind on all the things you're miserable about and it's going to produce in your body a feeling of misery. In other words you can change the state of your mind...and it goes on to change the state of your body. But it goes the other way too, right? We've all seen that Ted talk where they talk about the power poses. Stand in front of a mirror...hold your hands over your head like you just won a race...and it feels like you just won a race...you can change your posture and you feel better about yourself...tons of ways to change the state of your body to change the state of your mind but the point is if you were trying to write a book about either ONE of these things...if you tried to write a book about the mind without ever referencing the body once...you can imagine how the book might be massively incomplete when you finish it...almost DOOMED to failure from the start. Well to Sartre this is what philosophers have been doing for hundreds of years with these elaborate books written about JUST consciousness or JUST the world. Again, consciousness and the world are a unified thing... we can never comprehensively talk about either one of them without directly referencing the other... but still nonetheless, we do NEED names for them so that we can talk about the details of what they are and the names Sartre gives

them are on the one hand Being-in-itself (the world) and on the other... Being-For-itself (consciousness). Being in itself and Being for itself. Let's talk first about Being-in-itself. You know, when teachers try to explain this concept of Being-in-itself they'll often times say to think of it as almost the same as the concept... of matter...and it's not because Sartre is a scientist or that he thinks Being-in-itself is just a combination of molecules...they use this word "matter" because it's a general, vague term about something physical that exists without giving any details about it. The way that Sartre describes Being-in-itself... is extremely similar to a description given by a guy we talked about on the first or second episode of this show...a guy named Parmenides. Parmenides famously argues really quite simply, that what is, is. And what is not, is not. Something either exists...or it doesn't exist. Seems pretty reasonable. What follows from this if you're him is that something can never come into being... because in order to do that...where did it come from? Non-being? That doesn't exist. But it goes the other way too, something can never go out of being because where would it be going to? Something that doesn't exist? Things coming and going out of being, to Parmenides... is an illusion created by our feeble senses. Things changing and time moving and even things being separate from each other are all...illusions created by the senses. What follows from this for Parmenides is that what being actually is...is this giant, featureless, unmoving, unchanging, inert sphere of existence...and that anything else we humans try to say about it is just us imposing our feeble senses onto it. He describes it:"... it is uncreated and imperishable, for it is entire, immovable and without end. It was not in the past, nor shall it be, since it is now, all at once, one, continuous; for what creation wilt thou seek for it? how and whence did it grow? Nor shall I allow thee to say or to think, 'from that which is not'; for it is not to be said or thought that it is not. And what need would have driven it on to grow, starting from nothing, at a later time rather than an earlier?" Well just listen... to how Sartre describes Being-in-itself at the beginning of Being and Nothingness: "Transition, becoming, anything that permits us to say that being is not yet what it will be and that it is already what it is not — all that is forbidden on principle.... It is full positivity. It knows no otherness; it never posits itself as

other-than-another-being...it is not subject to temporality" So, this picture that Sartre presents of being-in-itself...is not much different than the way Parmenides describes being as a giant, timeless, featureless, unchanging, inert blob of existence. When Sartre says in that quote that being-in-itself is FULL positivity...he means more or less the same thing Parmenides means when he says what is, is and what is not, is not. Being-in-itself is what is...any talk about what is not has nothing to do with it. In other words, Being-in-itself is fully positive or affirmative in its existence, it doesn't depend on anything for its existence, it doesn't exist AS OPPOSED to some OTHER being out there...hypothetically speaking you could fully describe Being-in-itself without ever using the word "not" or ever referencing something that isn't the case. When it comes to Being-in-itself, what is, is. And what is not, is not. Things like motion and change and time are all... NOT... aspects of this Being-in-itself. And while BOTH Parmenides and Sartre arrive at this same place...the DIFFERENCE between them... is that while... Parmenides arrives at this place, sees all this motion and change and things seemingly coming and going out of being in the world, and HE writes all this stuff off as a paradoxical illusion created by the senses...Sartre explains all these things... as the WAYS that consciousness interacts with the world. Or in other words: the way that Being-For-Itself interacts with Being-in-itself. Consciousness as being for itself...the world, matter, as Being-in-itself. Now given the fact that Being-in-itself is FULL positivity. Fully affirmative. Consciousness...or Being-For-Itself...is what allows us to consider the other side of that...what is not. Now let's get out of describing this stuff in this "is and is not" way the point is... that if consciousness allows us to consider what is not...you can start to see the direction this is heading in of consciousness being nothingness. Consciousness, to Sartre, is not a box...it's not a cage up in our heads that we're trapped in...consciousness is an activity...an activity of pure directedness towards Being-in-itself...pure intentionality. The big move here...is that unlike Descartes...who talks about us not having access to the things of the world but only the way that they appear to us...and how that whole strategy effectively locks us up in our heads trying to decipher these mere APPEARANCES of things...you know it's a three step

process...there's the actual things, the appearances of the things and then there's us sitting up in our head trying to decode them. Sartre cuts out the middle man. Yes, things still APPEAR to consciousness in a particular way, but the OBJECTS of consciousness ARE the things in the world, not this sort of internal picture being projected up in our heads that was CAUSED by the things outside of our heads like so many philosophers have assumed. So let's just try to picture consciousness then. Picture rays of light, coming out of a flashlight, illuminating a little circle of things in an otherwise dark room, except...here's where it gets weird. Picture there's no flashlight causing these light rays, that was an assumption too...and consider the fact that consciousness doesn't just passively reveal things in the dark room like the light-rays do, consciousness reveals things based on a very particular scheme that we can study. Picture light-rays... as if they were animated by something that gives them a particular structure...but it's even WEIRDER than that...because to even picture light-rays is to be picturing some...thing...this apparatus made up of photons interacting with the objects in the room. But consciousness isn't some...thing. It's an activity of pure awareness and what follows from that if you're Sartre is that other than this strange relationship between consciousness and the objects it's revealing...consciousness...is nothing really. Consciousness...is nothingness. But it's nothingness in another sense too, it's nothingness in that... it's the source of all nothingness... in our experience of the world to Sartre...the feeling that something's lacking, of what is not...it's the source of something about the way we interpret the world that at this point is an age old problem in philosophy... called The Problem of Negation. Here's an example Sartre uses: Let's say you were going to meet your friend Pierre at a bar. Let's say you get there and Pierre hasn't gotten there yet, and when you get there and you turn your consciousness towards the bar and you examine whether Pierre's there or not...you don't go ok I see 5 tables, 10 chairs, some glasses, some pictures on the wall, tiles on the floor, lights, a man in a nice hat, some alcohol behind the counter...you know I've taken a pretty exhaustive inventory of this place and I just don't see Pierre on this list of things. No, what actually happens is...you look around and you perceive a sort of...lack of Pierre. In other words, if you walked in

the bar and Pierre was sitting there...it would be a FULL positivity, affirmative, being-in-itself style fact that Pierre is sitting in the bar. But when Pierre isn't there, what you end up getting access to is a weird sort of "negative fact". An awareness of a non-Pierreness. An absence of Pierre, but what is that really, what exactly are we conscious of there? These sort of "negative facts" as they're called deeply worried thinkers like Parmenides who went so far as to say that you can't even SPEAK of what is not without being contradictory. For Sartre one thing for certain...this awareness of what is not DIDN'T come from being-in-itself...no, to be able to see this lack or negation or nothingness... of non-Pierre in the bar, we get that from consciousness. Consciousness is the source of nothingness in our awareness of the world. Now if you're someone out there saying, OK, this is all very interesting but it's also all very deep and analytical. Look...you can explain it 'til you're blue in the face Sartre, but if consciousness is this way on this fundamental level...is there any way on a more practical level I can experience this nothingness of consciousness? And it's almost like I wrote that question ahead of time...it turns out...THERE IS! Several different situations that we can ALL relate to. I'll talk about a couple of them. Two of the more famous ones are often called The Gambler and Vertigo. Let's talk about the gambler. Sartre says to imagine a guy that's a compulsive gambler. He goes down to the casino every day and gambles all of his money away. His family's struggling...his children are starving and he realizes something has to change about this whole scenario...so he makes a resolution to never gamble again for the rest of his life. But then the next day he goes down to the casino...always a wise move...he walks past the gambling table, and that demon... that demon starts talking to him, oh maybe we could gamble a little bit. No, no I need to stop. This is ruining my family, this is ruining my life...but maybe if I just made a really small bet...Sartre writes about his inner monologue as he looks back at the compulsive gambler he used to be he says: "That man back there in the past is me. It's not someone else, after all; I recognize myself in that past man. And yet, in the sense that matters right now, that man is not me. That man has good resolutions that speak to him and are persuasive. But those resolutions do not affect me one bit, unless I make those resolutions anew — now. I do not find his resolutions

affecting me." What he's saying here is here's this compulsive gambler that's trying to stop...looking into the past at the man he used to be...thinking about the moment he decided to stop gambling and all the resolutions he made to himself never going to do it again. But now he finds himself in THIS moment...and while in one sense that person in the past that decided to stop gambling IS him...but for all intents and purposes...that guy that made those resolutions... is essentially a different person in a different time and place. He realizes that all those resolutions he made that day... mean NOTHING... if he doesn't in each and every moment make those very SAME resolutions. Now you can imagine this with weight loss or drinking or meditating twice a day but the point is: Sartre would want us to ask...when we make these changes for the better in our lives...and we look back at the person we used to be...what is stopping us, in this very moment, from going back and becoming that person again? What's stopping us from going back to the gambling table or the bar or the fast food drive through? Well Sartre would say...nothing. Nothing...is stopping you. And it's THAT realization...that at any moment you could choose to go back to living in your own little personal hell that you created...that reality produces in us a feeling that Sartre calls Anguish. Not a good feeling. We'll talk more about it in a second but let's talk about Vertigo. New story. A person's going on a walk one day... and they come to the edge of a giant cliff...and they look down...400 foot drop...they see the ravine below...jagged rocks...and all of a sudden their palms start sweating and tingling and they get a little dizzy and so they back up away from the edge don't look down there. Well, what just went on there, why did their body react that way? Well the default answer might be to say that, look...I'm at the edge of a cliff...I looked down and it doesn't look very fun down there...I was scared I was going to fall. But Sartre would say, it wasn't that you were scared to fall...it was that you were scared about the possibility that you could JUMP. Just like the Gambler looked into the past...what happened was you looked into the future...you saw yourself laying there at the bottom of the cliff looking like a human swastika...just mangled from the fall...you looked at that person in the future...and while in one sense that person is a completely different person in a different time and place...in another sense...all it would take is one

choice, about 15 seconds and the effects of gravity to TURN you into that person. In other words, what's stopping you in this moment from hurling yourself off the cliff to your death...nothing. Nothing is stopping you. Look, if there was some essence that preceded your existence maybe you wouldn't have the CHOICE to jump off the cliff, but the fact is you DO have a choice. We ALWAYS have a choice. And the fact that NOTHING stops the gambler from going back to the tables and NOTHING stops the person from throwing themselves off the cliff and that NOTHING is stopping anyone listening to this from being the best or worst person they could ever possibly be...this nothingness...when you think about it, it ends up just being another word for freedom. Consciousness...is freedom. And when we're hit with this reality...that every second of every day is a choice moving in the direction of our potential bad OR good selves...when we TRULY face that fact...it doesn't make us happy like we just got out of jail...it's terrifying to us. It produces in us that feeling that Sartre calls Anguish. We feel a sense of Anguish...when we truly consider just how much freedom we have to choose and how responsible we are for our actions...and Sartre says most people spend their entire lives coming up with all kinds of creative ways to tell themselves a story... blaming their behavior on something other than themselves, all in an attempt to ESCAPE, this feeling of anguish. Let's talk about a few of the ways... Sartre thinks people shift this blame off themselves and pretend like they didn't have a choice...one of them happens to be a prevailing idea in the field of psychology during Sartre's life...it's the Freudian idea of the unconscious mind people will tell themselves...I did something...but it wasn't really fully ME that made the choice to do it...see I have this thing called my unconscious mind up in my brain that affects and sometimes even GOVERNS my decision making. Sartre uses an example like...say you were walking out of a restaurant and you see a little girl bleeding out of her head on the sidewalk looking for help. Now most of us... when faced with this situation... consciously think...oh, here's a girl that needs help. I care about this girl. I'm a good person. The right thing to do here is to help this little girl. And then we do it. Now a common criticism of this description of what's going on there is that what really happened...is that you saw a little girl bleeding out of her head...that visual produced in you a very unpleasant feeling

of distress and worry...and you went over to help the girl really on a self-interested mission to get rid of that distress and worry. In other words, consciously you told yourself that you're a good person and what you like to do is help people who are in need...but unconsciously...you were acting in a self-interested way. Now nobody gets hurt in this example, but you can imagine how having this cordoned off place up in your head called "the unconscious mind"... that we have no awareness of when making choices but nonetheless sometimes governs our behavior...you can imagine how people might sometimes use that as a way of taking the blame off of themselves and not admitting that they were free to make another choice...you can imagine how Sartre might have a problem with it. And an important thing to note is...it certainly may be true that most of the stuff we do is done without us directly reflecting on it...the thing Sartre wants to avoid is people using this "unconscious mind" as a scapegoat that they can evoke any time they want to justify horrible behavior. Police talking to you: Sir, what happened here? Yes I trampled that small child...but you know when I heard the fire alarm I had this unconscious natural urge to protect myself and my kids and everything else went out the window. Police talking to you again: Look man I was just sitting there this guy rolled up and I said bro, you better get out of my face and then unconsciously bam! I laid him out. Unconsciously...I just had this instinct to protect myself. This is what he's trying to avoid...and think about it...is it absolutely necessary to have this hidden realm called the unconscious mind that we have no awareness of? Sartre would say that sure, it is true that seeing the little girl makes me feel distressed and worried. And it's true, that helping the little girl removes this feeling of distress and worry that I have. But what's ALSO true...is that once I help the little girl rub some dirt on the wound and wrap it up in a giant bandage...how convenient...that I'm never surprised at that point... that I feel good about myself and that these bad feelings have left me. It's almost like...I was always aware of the fact I was acting selfishly...I just wasn't reflecting on it in that moment. It's almost like this motive wasn't hidden away in some unconscious mind that I have no awareness of...but that I was just aware of it in a different way. Sartre makes the distinction that consciousness is not this single wave of awareness like many psychologists assume that

every consciousness has what he calls both positional and non-positional awareness...but the ultimate goal... that Sartre has here is to do away with this mysterious and unnecessary realm called "the unconscious mind"... that supposedly can dictate behavior with motives that are IMPOSSIBLE to be conscious of oh, and by the way...can be evoked at any moment... to allow people to escape from the Anguish of how truly free they are. Now the unconscious mind is just one of these clever ways people have come up with to avoid responsibility. Sartre says people do it with all kinds of other stuff...people do it with a God that has a plan for them...they'll do it by reducing themselves to some social role...you know, I'm just a carpenter that's all...the point is...there's no shortage of these creative ways people have come up with to avoid how truly free they are and how responsible they are for their actions. And one of the most common things people will use as an excuse for why they behaved in a particular way that they didn't have total control over...are their emotions. Sartre writes an ENTIRE book on emotions...talks about them in several others. And it's a tempting place to take issue with Sartre, right? I mean when you hear somebody make a radical claim like that...that we're TOTALLY free and ABSOLUTELY responsible for our behavior...one of the first places you might go is to say look, I'm down with freedom and responsibility...but let's face it...we aren't TOTALLY free...fact is, we are emotional beings...sometimes we get overwhelmed by emotions, sometimes these emotions cause us to behave in crazy ways. But Sartre wouldn't agree. Sartre would say that emotions, ultimately are choices that we make. Let me explain what he means: he's responding to a really common way that people look at emotions. The basic idea is that what happens when we have an emotion...is that we have some perception...for example, we see a news story about someone getting stabbed...it CAUSES us to have a particular physiological response...our stomach drops, we get butterflies, blood rushes to our face...and then we become aware of that physiological response and just sort of marinate in it...until it goes away or we use some mental trickery to get rid of it. Point is: our awareness of that physiological response that was CAUSED by some perception...that is WHAT the emotion is. But Sartre would say, it's not that simple. The first thing he'd want to point out that isn't explicitly stated in that theory

is that emotions... are... intentional. In the same way consciousness is always consciousness OF something...it has intentionality...and that there's no empty consciousness out there not directed at anything...emotions are the same way. Whenever you're angry...you're ANGRY about something that happened. Whenever you're sad...you're sad ABOUT something...for example, a story on the news of somebody getting stabbed. Point is: When you say that you're sad...you're not just in some "physiological STATE of sadness"...you're always sad ABOUT something...some state of affairs happened in the world...and then that sadness came about. Well WHY did it come about? It's tempting to say that it was against our will...that I SAW the story on the news and it CAUSED me to be sad. But Sartre would say what's REALLY going on...whether we realize it or not...is that we use our emotions as strategies...strategies that we employ to escape some otherwise unpleasant situation in the world...in the event we CAN'T totally escape the situation...the emotion at least makes us feel better off than we would otherwise be. Now at first this may seem just downright counter-intuitive. My emotions aren't strategies that I'm using...I don't even THINK about them. Well just picture for a second what it looks like when people DO use emotions in an overtly strategic way...for example imagine a super manipulative person...you go to a restaurant...they wanted to go to a different restaurant. sigh I'm so sad. Look at me and how sad I am...if only someone took me to a different restaurant I might feel better. Now this isn't what Sartre says we're doing I'm just giving an example of how even FEIGNED emotions can be used as strategies to bring about a particular end and that maybe emotions are more than just some force within us that leads to an involuntary physiological response. Sartre would say...that when the guy cuts you off in traffic...most likely it was an accident but for the sake of this example let's imagine he cut you off on purpose...he was staring you directly in the eyes through the back window of his car as he cut you off...well what exactly happened there? Well this guy was really inconsiderate of you. He put your life in jeopardy...other motorists lives in jeopardy...he essentially just reduced you to this sub-human level where you don't even deserve the space on the road as much as he does...that's basically HIS road...and you're this little insect that's in the way. That guy's

preference of which lane he wants to drive in... is ESSENTIALLY more important than your overall safety and well being. That's you now. This is a particular state of affairs that you can possibly be faced with...and how do people sometimes respond when they're faced with this scenario? They get ANGRY. Why do they get angry? Well to Sartre, it's a strategy they're using. Because let's say you really looked at someone cutting you off in traffic in that way I just described...you've got a few options...you can sit there...and just revel in this new status this guy has just given you...as this insect that's just in the way of this guy's 1987 Honda Accord...an insect that doesn't even deserve the consideration of their own space on the road...or, what else can you do? You can get ANGRY. Yeah. You can feel indignant! Now, instead of being this little insect...I've RESTORED my honor as a human being! This guy's got expectations that THAT guy's not living up to. And he should feel HORRIBLE for being such a worse driver than me...how DARE he be so inconsiderate of somebody that's so much more important than an insect. Being angry can be an uncomfortable feeling...but it's a much MORE comfortable feeling than being sub-human and just in the way of the REAL people...to Sartre, we EVOKE the emotion of ANGER (and ALL emotions for that matter) as a strategy to ESCAPE from an unpleasant situation. Even positive emotions...you know when somebody's going throughout their day and they're WALKING on sunshine...nothing can bother me today, I'm in TOO GOOD of a mood! Sartre would say That person's doing that as a way of escaping the reality of being a human being...that we DO have responsibilities and obligations...we DO have things that annoy and inconvenience us. Emotions, whether we realize it or not, are choices. We may not have something happen to us and then say to ourselves, OK I'm going to be sad now to cope with this GO! But these ARE strategies that we're using and how convenient...that people that HAVE alternative coping skills...are less moody people! Again, what Sartre's ultimately trying to get away from here are people making excuses for their behavior, blaming their emotional state and denying the true level of freedom that they have. You know, it's so easy to say, hey sorry I acted that way, I'm an angry person. But Sartre would say: no you're not. Where did THAT come from? There's no essence to your being given to you by some creator that makes you a more ANGRY

person than everyone else out there. Maybe you're not Angry because you're an Angry person, but instead... maybe you're an angry person because you consistently choose anger as a response to cope with things that happen to you. Maybe you're NOT a slave. Maybe you HAVE a choice. Maybe your consciousness is not something being constantly controlled by some powerful force called "emotion"...maybe in reality...consciousness is freedom. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Sartre and Camus pt. 6 - The Self

Episode #105

This is a transcript of episode #105 on Sartre. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So in a culture where there's so much social currency connected to being a victim... and having some burden that you carry around with you throughout your life...there may be some of you out there that feel a little left out...maybe you're the kind of person, you look at yourself...and you don't feel like a victim...maybe you don't sit around poised waiting to make other people aware of some bad thing that happened to you in the past...well ENOUGH of that crazy talk, get off the bench because your uncle Steve's putting you in the game. I'm here to tell you...Rest assured my friend...you ARE a victim. Turns out, we're ALL victims just by virtue of being born because just...think...for a second about how horrible the world was for us...when we were all babies. Think of what it's like being a baby, imagine going through something similar today and if you made it out the other side TELL me you wouldn't be part of some sort of advocacy group for the people that are currently going through it. Think about it...you didn't CHOOSE to be born. Imagine being rounded up against your will and being rocketed off to some alien planet you know nothing about. You find yourself once you get on that planet...absorbed into some tribe...you don't speak the language...you have no idea what anything is...you think the remote control to their TV is food...and you're completely defenseless. And who do you have as teachers, on this journey? What...just some random man and woman that happen to look like you? They didn't go to school for this stuff...being a baby is like going to the world's worst community college where they don't even have teachers...they just pull some random people off the street and say "teach these kids about rocket science, GO!" Except it's worse than that...we're not just learning about rocket science...we're learning everything about what it is to exist. How we look at other people, how we look at the world, how we look at our selves within that world. What I'm saying is: the struggle for us former babies...was real. And I think it's safe to say that when you're living in the

middle of this chaotic world as a baby just trying to figure things out...no one's really blaming you for just sort of going along with a lot of the ways people were doing things around you. There's a lot to figure out, and a lot of these ways we've LEARNED to make sense of this stuff is totally arbitrary. A lot of the ways that we think about stuff...have been just sort of, almost by accident, PASSED DOWN from generation to generation. Philosophers realized this...and at the time of Sartre, for over 300 years people had been pointing out... how MANY of the ways we look at things in the western world are largely derivative... from the way Christianity describes being a human being. That's how entrenched religion was in the lives of people back then...and that even if you've never been to church, even if your family's 15 generations removed from ever stepping foot in a church... some of these things are so foundational, that generation after generation of confused baby trying to figure things out...just went along with certain assumptions about existence that have their origins in Christianity, for example. There's a certain revelatory way that a lot of people look at important crossroads in life. Right, like for example they'll say...ok, so I need to choose a career path for my life, I need to declare a major. Big decision...what do I do? Well whenever I think about it I just don't, know what I want I certainly have it narrowed down to a few options...but I just can't make that big decision. I don't know exactly what I want, and yeah, I don't spend that much time thinking about it, but I have faith it's gonna come to me. I have faith that I'm gonna wake up one day somethings gonna happen to me, some life event...and then I'm gonna know. I'm gonna realize my calling in life in that moment. People do this same thing with relationships. They'll say I have this vague idea up in my head of my one and only someone...don't know EXACTLY what they look like what they're gonna be like...but I'm confident...one day I'm gonna meet someone... and there's gonna be this moment when I look at them and I realize they're the person I wanna spend the rest of my life with. People do this with anything...they'll do it with motivational videos on YouTube...one day I'm gonna watch the right person screaming at me to be better... and from then on out it's gonna be EASY to go to the gym and eat pine cones for the rest of my life...in other words: there's a certain revelatory way that some

people look at life choices... that some thinkers believe is a long lost relic of the revelatory way we used to think about the nature of existence. That a reasonable expectation to have when navigating your life...is that one day you're going to wake up...and there's going to be some event...some miracle that you witness some transcendent moment... where you realize the divinity of Jesus and if you have any further questions about the nature of existence just forward them to the Pope's inbox. That's a REASONABLE thing to expect, in that worldview. Well this isn't the only...example of these long lost remnants of Christianity in our thinking. And another major one... another one that a LOT of people in today's world still use to make sense of things...is the way that they look at themselves and who they are. Just like in Christianity...where yes you have a body...but your TRUE self... is a soul, it's an eternal spirit hidden deep down within that body that YOU have an intimate access to...just like that, a lot of people in today's world think of their true SELF...or the answer to the question: who are you? As a personality... hidden deep within us that only we and our closest friends have access to...you know they'll say things like sure...when I'm out in public I DO kind of put on a mask for the sake of social utility, I admit it. I don't act like my 100% TRUE self in the Starbucks drivethru...I tell people things they want to hear, I play the game because look... fact is: it's just not useful, not to mention I don't really feel comfortable giving 100% of my true self to the person in the Starbucks drivethrough. Who am I really? Well that's something I reserve for my closest friends. In fact even some of my closest friends don't know everything about the depths of what it is to be me. Maybe for some of you out there...there's only one other person in this entire WORLD that has full access to this TRUE SELF hidden deep within you. But Sartre would say, is this really how the self works? Is the self really like the Christian soul hidden somewhere deep within you that only you have access to? Sartre would say it very well may be that you put on a mask when you go to work for the sake of pragmatism...and it very well may be that you've reflected on yourself and you have this idea of who you are inside your head that's only accessed by you and your closest friends. But don't ignore the possibility that there are multiple levels of deception going on there. Maybe you're telling yourself a story you want to hear the same way you're telling the

Starbucks barista a story. This concept is a common one in existentialism...it's actually one of the main themes in Dostoyevsky's book *Crime and Punishment*...the idea that, you know we often think we know a lot more about ourselves than we actually do. Two examples of this, bear with me for a second the first one's a little cartoonish... but I think it's a really good example to pull us out of this conditioned way we look at the self and it gets us to honestly start asking this question: where is this self that we're talking about REALLY located? Imagine a guy that thinks he's Napoleon. He spends all day every day dressing up in Parisian military garb, making a fort out of couch cushions in his front room, talking to himself agonizing over how he's going to conquer Moscow. Now this man believes beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is Napoleon. If you asked him candidly...no but who are you really, deep down inside? He would say I am Napoleon Bonaparte. Commander of the armies of the north. Husband to a murdered wife, father to a murdered son. And I will have my vengeance. But is this man really Napoleon? WE know he's not Napoleon. In fact in a weird way, as outsiders, we seem to have an ADVANTAGE when it comes to knowing who he really is. Interesting. Here's the less cartoonish example and try to think about how this applies to you. Imagine a guy sitting on the couch watching the TV with his pals. They turn on the news and there's a story about a mass shooting that just happened at a Walmart somewhere. He hears the story, gets a little angry, turns to his friends and says you know what? That guy and people like him better HOPE he never shows up at my Walmart. Someone pulls out a gun when I'm there, I'm not gonna be one of those people on the news chopper camera screaming and running out of the store...I'm going to the Sporting Goods section. I'm gonna go up into the rafters like I'm Tom Cruise repel down and snap his neck. I'm gonna do this...because that's just the kind of person I am, that's me...I'd sacrifice my life for the greater good. Now he may tell his friends this...he may believe that that is who he is deep down beyond a SHADOW of a doubt...but if next Saturday he's out shopping with his family, someone pulls out a gun and all his wife and kids see is a poof of smoke and him running out the back door...who is that guy REALLY? In other words: when we reference this thing we call our "self". Intuitively it can feel like well I AM my self. I know who I am, so no one

can tell me who I am but me. In fact if you just recited that statement in most public settings people would be like, YEAH! You tell 'em! Only YOU know who you are deep down inside! But is that a delusion? Is that just a narrative that we tell ourselves to simplify this concept of the self? Sartre says that when you take a closer look at the self...it's not a soul...it's not a personality hidden deep within you...what we're referencing when we talk about the self turns out to be much more complex than that with many more moving parts. And I think a good place to begin if we want to understand Sartre's views on what the self REALLY is...is to talk about two foundational aspects of what it means to be a human being that to Sartre seem to be constantly intertwined and dependent upon each other...what he calls our Facticity and our Transcendence. If you are a human being that is alive, right now...you have both Facticity and Transcendence, put very simply: our Facticity is the collection of facts that are true about us at any given moment...and Transcendence is our ability to change or the possibilities that we have at our disposal. Let's break it down further though: remember last time when we talked about being-in-itself vs being-for-itself? Being in itself as being kind of like matter...this inert, featureless, blob of existence, fully affirmative. And being for itself as being consciousness...or the source of all negation. Well when Sartre's trying to meet his monthly quota for obscure sounding philosophical descriptions...the way he DESCRIBES the relationship between these two ontological categories is that being in itself: is what it is. And being for itself: is what it is not. Well as weird as that sounds in a vacuum, after listening to last episode we all know what he means when he says it. But then Sartre points out something very, mysterious...a very strange coincidence. When you look at the relationship between these two ontological categories...two things that are easy to write off as these meaningless abstract concepts that Sartre cooked up one day...when you look at how being in itself and being for itself relate to each other...Sartre notices there seems to be a similar sort of relationship at the foundation of who we are as people. See because, on one hand, all of us have our Facticity....and Facticity is kind of like being in itself...it's the fully affirmative set of facts that are true about us. You ask me who I am....and I say things like oh, well I'm 117 years old, that's a fact. I am a horse

wrangler by profession, that's a fact. I make 28,000 dollars per year, I drive a Ford Focus and I'm scared of spiders, things like that. In other words, statements of facts that are currently true about us, this is what makes up our Facticity. But what Sartre would want us to consider...is that while these kinds of statements are no doubt useful when it comes to describing certain pieces of who I am...they never tell us the full story right? And the reason why is because human beings are far more complex than that...to fully understand a human being...just BY DEFAULT is to understand a type of being that has possibilities...none of us are PURE Facticity...the only time a human being is PURE Facticity is when they're DEAD...yes, we have a set of facts that are true about us right now, but we ALWAYS have the ability to change into something else...and if we're trying to describe a self...if we're looking at the WHOLE picture of who someone is...the choices we make about which of these possibilities we're going to bring about, end up being JUST as important as the facts about who we are right now, for example. If I'm going to school to become an IT consultant...or if I'm training for a marathon...or if I'm losing a bunch of weight for wedding pictures...a big part of understanding who I am is understanding the thing I'm actively trying to change into...an IT consultant, a marathon runner, the flower girl at a wedding. In other words, part of understanding the full picture of ME is understanding what I am not yet. You can start to hear the weird Sartre description creeping in...just like being in itself is what it is and being for itself is what it is not...in a sense...I am what I am, I have a Facticity...but I also am what I am not yet when I consider my transcendence. Just like being in itself and being for itself...these two aspects of what it is to be a human being, Facticity and Transcendence, are entangled, intertwined and in some cases reliant on each other for their very existence. Your facticity and transcendence are constantly affecting each other...and that's because the facts of your life are often times caused by what possibilities you decide to bring about and the possibilities you've decided to explore are almost always limited by the FACTS of your life, let's stop with the hypotheticals and give a real example. Me. I'll use me as an example. I am six feet tall 172.2 pounds this morning. No matter HOW MUCH I want to...I am never going to become a horse jockey. It's just not going to happen for me. As

long as there are people out there that are 4'8" 85 lbs...the facticity that I'm a certain height and weight limits my ability to transcend...and the result of that is: I'm never winning the Kentucky Derby. This is an example of how our ability to transcend is often times limited by the facts about us. Another example...I was born with a particular face and a particular ability to put on muscle. No matter HOW MUCH I want to...I am never going to be an Instagram model. The facticity of my face...my faceticity...and all the stuff that's going on there...I will never be the kind of person that people voluntarily want to look at and click an emoji that signifies how they're feeling about the most recent picture of me. It's just not gonna happen and these facts about me are the parameters I live my life and exercise my freedom within. See because that's the thing, and this goes for all of you out there...When Sartre talks about radical freedom...when any of us talk about being individuals that are free to act as they choose...we're never talking about TOTAL freedom...right? It's always freedom within certain limitations. We often say things like, "I can do whatever I want to do." But you can't REALLY do anything you want to do...right, I mean ultimately you're a human being...you can't wrap yourself in a protective cocoon and then emerge a unicorn in three days. You can't fly to the edge of the universe and look at what's on the other side. No, freedom is always freedom within certain limitations... and it's those limitations that give a LOT of what you choose to do in life its value. We see this... in all the various different forms of art...you know when someone writes a really good Haiku...we see it as good NOT because they're the greatest words that could ever have possibly been strung together...the beauty of the Haiku is because we understand that we have given an artist total freedom within a set of limitations that we impose. Five syllables, seven syllables, five syllables, go. In other words, the limitations are a big part of what makes the Haiku beautiful, and this applies to life as well. The facticity that you were born into, your own individual limitations are always going to affect the possibilities that you have and what you ultimately choose to do with your life. So try to live your life like it's a piece of art you're creating. That's why I've just accepted that I'm never gonna be an Instagram model..I mean, it's like anything you just learn to adjust. Like I literally wear all of my hooded sweatshirts backwards

now...so that if any field trips pass by any small children come around I can just pull it over my face, nobodies gotta get scared.. So yeah, you just find little ways...but yeah, ultimately the point Sartre's going to make here with the concepts of Facticity and Transcendence...is not only stop thinking about your self as though it's this artifact hidden deep within you in a vault, but also stop thinking about who you are as though it's this static, unchanging thing that you can point to. That who you are... is always in a state... of constant change, sometimes small changes, sometimes bigger changes, but always CHANGING and in flux. But don't go extreme in the other way...don't start thinking of your self as this ethereal thing that can never be defined. Again, all the way up until the day you die... when you're finally turned into TOTAL Facticity...you will always have certain facts that are true about you and certain possibilities at your disposal to bring about. Unless if you're dead...you've never arrived at a destination as a human being. Now at first glance this may seem like Sartre's writing a self help book. No single fact about you sums up who you are! Release your inner transcendence! No. Like we touched on last time Sartre thinks that when people are truly faced with the number of these possibilities they're free to choose from...most of the time they don't get excited...they're horrified by it. In fact most of the time once people realize this stuff...Sartre thinks that the secret, covert desire of everyone whether they realize it or not...is to escape this duality...it's to turn themselves into either PURE facticity or PURE transcendence, or as Sartre says...we all secretly want to become God. Let's talk about what he means by that. Think about the way followers of the Abrahamic religions have traditionally looked at God, what is it like to be God? Well God is perfect. God is in this moment everything he will ever be. If God had a job interview...and the person asked him, "What's one thing you'd change about yourself?" God LITERALLY doesn't have an answer to that question. But then on the other hand...God is all powerful...with the snap of his fingers...he can do...anything, he wants to do. In other words, in this old style, traditional view of what God is...on one hand...God is perfect as he is...PURE facticity. But on the other hand God is all powerful and capable of bringing about ANY possibility he wants...in other words PURE transcendence. Sartre would say this is no

coincidence....and it's also no coincidence that as people navigate their lives they have all sorts of tactics they use to turn themselves... either into somebody that ignores their possibilities and are PERFECT as they are right now...or someone who ignores the very real unfortunate facts about who they are and stay lost in unattainable dreams their entire life. This is the context we needed to understand a concept we talked about well over a year ago on the one episode we did on Sartre. The primary tactic that people use in their lives to turn themselves into PURE Facticity or PURE transcendence like God...is something that Sartre calls Bad Faith. Let's look at the most famous example of Bad Faith Sartre gives and because we already talked about it in the other episode, I'll keep it brief. Sartre talks about sitting in the middle of a café in Paris watching a waiter as he does his job. You can imagine a waiter in the 1940's dressed up in his little outfit...very upright, good posture, very proper...he holds the tray in a particular way, he walks and changes direction in a very militaristic, particular way just like a good waiter does...Sartre can't help but point out...that this guy doesn't seem to be a "self" with Facticity and Transcendence in this moment...he seems to have relegated himself to just, playing the part of a waiter. He's going through the motions turning himself into pure facticity...just a waiter and nothing else. Now even though waiters don't act like this often in today's world...go to most restaurants and you can find some modern version of what Sartre's talking about here...there's so many servers out there that have fallen into bad faith and are just sort of playing the role of this same person that seems to be the modern archetype of what it is to be a server...they all say the same stuff: Hi, I'm John I'm gonna be taking care of you today. Can I get you guys started with a bottomless bucket of shrimp or some drinks? Later on, How's everything tasting for you? You save room for desert? I'm just gonna leave this here absolutely no rush on the check I'm gonna be over here I'll take a looksy back at you...ask yourself: is this the way this guy talks to his mom? Is this the way he talks to his best friends? No. He's fallen into bad faith and is just playing the part of a server. Now the point Sartre's making here is not that waiters need to be more creative, it's not about waiters. Sartre thinks that as human beings... we have a tendency to gravitate towards this trap... in ALL aspects of our life. We make

PROCLAMATIONS about what we are! I am a stay at home mom, and that's my identity...I am a Libertarian...I am a Mormon and that's that...what we're desperately trying to do is give ourselves an essence in a world where existence precedes essence. All of these things are just us wanting to think about our "selves" as some static thing set in stone... and run from the reality of the possibilities we have. When we take an honest look at the possibilities at our disposal, it terrifies us and produces a feeling called nausea...and we use Bad Faith to quell this feeling of nausea. Now if all you ever read was Sartre's Being and Nothingness...you might get the read from the book that this tendency we have to gravitate towards bad faith, is an inescapable condition of being a human being... and that even when we're self aware of the Bad Faith we're engaging in...we're still engaging in bad faith. If all you ever read was the main text of Being and Nothingness, you might get that impression and it certainly sounds like a really sad picture...but in one of the footnotes of Being and Nothingness Sartre alludes to a way out and perhaps to an ethics that he would write later in life. Well HE never writes an ethics, and it may be because he lifelong partner and fellow existentialist Simone De Beauvoir produces what many consider to be the greatest existentialist approach to ethics called The Ethics of Ambiguity. We'll talk all about it on the next episode. But enough of bad faith...back to answering this question: who am I, really? Here's the thing. These concepts of Facticity and Transcendence we've been talking about. When it comes to the facts that are true about you and the possibilities that you have...those things aren't hidden somewhere deep down within you that only you have access to. You may have a particular perspective of the facts that are true about you... and the possibilities that you have, but not only do you have an incentive to slip into bad faith and tell yourself a story about them, Sartre would say: you don't have some privileged VIP access to the facts about you and the possibilities that you have...hypothetically, any other person if they were diligent enough has access to your Facticity and Transcendence. In fact, just like the guy that tells himself that he's Napoleon... sometimes other people are better at telling us who we are than WE are. But how is this possible? The reason it's possible is because the self is not the Christian soul, to Sartre. Just like your Facticity and Transcendence...what

we're referencing when we talk about our "selves" ... is outside of us. It's an abstraction. It's the conglomeration of all of the things you've ever actually done in your life. When you want to get a solid answer to the question: who am I? You don't reference the story that you tell yourself that's clouded by all sorts of... bad faith and wishful thinking like the guy that thinks he would try to take down the gunman at Walmart...no, we tell ourselves stories all the time... what follows from this is that the TRUE measure of your values, and who you really are...is what you actually do...it's the collection of what you've actually done thus far in your life. And Sartre says when you stop looking at the "self" as though it's something inside of you...and you start looking at it accurately as this abstraction that's outside of us...what you inevitably start to realize is that it's impossible to ever get a full picture of who you are, without referencing the way that other people view you. More than that...it's impossible to get a full picture of BEING without referencing other people...and HERE'S what he's getting at: So far when it comes to describing being... we've been presented with being in itself and being for itself... but it's right here, FAIRLY LATE in being and nothingness... that Sartre lays out his third ontological category...what he calls "being-for-others". Let's talk about what he means. Sartre would say that an intrinsic part of what it is to be you... is existing alongside other people and all of the consequences that come along with that. This is Being-for-others...now how does "being-for-others" affect my answer to the question: who am I? Well again, this concept of the self is outside of us it's an abstraction... and what Sartre points out is that there are many aspects about who we are that are given to us by other people. For example, whether we're trustworthy or not. Whether or not you're a trustworthy person is an aspect of who you are that's mediated by other people, right? Whether I'm a nice or mean person. I may think of myself as a nice person, but if every single other person I encounter all throughout my life says that I'm mean, for all intents and purposes...I am a mean person. This concept of the self, and how other people view us...seem to be connected, but the flip side of it being that interconnected...is that it leaves us in a perpetual state of being judged by the people around us. We're almost constantly being turned into PURE facticity in their mind. For example, have you ever

been walking around self-conscious about the way you look? Maybe you just got a new pair of shoes and you think they look weird...and as you're walking around you feel like every person that passes you is thinking, WOW. What were THEY thinking when they picked those shoes. This is obviously a person that doesn't care much about how they look...in other words they're looking at you and they're turning you into an object in their subjective view of the world...pure facticity...you will henceforth be known as the weird shoes guy in that person's mind, this is constantly going on. But Sartre's not saying it's always bad, that being around other people is some sort of paranoid, everybody's thinking bad things about me all the time thing...people very well may be thinking really good things about you all the time, the point that Sartre wants to make is that this dynamic...of other people seeing you, putting you on trial and turning you into pure Facticity in their minds... is going on all the time simply by virtue of the fact that we exist alongside other people...and that while the insights other people give us about who we are are no doubt valuable...we have to be careful not to slip into bad faith on either side of this dynamic of being for others. What I mean is: just because somebody sees you wearing weird shoes one day doesn't mean that you are now "weird shoes guy". In other words, don't slip into bad faith when it comes to what people think about you...no matter how convenient it is to prescribe yourself an essence and deny your transcendence...don't turn yourself into PURE facticity and accept what other people tell you you are. Maybe you are weird shoes guy right now, but you don't HAVE to be in the future. But the other side of that, is don't deny your facticity and tell yourself that you don't care what anyone else says and that what other people think of you doesn't matter at all. That's slipping into another kind of bad faith. So to sum this up...intuitively, it may seem to us like we have a special access to knowing who we are... and that we choose to share ourselves only with our closest friends who we trust. But Sartre would say the reason it seems this way is that what you actually have is a narrative about yourself, forged from a particular biased perspective, and that the reason it seems like your friends reinforce this picture of who you are...is because the very criteria that we all use to choose who our friends are going to be...is whether or not they reinforce this picture that we have of ourselves. That's

what we “like” about our friends, to Sartre. For example, if a BIG part of the way you view your self... is that you consider yourself a smart person...Sartre would predict... that most of your friends are going to be people that are not so smart that tell you that you’re smart all the time, or people that ask you a lot of questions that you then answer, making you FEEL smart, or other smart people that commend you on being so smart like them. We choose our friends because they reinforce the way that we view ourselves, of COURSE we we’d give them privileged access to our biased narrative of ourselves, and of course it’s going to feel validating. Of course it would seem...that you know better than anyone who you are...but again, Sartre would say that the TRUE measure of your values, the TRUE answer to the question: who are you?...is what you actually do. Thank you for listening. I’ll talk to you next time.

Simone De Beauvoir pt. 2 - The Ethics of Ambiguity

Episode #106

This is a transcript of episode #106 on Simone De Beauvoir. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So last episode we talked about Sartre's idea that at the foundation of who we are... there's a constant tug of war that's going on between what he calls our Facticity and our Transcendence. Our Facticity being the facts that are true about us at any given moment and our Transcendence being the possibilities that we have at our disposal. Last episode, what followed from this, for Sartre... is that people are made massively uncomfortable by this constant tug of war that's going on... and we all tend to gravitate towards removing one side of the people pulling on the rope... we either want to ignore the facts that are true about us or ignore the possibilities that we have so that one side will just fall into the mud pit already and we can all stop pulling on this stupid rope. But unfortunately... Sartre would say... the game never actually ends. Despite the fact you may view yourself as some sort of completed project... the reality is that through your actions... you are constantly creating and re-creating yourself in each passing moment.... every second, that passes you change in some small way... the reality is: we all exist in this place of tension... this tug of war that's going on between two sides of a duality called our Facticity and Transcendence. But Simone De Beauvoir is going to take that one step further. The implications of which form the basis of her book *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Just listen for second to the very first paragraph of the book and then we'll talk about what she's getting at: "THE continuous work of our life," says Montaigne, "is to build death." Man knows and thinks this tragic ambivalence which the animal and the plant merely undergo. A new paradox is thereby introduced into his destiny. "Rational animal," "thinking reed," he escapes from his natural condition without, however, freeing himself from it. He is still a part of this world of which he is a consciousness. He asserts himself as a pure internality against which no external power can take hold, and he also experiences himself as a thing crushed by the dark weight of other things. At every

moment he can grasp the non-temporal truth of his existence. But between the past which no longer is and the future which is not yet, this moment when he exists is nothing. This privilege, which he alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends.” Now you can just hear in that passage... she’s describing what she’s later going to go on to call the Ambiguity of human existence. Let’s talk about what she means by that. She’d say sure, Sartre at any given moment we are both Facticity and Transcendence...it’s a duality we exist within...like we talked about last episode, when you take an honest look at what it is to be me...I am what I am...but simultaneously I also am what I am not yet. And if somebody asked you...so... which one are you really are you the facts about who you are right now, or are you the possibilities you’re currently bringing about? That’d be kind of a confusing question because the answer is: I’m BOTH. Yes, people commonly fall into bad faith and try to remove one side of it...but the reality is I am BOTH Facticity and Transcendence simultaneously and that reality creates a certain tension for me. But Simone De Beauvoir would point out...that when you take a closer look at human existence...it starts to look like we’re not just engaged in a single game of tug of war that’s going on...it’s not just Facticity and Transcendence...we seem to be engaged... in MANY different games of tug of war all at the same time. See because yes, I am both Facticity and Transcendence. But what else am I? Lots of things she would say. For example... at any given moment, I am simultaneously both a subject navigating the world and an object within other people’s subjective view of the world. So what am I? Am I a subject or an object? What if I’m both of them simultaneously and that existing within that duality creates a certain level of tension for me? Another example...at any given moment, I am both an individual person and a member of a collective group, family, nation-state, species, whatever. So what am I? Am I an individual or a part of a larger group? What if I’m both simultaneously and that existing within that duality creates a certain level of tension for me? Mind and matter. Self and other. The examples of these dualities that we exist between go on over the horizon...and Simone De Beauvoir would

say that when you look back at the history of philosophy and religion...so many of the ideas that have been laid out over the years have been people trying to reduce one side of these dualities... so that we can simplify the world down into terms that are less ambiguous. To escape the true reality of the Ambiguity of being a human in this world. Whether it was to think of the world as merely an earthly shadow of flawed forms...whether it was to think of ourselves as a mind perched up within a brain, or a soul inhabiting a body...or as a member of a state with a duty to fulfill that transcends your individual desires...within each and every one of these and many more... you can see what Simone De Beauvoir says is an attempt to over-simplify our human condition, and escape the true Ambiguity of existence. The ethics of Ambiguity is just filled with iconic quotes that are unforgettable...about this point she says: “At the present time there still exist many doctrines which choose to leave in the shadow certain troubling aspects of a too complex situation. But their attempt to lie to us is in vain. Cowardice does not pay. Those reasonable metaphysics, those consoling ethics with which they would like to entice us only accentuate the disorder from which we suffer.” Just listen to that quote...those REASONABLE metaphysics, those CONSOLING ethics with which they would like to entice us...that is just great writing. And shots fired at Philosophers and Theologians throughout history...Simone De Beauvoir’s saying they start to look guilty of what your average person does when they fall into Bad Faith...how is what they’re doing any different than reducing one side of your Facticity and Transcendence to try to escape a state of tension.No...to be an honest human being...is to be in a state of tension...it’s to BE in a state of ambiguity. Simone De Beauvoir’s saying...we feel the effects of this ambiguity...and our kneejerk response throughout history has been to feel like something’s missing...she says we recognize a “lack” in ourselves (important word)...we feel like somethings missing and that if only we can come up with the right philosophical rationalization to make us feel like we understand the world perfectly...then the ambiguity’s gonna go away...then we’re going to be COMPLETE as people.What Simone De Beauvoir is asking here is what if we’re never meant to be completed as people? And that no matter what story you decide tell yourself to run from the ambiguity...what if it’s

just not as simple as I am purely a spirit...or I'm PURE energy...or PURELY an American...what if the world, what if being a human being is not black and white like that...what if it's black, white and grey simultaneously and that we purposefully look at it through a very small lens to make us feel like its more simple than it really is? What would happen... if somebody stopped running from this Ambiguity and just embraced it, what would that person look like? Could you ever be happy living within that ambiguity? Is there any reasonable foundation that you can approach how to best behave within that ambiguity? This is the task of the ethics of ambiguity. Now if you're gonna be an existentialist writing an approach to ethics like Simone De Beauvoir is...there're going to be certain classic questions that arise that you'll have to address at some point. One of them is that.... if existence precedes essence...if it is the job of the individual to create their own values and meaning to life...how can anyone ever say that the values I arrive at are any less or more valid than anyone else's. What I mean is, if someone arrived at a set of values that said raping and murdering people was a good thing...if I'm not appealing to some standard of good and evil behavior, if existence precedes essence...how can I ever say that worldview is wrong? Well to begin answering this question...Simone De Beauvoir's going to cite a famous line that Sartre writes in Being and Nothingness...it's the idea that "Man is condemned to be free." Where she's going with this is that...even if there's no objective good and evil written into the universe...that doesn't mean there's not certain, fundamental aspects about the human condition that we have to consider when navigating our lives...we are condemned to breath, we are condemned to forage for food, we are condemned to turn read receipts off on our cellphones...but she'd say more important than all of those things, we are condemned to be free...we are condemned without our prior consent, to a life where we have to be constantly making choices...she points out how...even if you try to deny this reality... even if you just sit around or fall into bad faith and do nothing your whole life...the choice to do nothing... is still a choice you're making, The fact that we're condemned to freedom...the fact that we can make practically any choice we want is the very thing that allows us to create the meaning to our lives...in other words...this essence we're talking about ultimately relies on this more

fundamental aspect of the human condition that we are free...and if you examine this freedom closely, she thinks there are certain essences (like raping and murdering people) that are just flat out contradictory to arrive at. See because, the very idea of morality relies on the idea that people are free enough to choose between at least two different alternatives. Right, I mean if somebody was truly powerless over acting in a particular way, the whole concept of morality evaporates. For example if you were down at the beach and you lost control of your skateboard...and it was rolling towards the edge of the boardwalk about to go into the ocean...and your friend was near the edge and could easily put their foot out and stop the skateboard, but let's say they don't...let's say they look at you...look at the skateboard...hands on their knees smiling as they stare at the skateboard plummeting into the ocean...you might call their behavior into question. Now same situation, but this time you lost control of your 18-wheeler semi-truck...you're probably not gonna wonder why they didn't dive in front of it like they're superman...they were powerless, there was nothing they could do about it in that situation. This is an example of how the whole idea... of what we're morally obligated to do... is directly connected to the amount of freedom we have in a given situation...or as Simone De Beauvoir puts it you don't offer an ethics to a God...you don't offer ethics to someone who thinks they can't make mistakes or on the other hand to anyone who thinks they're powerless to the point they can't make choices. Good news for us is: in actuality we're neither of these things, people just tell themselves they are...and because this whole discussion of ethics and what we're morally accountable for... is ultimately contingent upon our level of freedom...it follows to Simone De Beauvoir...that any serious discussion about what we're morally accountable to do at the VERY least... needs to begin from a place that maximizes that default state that we're born into: condemned to be free. In other words: in the same way we shouldn't deny one side of these dualities we exist between in an attempt to run from the ambiguity of existence...we shouldn't deny that we are condemned to be free. We should recognize the fundamental aspect of our being THAT we are free, embrace it and then move in the direction of behaviors that MAXIMIZE that freedom rather than run from it. Now the extension of this...and one of

the highly unique aspects of her Ethics we're gonna talk a lot more about next episode...is that to TRULY maximize your freedom to Simone De Beauvoir requires the maximization of the freedom of others...that for many reasons, you can't really be totally free unless if other people around you are totally free. Again, we're gonna talk all about it next episode because that's the third and final part of the Ethics of Ambiguity... and what we've been talking about so far is what she lays out in part one. So what does that leave us with? Part two...I guess I just want to talk for a second about how this book is structured...it's pretty brilliant what she does and I didn't really realize what exactly she was doing when I first read it years ago. So, part one lays out this whole idea of the Ambiguity of existence and the maximization of freedom...part three lays out how we should actually be behaving in practice, and part two can read like a sort of a tangential aside where she wants to put certain people on blast for not being free enough...but the genius of what she's doing in part two is that she foresees the people coming along reading her work mistakenly thinking they have it all figured out...she foresees people saying stuff like, ambiguity? Oh yeah...WAY ahead of you Ms. De Beauvoir, way ahead of you...LONG AGO I accepted the true ambiguity of existence and even LONGER BEFORE THAT when I was but a child I realized how free I am to choose anything I want. Sometimes it gets lonely...you know ...being so smart...being so much more free than everyone else around me...but it's not all bad I find humor in their feeble attempts to deny their freedom...This is what's so awesome about part two...Simone De Beauvoir lays out like 12 different personality types of people that she sees around her...personalities that you still see EVERYWHERE in today's world...some very simple, some very nuanced, but ALL OF WHICH are examples of tactics people use to convince themselves they are free when they actually could be much more free...not only that though...when you look at these types of people that she talks about... Simone De Beauvoir thinks all of these different approaches to looking at life... are reactions to when we were children...they're reaction to when we were first faced with the reality, the true freedom and responsibility that's required of us, in adulthood. She says two things happen when we're kids: one, we're born...and we look at adults as these authoritative sources of

information... people that have grasped the ultimate values of life and we need to be more like them. We seem them as these...COMPLETED people...these people that have figured out what's lacking like we talked about before and have COMPLETED themselves. But again, what if in reality...we NEVER complete ourselves. What are THEY doing then?The second thing that happens is that throughout the entire time you're a kid, you live in a state... of never having to deal with the ambiguity of existence...your parents...protect you from that and what you end up doing is running around, playing and just being a kid. In other words, what Simone De Beauvoir's saying is that for the first 16 years of your life or so...you don't even KNOW about the ambiguity of existence...you don't even know about this constant state of tension that life truly is. You know, there's people that have emailed me and asked why do you think we have such a tendency to gravitate towards bad faith, as opposed to embracing our freedom? Well, how can you blame people? You're faced the reality of the freedom and responsibility of adulthood...and when you look around you at the role models you have at your disposal...they're all people that claim to have this whole life thing figured out. They're all people using one of these strategies she talks about, convincing themselves that they've COMPLETED themselves.Kind of like Nietzsche and the whole Camel, Lion and Child progression he lays out in Thus Spoke Zarathustra...Simone De Beauvoir structures all these different types of people in part two in a similar sort of way where there's a progression...a progression from the least free to the most free. Now, the LEAST free person...the absolute bottom of the barrel in terms of freedom...is what Simone De Beauvoir calls the "sub-man". The sub-man is that guy working at Subway making sandwiches all day...what a loser says Simone De Beauvoir...just kidding she's talking about a different kind of sub...sub meaning below.Simone De Beauvoir describes this person as the kind of person who's sort of apathetic about everything all the time. She says they feel " like nothing merits desire or effort". That everything's dull...nothing is really that impressive ever...they see things other people do...they shrug a lot...meh...okay. Nothing really is worth their time.Simone De Beauvoir says that what this is... is a child that saw just how much freedom adulthood had in store for them...they

saw the sheer number of possible projects they could work on throughout their life...they felt really uncomfortable... and then in an attempt to ease their discomfort and return to that...safe, unambiguous cocoon of childhood...they sort of retreated and closed themselves off from the world. People with a lot of different interests and a lot of capability are at a higher risk for becoming a sub-man...reason being because they look at all the possibilities and say man I could do anything...I could be a Veterinarian, I could be a news anchor, I could be a scientist...you know what...who cares about any of it? They deny that there's any sort of tension or lack within themselves that requires action... and they COMPLETE themselves... by choosing, nothing...De Beauvoir says...and the problem with someone choosing nothing on a social level... is that they become potential members of a mob. They become malleable fodder for the projects that other people are working on... as long as those people can persuade the sub-men to be temporarily emboldened by whatever cause they give them to support. Sub-man's often referred to as what people call a "sheep". The second rung on this ladder of types of people...little more free than the Sub-man, but still deeply enslaved and running from the ambiguity of existence... is what she calls the Serious-man. The serious-man makes up probably around... 70% of people...this is by far the most common tactic people use to remove themselves from ambiguity. The Serious man is any version of somebody that denies their transcendence and turns themselves into pure facticity for the sake of a cause. This is the child facing the freedom of adulthood... all grown up now saying something like: I am a life long democrat and I'm always going to be a democrat. I've harnessed the ultimate values of life and completed myself like my parents did. I am an evangelical Christian and I will be that way until the day I die. I have discovered a set of absolute values. Make no mistake...Simone De Beauvoir's not saying that being any of these things is wrong...it's your relationship to how you view the title. Do you live your life as though being a democrat or being a Christian is some sort of permanent, irreversible aspect about who you are? If so, then Simone De Beauvoir would say you are a Serious man, trying to give yourself an essence and escape the true ambiguity of your life...and if you look back at history even just to the 20th century...you don't gotta look very long to see

the bloodshed that often comes when people think they've harnessed an ultimate set of values... that's what Simone de Beauvoir's worried about. Now another important rung on this ladder a little higher up...is a response to the freedom of adulthood...that's a true classic. We've all heard of this one before. I'm talking about Nihilism. Quick recap of the ladder up until this point: The sub man either doesn't realize there's a lack in their being... or denies the whole idea of there being something lacking...the serious man acknowledges that there's a lack... and then believes a story about something that will complete him as a person. And, the nihilist... realizes there's a lack and that nothing can complete them...so they ask themselves question, why bother doing anything at all? Now Nihilism is a particularly dangerous place to be if you're Simone De Beauvoir...and the reason why is because the Nihilist...is partially right. They've arrived at the truth about the ambiguity of existence...but they're making a big assumption after arriving at that conclusion that blinds them from the fact that they aren't seeing the WHOLE truth about existence...and it's dangerous because it's a very easy trap to fall into and then convince yourself that you're right, citing that piece of truth you've accessed as justification. I want to read you a passage out of the ethics of ambiguity where Simone De Beauvoir talks about why the Nihilist is wrong. Full disclosure, I have this passage hanging in the front room of my house...it's one of my favorite passages from all of existentialism. We'll read it and then we'll talk about what she means by it: "The nihilist attitude manifests a certain truth. In this attitude one experiences the ambiguity of the human condition. But the mistake is that it defines man not as the positive existence of a lack, but as a lack at the heart of existence, whereas the truth is that existence is not a lack as such. And if freedom is experienced in this case in the form of rejection, it is not genuinely fulfilled. The nihilist is right in thinking that the world possesses no justification and that he himself is nothing. But he forgets that it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly. Instead of integrating death into life, he sees in it the only truth of the life, which appears to him as a disguised death. However, there is life, and the nihilist knows that he is alive. That's where his failure lies. He rejects existence without managing to eliminate it. He denies any meaning to his transcendence, and yet he

transcends himself. A man who delights in freedom can find an ally in the nihilist because they contest the serious world together, but he also sees in him an enemy insofar as the nihilist is a systematic rejection of the world and man, and if this rejection ends up in a positive desire destruction, it then establishes a tyranny which freedom must stand up against.”I guess a good place to start unpacking that is to say that if it weren’t for the Nihilist being partially right...and recognizing the true ambiguity of things...they would be no different than the serious man. Because just like the serious man... who might say something like, ok I am a Mormon...and I possess certain ultimate values that are written into the cosmos, I am complete...a Nihilist is making the same kind of proclamation by saying “there is no cosmically written meaning to my life”, I am complete. In other words, why are we both speaking on behalf of the universe here? I mean at least the Mormon believes in a God that gave them this information...what is the Nihilists based on? The way it intuitively seems to me as a human being in an ambiguous world?I’m not saying this because there IS some cosmically written meaning necessarily...the point is: where did this expectation of the Nihilist come from? Lot of people think it’s another one of those things we talked about last time...it’s an extension of generation after generation of people thinking of themselves as something born into a realm...that doesn’t belong to them. This universe is private property...God built this place...he’s bestowed upon you the gift of life... and as long as you’re staying here...there’s some chores he wants you to do. When the Nihilist realizes this way of thinking is a relic of a bygone era...they mistakenly assume that because there’s no God out there to confer a meaning onto them...that therefore...there must be no meaning to ANYTHING that I do!But what if that whole dream of being handed some pre-packaged meaning to your life was never how it worked at all? What if that was an assumption? What is meaning anyway...it’s just a human construct...a word. What if the same way you have to choose a career...and the same way you have to choose a life partner...and these things take years of thought to fully realize...what if it’s your responsibility to choose a meaning to your life?What I’m saying is: what if there IS a meaning to your life? And I’m not saying that like I’m some late night pastor...what Simone De Beauvoir would ask is what if when you make a

grandiose proclamation like “there is no meaning to my life”...you just did it...right there...you just declared the meaning of your life to be that you’re going to sit around making proclamations about how nothing matters on a cosmic level (genius) and then use it as justification never take action on anything. You can’t HELP but have a meaning to your life to Simone De Beauvoir...it is created and recreated by your actions in each passing moment. The question is: what’s the meaning of your life gonna be? To sit around on the couch doing nothing? Or to transcend. To get out of that job that sucks the life out of you...or to travel the world or to help maximize the freedom of others? To leave the house...feel the fires of hell on your skin as sunlight hits it for the first time in eight months? What is the meaning gonna be? Next time we’ll talk more about more of the rungs of the ladder, more of these= types of ways children respond to the startling level of freedom and responsibility required in adulthood... as well as the importance of maximizing the freedom of others, why we can never be truly free unless if others are free around us and the wisdom that lies in living a life in the service of others. You know whenever I read part three of the Ethics of Ambiguity and I get all excited about the importance of finding a way to serve others in this miserable existence it always brings me back to ironically ANOTHER quote that I have on my wall by Rabandranath Tagore...and I’ll leave you today with it: I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life was service. I acted and behold, service was joy. Thank you for listening. I’ll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School - Introduction

Episode #108

This is a transcript of episode #108 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So we're going to be talking about individual philosophers on most shows, but let's never forget the fact that our ultimate goal throughout this current arc of the show is to tell some of the MAIN philosophical stories of the twentieth century. And realistically, you could never tell the FULL story on a show like this. But the point is we're talking about more than just individuals now...we're talking about movements, we're talking about massive historical events that thinkers are living within and reacting to...we're telling a STORY, here. And whenever you're telling a story...sometimes you need a narrator that takes a step back from the individual characters and what they're saying...and talks about what's going on on a larger scale so that you can understand the behavior of the characters better. Why is it...that freedom and responsibility are so important to Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir, specifically in the time they're living, what were they responding to? Why is Bertrand Russell so concerned with mathematics...why is Wittgenstein SO concerned with language...specifically...during the time he was living in the early 20th century? We have a lot of people to talk about. But one thing I think you'll find the further we get along this journey...is just how revolutionary of a moment it was in modern human history... when Nietzsche wrote the words: God is dead. Seriously, if there was a page one of this story that we're telling...it wouldn't be once upon a time in that giant Declaration of Independence font...it would be God is dead. He remains dead, and we have killed him. Now when Nietzsche says this...a way someone might misinterpret Nietzsche here is to think oh, he said God is dead...here's this anti-religious nihilist philosopher triumphantly proclaiming that God is dead calling for us to move onward into a better age where we can get away from the scourge of religion! Not even close to who Nietzsche was or what he was saying...and I think it's going to be useful for us to talk a little more about what he WAS saying... at least more than we did in

Nietzsche pt. 1...real quick, just to get back to where we were in that episode: Think of any universal human problem. Think of a problem where no matter what area of the world your particular ancestors decided to settle...they were going to be faced with this problem and were going to be forced to come up with some creative invention that DEALS with this problem. Carrying a lot of heavy stuff around. No matter where you're from...your ancestors had to invent something to cope with carrying around heavy stuff. And historically, what we see, are different cultures coming up with slightly different solutions to this problem based on a lot of different factors individual to them...what resources they had, what landmarks were around them, what their lives were like...for example if you were a culture of animal husbandry...some sort of herding culture...maybe you used animals to solve this problem of carrying around heavy stuff. If you were part of a culture that had a lot of trees around you... maybe you rolled things around on logs...maybe you make a cart or a wagon or a rickshaw, any one of these inventions that ALL are slightly different from each other... but ultimately were all created by human beings with the same goal in mind: to solve this universal human problem of carrying heavy stuff. Well what's another universal human problem? What's a question that every human being asks at some point in their life? What is the meaning of my life? How do I fit into the grand picture of the universe? How can I feel like my life has meaning? In other words, in the same way cultures throughout history have all come up with their own personalized, slightly different, clever inventions that solve the problem of carrying around heavy stuff...Nietzsche would say that all the varying forms of mythology and religion throughout history, have been the same thing: clever human inventions to solve a universal human problem of answering these existential questions. Now fast forward to Nietzsche saying God is Dead. Nietzsche himself is not really doing anything when he just says the words God is Dead...the significance of those words... lies in him pointing out a reality of the world that's come to pass. He's pointing out... that our understanding of the world has come a long way since the scientific revolution. That science has no doubt given us a lot of incredible things...but we have to start to think about, at what cost has that come? Nietzsche would say that being a human being in this new scientific world

we have...is just a totally different situation than any other situation a human has had to face before...that for us...living in a world post-Copernicus, post-Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Freud...living in that world as a human being...it has become next to impossible to simultaneously be both a reasonable person...while also believing that there's a guy up in the clouds named Zeus with lightning bolts that's going to zap you if you do something wrong...or that there's a guy that used to walk on water and cure blind people. In other words, it's become next to impossible to use one of these clever human inventions... that solve this universal human problem of searching for meaning. When Nietzsche says God is dead. He's not saying that in a happy tone, at all. He's saying it regretfully...FEARFULLY even. Think about the situation we're in as people: we are TRIBAL creatures. We have such a strong tendency to attach ourselves to some group or some cause...and then the meaning of our life becomes to advance the agenda of OUR group, label some other group as the enemy, and then go to war with that other group. Think of all the OTHER incentives we have to act this way...how good it feels to seemingly have a vice-grip on the way that things are in the world, no further questions, no more cognitive dissonance for me. How good it feels...to derive a sense of identity from these beliefs that you hold...to escape that ambiguity about who you are. Given the reality of human psychology...think of how many barriers are naturally in the way if you want to try to budge somebody OFF of one of these positions...and for tens of thousands of years whenever people have asked what tribe they should be a part of, what their sense of identity should be or where they can get a convenient vice-grip on the truth...for tens of thousands of years mythology and religion has given them those answers. You know, Nietzsche would say that the sort of naïve way of looking at religion is to say, hey...look back at history! Look at all the wars that have been carried out in the name of religion. In the name of these fairy tales people used to believe in...you know what? We need to do away with all this religion nonsense and get rid of this unnecessary bloodshed. Nietzsche would say, ok...let's do away with religion and start over. Do you think the history of the world is going to be a bunch of science fairs and meditation seminars? No...it would still be a violent and bloody clash... of people organizing into groups, thinking in terms of us

vs. them, exercising their will to power...it just wouldn't be religious groups carrying it out. In fact there's people that make the case that religion may have been a moderating influence on the violence throughout history...because at least it allowed people to organize into these MASSIVE groups of millions people...as opposed to the world being much more fragmented and volatile. When Nietzsche says God is dead he's not talking about the literal death of some deity. He's talking about the death of humanity's pursuit for moral objectivity. He's talking about the death...of people having a ready-made answer that fills that void within them that craves meaning. Nietzsche's asking: what are people going to do now that they don't have that answer? Remember, to Nietzsche, 95% of people are the mob...they're camels, beasts of burden, all of their beliefs and values loaded onto their backs by other people...they're scared and lazy and generally speaking are just not the kind of people that are going to read up on some existentialism and fill this void in other ways. And it's not like when you cut the legs out from underneath religion science just naturally fills that void....people aren't sitting around saying, well there's no meaning to anything I do...but I got a large Hadron collider for Christmas...that'll be fun. Just got a new iPhone...spiritual guidance...I think I'm good for a while! No that void doesn't just magically disappear...and they're GOING to fill it with something...the question becomes: now that it's a near impossibility to fill it with religion... what are people going to fill it with? Nietzsche predicts in his book *The Will to Power*...very ominously...that in the next 100 years after writing that book...tens of millions of people are going to die because of the position we've worked ourselves into. Nietzsche saw the beginning of the twentieth century before it even happened. In many ways, he saw the world we still live in today before it even happened. Out went religion and in came ideology. Nationalism...Marxism...Capitalism...tons of other isms you could throw in there. The story of the 20th century is in large part a story of competing ideologies living in the wake of the death of God. When the French Existentialists...Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Camus...are writing their work...part of the reason why they're so focused on making a case for individuality... is because they're living in the middle of Nazi occupied France. They're living in a world where people are thinking of themselves

first, and primarily as a member of some group... and THEN as an individual human being. I am a German. Germany is one of the great nations of the world. If we're ever going to assume our rightful place as a world power we're going to have to take back some of the land THEY took from US through the treaty of Versailles. Us vs. Them. People identifying themselves in terms of their GROUP identity rather than their individuality. The reason freedom and responsibility is so important to the French Existentialists...is because people were using this group identity, as a justification for doing horrible things... and then pretending they had no choice in the matter because this is what their group is doing. For example, look...I'm a just Nazi Soldier...if one of the higher ups orders me to go round up those kids over there and put a bullet in their head...I'm just a soldier following orders. I had no choice in the matter. Or on the other side...hey, I'm just a citizen of France I didn't want to go to war. Those Nazi people have guns...what can I do but just sit around weave flowers together so I can throw them on whoever comes and saves me? I don't have a choice in the matter. The existentialists are responding to this thinking by saying, no...in both cases, you didn't need to kill those kids and you could've been actively part of the resistance...in other words: you DID have a choice, and you are responsible for what you have done. The consequences for making that different choice may have been dire for you, but one thing the existentialists aren't going to allow... is to let you get away with pretending to be some droning, mindless member of a group that's devoid of individual autonomy. But, on the other hand...again, an integral part of being a human being is FEELING like you're a member of some group that is fighting for good. That's the sort of ambiguity that we have to navigate as people in this new post-scientific revolution world. And if you're not an EXTREMELY self-aware and HONEST person...as Simone De Beauvoir warns about...you can very easily find yourself a foot soldier for some tyrannical group...all the while feeling TOTALLY morally justified...feeling like you're a good person while doing it. As people that are alive today...JUST like the people of Germany in the 1930's...we all carry this burden of potentially reducing ourselves to just a foot soldier of an ideological group, but we CAN'T forget our individuality. Now one of the main ideologies that people attached themselves

to and worked to advance throughout the 20th century... was neo-Marxism and its varying forms. In fact, at the same time Sartre, Simone De Beauvoir and Camus are doing their work in France...there's a group of Marxists that had been working on their own projects since the 1920's that would come to be known as The Frankfurt School. Now this needs a bit of a setup...to understand where the mindset of a western Marxist was during this time period... we have to talk about a couple prophecies that were made by Marx himself back in his time. Remember Hegel's Dialectic? The idea is that the process of change throughout history can be understood in terms of a repetition of three stages that Hegel calls the Thesis, the Antithesis and the Synthesis. There's a way that things are...that's the Thesis...some competing interest comes along and overthrows that way of doing things, but inevitably the pendulum swings too far in that other direction and eventually finds a resting point somewhere in the middle of the Thesis and Antithesis in a place Hegel calls the Synthesis. The Synthesis then becomes the new Thesis and so on and so forth throughout the history of time. If you're unfamiliar with the concept and want more of an explanation, you can always go back and listen to the Hegel episodes. Well, as Marx famously writes, "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." In other words, during his time Marx looks back at the history of the world and points out that when people go to war, or there's some sort of bloody revolution or civil war, people primarily tend to go to war for economic reasons. The history of the world to Marx seems to be, in a way that resembles Hegel's dialectic, a revolving door of a ruling class exerting control over an exploited class of people (the thesis), the exploited class of people rising up and overthrowing that ruling class (the antithesis), and then a new ruling class being elected that appears to be slightly better for the formerly exploited class (the synthesis). That new ruling class becomes the new thesis... and the whole process repeats itself over and over again. Marx points out how in every single economic system that's ever been implemented throughout history...you always have this dynamic...there always seems to be a ruling class and an exploited class. During the Feudal System there was the peasantry and the Aristocracy. In a slave based economy there are the slaves and the slave owners. To Karl Marx,

capitalism is the same way. There are the people that control the resources and the means of production, and then there's the working class. During his time, Marx asks a question that would go on to change the course of human history. Why does it have to be this way? Does it? Do you think...even potentially...that there might be some sort of economic system we could put in place that doesn't have to involve this dialectic of class struggles? How many people need to die before we start to try to come up with some way that people don't need to be exploited... and there doesn't need to be this inevitable process of revolution and bloodshed? Well, after realizing this...there's good news and bad news says Marx at this point. The bad news is people are currently being exploited...right now...but the good news is: we know exactly where this is going, because it's happened all throughout history. Here's the prophecy he makes: There's an industrial revolution going on in Europe at the time he's alive... and it's in these high production areas that the ruling vs exploited class dynamic of capitalism is going to be the most pronounced. Just like the peasants immiserated under the Feudal system, the working class in this capitalist system is eventually going to rise up, take over the means of production... and it's at that point that we should implement a system that DOESN'T have this exploitation built into it. Well fast forward to Germany in the 1920's in what's known as the "interwar period", or the years in between the end of WW1 and the beginning of WW2. At this point in time there's a lot of Marxist thinkers sitting around waiting for this revolution to come about...but strangely...it hasn't happened yet. In fact, it seems like its not coming. There's an attempt immediately following the end of WW1 and all the turmoil that came with that...but the Weimar Republic ends up winning and assuming control of Germany and a lot of thinkers were starting to doubt whether Marx was right with this whole grand prophecy of his. Not only that, they took look at the only country that's HAD a communist revolution at the time...NOT an industrial society like Marx predicted but a predominantly AGRICULTURAL society at the time in Russia...they see Marxism become this Leninist Authoritarianism that's going on there in the 1920's...and what happens is this general attitude of skepticism towards Marx and his original theories... starts to creep in. Was Marx correct? Has this just been a massive

failed experiment based on a misunderstanding of history? Now it should be said: there are people that just ignore everything that's going on and trudge forward with Marxism version 1.0...there's other people that abandon Marxism thinking that it's failed. But there's a strong contingency of thinkers in the middle, The Frankfurt School among others...thinkers in the middle that are still Marxists...they still strongly believe in the world that Marxism is trying to bring about, but they're highly critical of Marx for a few different reasons. Many critiques but two of the major ones are that Marx doesn't talk enough about the concept of personal liberty within his system and he doesn't do enough to consider the individual. Remember, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School are living right around the same time as Husserl and Heidegger and Sartre... and all these other thinkers that, like we talked about, are highly skeptical of enlightenment style thinking...of exalting reason onto this pedestal above everything else and trying to reduce everything, including human beings within a society down into these convenient, rational categories. During the time Karl Marx wrote his work, the concept of the individual just wasn't being considered in the same way it was during the time of the Frankfurt School, and the thinkers OF the Frankfurt School saw that as a huge blind spot within Marxism. Just to keep this organized: The Frankfurt School was a collection of neo-Marxists...convinced that Marxism was still correct overall...but that it needed some serious reworking...especially if it was ever going to work where they eventually wanted to implement it... in western countries including but not limited to: the United States. Now, researchers in the Soviet Union compiled a collection of Marx's notes that was never before published called: economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844. Now, not only did this book provide a never before seen more Hegelian interpretation of Marx...but this book was published in 1932...perfect timing if you're someone who is a western Marxist and you want a fresh perspective on the whole situation. Couple this with the fact that basically every thinker in the first generation of the Frankfurt School was of Jewish descent...living in Germany during the interwar years...seeing the rising tide of anti-Semitism and Nazism all around them...they saw the writing on the wall: first they moved the school out of Frankfurt to Geneva and then ultimately to New York City

for several years where they embedded themselves into Columbia University. So what were the goals of the Frankfurt School? Well, their short term goals were to take a deep look at enlightenment style thinking and try to figure out how it was possible...for the world to go from a place technologically and culturally more advanced than it had ever been in history...only to instantly devolve into the most barbaric, brutal, hateful event in human history... in WW2. The Frankfurt school wanted to understand...how was that even possible? What it is about this post enlightenment world that makes that possible? The conclusions they arrive at range from interesting to downright scary. We'll talk about them in the upcoming episodes of the show. Later works of the Frankfurt School focus on a critique of Capitalism. Which naturally extends to a critique of the people they think are being exploited, Frankfurt School pointing at the invisible chains they say people unknowingly wear around each day and how they manifest into their lives. Which naturally extends to a critique of various traditions and institutions within those cultures. Now, some of these critiques are scathing to the point that they take things that are long standing institutions within western culture and they shine a light on them that makes people never see them in the same way again...and when it comes to these critiques...how people say you should interpret them and what the ultimate goals of the Frankfurt School were, is all over the map. Some people think this is just naturally what happens when Marxist thought clashes with Capitalist thought. That Capitalism, is an antiquated system...founded on traditions that by their very nature are oppressive, don't stand up to scrutiny and that certain western traditions involving the church, lack of community, views on family among other things...those traditions are what was necessary for the ruling vs exploited class dynamic to ever get off the ground in the first place. These people say this scathing critique is just Marxism holding a candle to weak traditions. There are other people more in the middle that think both Marxism and Capitalism are viable systems if implemented correctly. That the critiques of the Frankfurt School, if they did anything, point out certain weak points that we, as a Capitalist society, should keep in mind moving forward when refining our systems and continuing to make things better. There are other people that believe that the Frankfurt

School is a group of Neo-Marxist thinkers engaged in a direct attack, the goal being to subvert western values, weaken the foundations of every aspect of western culture, then watch as the foundation eventually crumbles making it much easier to bring about a Marxist revolution in the west. Point is: this conversation about how to interpret the critiques of the Frankfurt School can go on for days, and I'm not interested in being the one that makes the final proclamation. So I'll leave you to make your own determination about what was going on inside the heads of the people that talk about these ideas, all I'm interested in is the merit of the ideas and what's interesting about them. Which brings me to a point I want to make. Just some things I want to put out there because I feel like they need to be said. I fully realize how political the world has become in the last year. I fully realize that there are podcasts and shows out there that used to do great content that now have become first and foremost a soapbox for some political ideology and secondarily content for their listeners. I just want to iterate that even though subject matters in the near future may trespass into places that are still relevant to modern politics...this is not the show becoming some bullhorn for who the next president should be...not that I even have strong enough political views to warrant doing a show on them...and maybe that makes me the perfect person to do this series. Look, I come from poverty. I absolutely CHERISH being able to do this podcast for a living. The idea that I would dilute the show down and waste your time like that...I mean if you knew me personally you'd know that that's the furthest thing from who I am. I approach every episode of this show with the same question: how can I give the people listening to me the most value possible... in these 30 minutes of their time they've given me? To me, it's an unselfish way of approaching the show that I think is a big reason why I've been able to do this as long as I have. I respect your time...and I guess I just want to plant a flag in the ground here and make a couple promises moving forward. I promise to cover these issues as fairly as I can. And I'm not just talking about the typical binary left/right way of looking at things...I plan on covering these subjects from multiple different angles that are interesting...if I can't be comprehensive, I just won't cover it. Secondly, my hunch is that the majority of you listening, even if you're a hardcore capitalist or Marxist, my hunch is that you'd

welcome and be excited to hear a deep reading of the philosophy that underlies the other side respectively. They may ask questions you don't have answers to that you can look into...at the very least you come out having strengthened your views from seeing the best the other side has to offer. But even if you're not that open minded and you've already joined the tribe...even if in this world where God is Dead you've labeled one of those groups your mortal enemy that you have to fight against for the rest of your life...I promise I'm going to do these episodes in a way where you're still going to get something out of it. Now onto the question some of you are probably wondering: where's Camus? You said on Facebook Camus would be here, where is he?! Camus' coming, he's stuck in traffic he's going to be here soon. No, here's the thing about Camus. Throughout the next several episodes, we're not just going to be talking about Marxism and Capitalism from the perspective of the Frankfurt School...we're going to be looking at it through the lens of thinkers that are critical of Marxism...of which...Camus is one of them and he's a particularly interesting one because he's a French Existentialist who's NOT a Marxist, unlike Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir...AND he has a really interesting take on how Marxism starts to look like a direct mirror of Christianity...you know with the dialectic as this absolute governing force moving us providentially into a particular direction...the idea of this dialectic moving us toward some sort of ultimate end...there being notable figures throughout its history that resemble saints and bishops...heresy trials...there are many parallels that we'll talk about more in depth when we get there. Anyway, to bring this full circle there are a couple ideas from Camus I want to expand on that I didn't get to finish in the last Camus episode because I was pressed for time. Nietzsche talks about this void that we have inside of us that craves meaning...this void that's such a default, universal part of what it is to be a human being that some people aren't even aware that they have it...they just fill it up with something immediately around them and then assume their role as a tribal zealot for the rest of their life. But what I love about Camus in the Myth of Sisyphus is that he talks about the process of discovering that void for the first time. When exactly do we realize there's something lacking in that department? Remember, Sisyphus is a man condemned by the Gods to an eternity of

pushing a boulder up a hill, only to reach the top and watch as the boulder rolls back down to the bottom of the hill, at which point he walks back down to the bottom of the hill to start the process over again...THE ULTIMATE EXAMPLE...of struggling and straining and feeling pain and exerting yourself only to have all of your efforts ultimately be for nothing. This is a metaphor...for life, to Camus. We live in a universe that is so inconceivably large and complex and of a scope that we as humans can't even wrap our heads around. We live our lives...with every step we take we fight against a tidal wave of things trying to kill us all the time...we coast through good times struggle through bad ones...only to reach the end of our lives to have to accept our fate that the universe really doesn't care about anything that you did. Certainly in a humanistic sense what you do matters...it matters to the microscopic scaffolding that we've set up on this dust speck out in the boonies of an ordinary galaxy, but on the level of the universe? Sun's going to blow up in 5 billion years, where's this podcast going to be then? Where's your stamp collection going to be that you've worked so hard to complete? We're all a little like Sisyphus in that regard...we're all rolling these boulders up our respective hills only to have it ultimately be for nothing...and at the end of the last episode on Camus I made the point that maybe we ARE all like Sisyphus in a way, but that Camus says we're only condemned by the Gods to push the boulder, not to agonize over the process...and that we should strive to enjoy the process of pushing the boulder as much as we can...that we should imagine Sisyphus smiling. I said all that, but I never really got to go into how Camus thinks you should be going about doing that. Camus gives two main strategies that Sisyphus uses to remain happy...you know, even though... he's condemned for all eternity to push a boulder up a hill. Camus would say that as outsiders...if we could sit on the sidelines and somehow watch Sisyphus push the boulder up the hill over and over again... it would no doubt look to us like a totally meaningless, tortuous, insane thing that Sisyphus is being forced to do. But at what point does Sisyphus realize that it's all meaningless? It's only when Sisyphus STOPS being present...takes a step back and says: wait a second...why am I pushing this boulder anyway? Looks around him...can't make sense of it and deems it all to be meaningless, it's only at that point that this concept of

meaning comes into play at all. 10 seconds ago he was just pushing a boulder. It wasn't until he stopped and reflected on the fact that he was pushing the boulder... that he started feeling like something was lacking. This is an example of a recurring theme that comes up in every single one of Camus' books. It's the contrast between reflection and lived experience. Camus would say think about what you're doing whenever you stop to reflect on something. You stop doing whatever it is you're doing... and you use your capacity to reason to try to make sense of things by asking a bunch of questions. Why am I pushing this boulder up the hill? Why am I here? Why do my actions matter? Well consider for a second just how presumptuous and arrogant that whole reasoning process is. I'm going to take this narrow, human, rational scope that I have called reason... a scope that is limited and biased and existing really only because it's sufficient at allowing my ancestors to pick mangos and reproduce... and I'm going to use this tool and impose this rationality onto the UNIVERSE... and see what conclusions I arrive at when it comes to what the whole purpose of it is. Right. What if reason is not the right tool for the job? What if you had some rusty hammer held together by string and some old Allen wrench from IKEA and someone told you to put together a space shuttle. You'd say, are you serious? I mean, I can try... I guess. The same way an Allen wrench is not the right tool for putting together a space shuttle, reflection and the human capacity to reason is not the right tool for understanding things like the meaning or non-meaning of the things that you do. Again, keep in mind that this critique of reason is very popular among the thinkers of this era... and it's the first thing we're going to talk about with the Frankfurt School. But anyway, the way Sisyphus deals with this absurdity of the universe... the way he deals with the fact that bad sometimes triumphs over good and that my grandma died and I didn't want her to and that my car broke down and that Santa Claus isn't real, the way that he deals with all this stuff... Camus says Sisyphus makes his rock his thing. What he means is Sisyphus is happy... because he chooses to fully engage himself in his work. So if reflecting on what the ultimate meaning of pushing the boulder is is never going to leave us with a satisfactory answer... why not focus ALL of your effort on being engaged in the task you're currently doing? See to Camus... reflection is good... it certainly is a

necessary part of life...but there's a point of diminishing returns. You can reflect too much...and all it's going to do at that point is deteriorate the quality of your lived experience. No, accept the absurdity of the universe...and then immerse yourself back into being more fully engaged in the tasks you care about. What Sisyphus does...is he learns to love his rock that he pushes up the hill. He studies all the little grooves in the rock...all the different ways the grooves interact with the soil underneath. He pays attention to his posture and form when guiding the rock. He studies patterns in the ways the rock rolls back down the hill. He tries to find the most efficient way of getting back down the hill to start over. He makes the rock his thing. Camus says that one strategy WE can use... is to be as engaged in the tasks of our lives... as Sisyphus is with his rock. Maybe for you that's appreciating your family more deeply. Maybe it's eating great food...maybe it's working on contemplative stuff to get your mental game on another level. Point is: sometimes...if we spend too much time reflecting, looking at things from the outside all the time...we can lose sight of the significance and the beauty of these moments because we're just not as engaged as we could be. Kierkegaard has an example he uses where he talks about a couple out in public showing some strong levels of affection for each other. They're making out...rubbing all over each other...breathing heavy...gross. And he says that if you just look at what they're doing from the sidelines and reflect on it...if you REALLY look at what it is they're doing...it's the most ridiculous thing you've ever seen in your life. I want to put my lips up against your lips and feel a tickly feeling as I move them around and I want to hold you in one place and rub my hands all over your clothes to feel what kind of cotton/polyester blend you're wearing today. It's completely ridiculous. The whole process can seem that way when you're reflecting on it...no it's only when...you're the one doing the kissing, that you understand it. It's only when you're fully engaged in the act itself that any of the significance and the meaning starts to make sense to you. So too with the things we do in life. I'll leave the second strategy Sisyphus uses for our response to the Frankfurt School. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School pt. 2 - The Enlightenment

Episode #109

This is a transcript of episode #109 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So whenever you're navigating the waters of a set of ideas that you disagree with...which seems inevitable for all of us given the next couple months of this show...one thing that's really important to consider is to put yourself in the shoes of the people that you disagree with...and try to consider where THEY'RE coming from with all this. One thing I like to do is I like to imagine myself AS that other person...I like to imagine I woke up this morning and I sat down with my family at breakfast and I held ALL the strong convictions that they hold about a particular subject that I disagree with...then I like to imagine...if I was this person, how would I see my actual self and the views that I have about things? In other words, where do they think I'm coming from with my views being someone who disagrees with them? See the reason I do this exercise is because I know that what Nietzsche said is true. I realize how strong of an incentive I have as a person to attach myself to some group or some cause that's bigger than myself. Glean a sense of identity from the process...feel all the good feelings that come along with fighting against some evil out there in the world. But a necessary part of that whole process...is identifying some evil that you're fighting against...and what that often looks like in practice is finding some group of evil people...that you're fighting against. But here's an important question to ask...if you were them...would YOU think you were evil? Do these evil people...view themselves as villains cackling and twirling their mustache in some super hero movie? Or do these people believe that they are acting as a force of good in the world? Almost always it's going to be the latter, and it's an important distinction to make. Because if there's some group of people that you've deemed to be evil that you want to do away with...you have to examine your tactics...it's not enough to just be a bundle of emotion screaming at people in the streets, or punching someone in the face, or bombing them out of existence. Ideas live on long after any nuclear fallout. You don't do away with

an evil idea... until you fight and win a war of ideas. And human psychology 101 says that you don't change people's minds by coming to the conversation labeling them as evil right off the bat, condescending them and screaming at them. They're gonna clam up and not even consider your ideas. That's just not how ideas spread or most people change their minds. Ideas spread... over millions of conversations between individual human beings coming together with a genuine interest in where the other one is coming from and a desire to show this quote evil group of people, how their true interests align with yours. What I mean is: it's so easy for a capitalist to look at a Marxist and say: look at this utopianistic, lazy, evil moron. You're either too lazy to work...or aren't clever enough to compete and provide value to people so what do you wanna do? You want to watch the world burn and bring about your evil, totally GENIUS system that's failed every time it's been tried and get ANOTHER 100 million people killed. It's so easy for a Marxist to look at a capitalist and say: look at this gluttonous, evil pig living a life of excess on the backs of 100 million people? Try hundreds of millions of miserable workers sewing sleeves onto shirts and making dollar store figurines all over the globe... just so you can sit on your yacht, evilly taking advantage of the surplus made possible by their exploitation and then wrap yourself in the flag of hard work as your way of doing it. Now no matter what side of that you fall on you realize that this isn't an accurate depiction of where you're coming from.....as someone participating in a capitalist system that's not what you're about...for example, hi...I'm not evil... my names bruce and I have a peanut butter business. I was born into a world where you need to make money to survive...I bring thousands of people enjoyment every day by making this peanut butter that they love...and not only do I get to use that money to buy stuff I want, but I get to employ other people which allows them to go on and buy stuff that THEY want and support their families. This is a symbiotic, beautiful system where we help each other as people. If you're a Marxist, you're not some lazy, evil hippie. Think about it from a Marxist perspective, they live every day of their lives seeing millions of people all around them being exploited, underpaid to go do work that they hate every single day because they're trapped in an economic system that's based on an outdated style of thinking from the

1700's. A Marxist talking to a worker in a capitalist society would be very similar to talking to a peasant in the feudal system...and you can imagine how no matter how many arguments the peasant gave you about how, hey well at least I had it better than my grandfather who got sold into slavery...and at least I have my family around me and get to work the land...look, it's a symbiotic, beautiful system...they own the land...I work the land...no matter how many arguments the peasant gave you... you can imagine wanting to make them aware that things can be better than being a peasant in the middle ages. What I'm saying is: somebody can be mistaken, misinformed or just not agree with you and not be an evil person. We have such a strong tendency to do it, but when you just label somebody evil for some belief they hold...It shuts down discourse. It robs you of the opportunity to potentially learn something from that person or from finding out where they're coming from and helping them see a different perspective. Simone De Beauvoir would have a lot to say about not turning other human beings into these objects, of evil and instead thinking of them first as fellow human beings going through the same thing you are. Anyway, continuing from last time. The Frankfurt School was a group of thinkers looking at western, industrialized society confused as to why Marx's prophecy wasn't coming true. If the exploited class... always rises up and overthrows the ruling class... why hadn't there been a workers revolution in the west by the time of the interwar years in Germany? The answer to this question that the Frankfurt School gives...is that Marx was wrong. Marx oversimplified the whole situation. His problem... was that he tried to explain the entire history and future of the world solely in terms of economics...in terms of this inevitable, dialectical process of change where it's just a matter of time until the exploited class overthrows the ruling class...but much in keeping with the thinking of his time, he fails to take into account the variables of individual human psychology...in other words, what if members of the exploited class...didn't feel like they're being exploited? What if there was somehow a way to convince the peasants in the feudal system, that everything around them was great and that they were totally free...would we see any peasant revolts in that world? The Frankfurt School...pulling ideas from Marx, Hegel and more recent revelations in Freudian Psychology...makes the case...that the only reason

there hasn't been a workers revolution in the west...lies in a problem of what they call "class consciousness". The workers of the west, were sort of bewitched and beguiled when they saw all the cool new stuff humans are able to do now that capitalism is responsible for...the power of industry...increased levels of efficiency...the scientific and technological progress that capitalism produces...they've seen these changes, have been raised to believe that this stuff is the measure of progress and that this is just HOW the world is now and to not question it...all the while immersed in a system that from birth tells them they are first and foremost a worker and consumer, through media tells them how to act, think and feel, programs into them false needs, sells them one product after another to satisfy these false needs, socially alienates them, keeps them confused and scared, provides them with an illusion of political freedom and through many different types of coercion gets them never to question the fact that all of this rapid technological progress is only made possible by the exploitation of other human beings. In other words, the workers of the west no longer resemble the free-thinking proletariat that Marx talked about rising up...they've been indoctrinated to love their chains in a sense. Now that's a big accusation and it's gonna take a couple episodes to unpack where they're coming from. Maybe the best place to start is to talk about their critique of enlightenment style thinking in general...now keep in mind...The members of the Frankfurt School...are FANS of enlightenment style thinking. They're not saying that reason is bad or science is bad...they're just saying there are certain consequences to enlightenment style thinking that as a species we're not adequately accounting for. Flashback to the beginning of the enlightenment. Western Europe...it's been over a thousand years of religious dogma, and some thinkers are committed to the task of producing an understanding of the world that's based on reason instead of faith. The Age of Reason, it's often called. Certain thinkers of the Frankfurt School would ask the question...what exactly is it that we're doing when we use our faculty of reason to arrive at an understanding of the world? For example, when you conduct an experiment on a plant and you arrive at the conclusion that, hey if I rub this plant over here on this cut, it makes it heal twice as quickly! What we're ultimately doing there...is yes, reasoning to

knowledge about things...but it's always reasoning to knowledge about how we as human beings can control nature to our benefit. In other words, instead of being totally at the mercy of nature like we've been in the past...instead of believing that lightning bolt, hit that horse over there, cause Zeus is mad the Bronco's beat the Cowboys on Sunday...we instead use reason... to try to understand things in nature like weather and clouds and electricity...the hope being...that we can control them to our benefit, as human beings. See this is the point they'd want to underscore...it's easy to miss that underlying motivation that we have...you can be that person all day: oh, I'm a lover of knowledge, all kinds...I'm a voracious reader...I never even use the word voracious unless it's about my reading...but what the Frankfurt School would point out is that there's a reason you're not reading and memorizing the phone book. Why? Because you're not an indiscriminate lover of knowledge whatever it is...you're a lover of knowledge that is useful to you, and that has a huge effect on the questions you ask and the areas you focus on. Well, so too with thinkers and scientists back during the enlightenment. When we use reason to arrive at knowledge it's not indiscriminate...it is by its very nature, anthropocentric and humanistic...it's always us trying to understand nature...SO THAT we can control it and use it to our benefit. But here's thing: human beings are ALSO a part of nature...they're in no way exempt from this process of using reason to try to understand them better so that we can control them. And this has been a GOOD THING historically speaking! When Jean Jacques Rousseau makes the claim that the true nature of human beings is to be noble savages that are then corrupted by certain aspects of civilization...that is him using reason to arrive at an understanding about human beings...SO THAT he can then build his political philosophy on top of it and arrive at a system of government that yes, controls human beings in some ways...but benefits everyone overall. This is a reason based approach to the problem of government...it's FAR superior to a faith based approach to solving that problem like, for example, the Divine Right of Kings...but we have to be aware of the fact that reason itself is pretty narrow in scope and in the business of controlling nature for the benefit of the people doing the reasoning...and that when it's applied to the task of trying to decide how people should be oriented

economically and politically...even brilliant thinkers reasoning with the best intentions historically often have arrived at systems that harness control over this “human being” section of nature...and reduce them into rational categories that fit within a larger system that they think is gonna benefit everyone. For example, members of a state within Rousseau’s political system. Workers and consumers within a capitalist system. Thinkers of the Frankfurt School are making the case that these systems no doubt helped make the world a better place than it was before in the 1700’s...but here’s the thing...it’s not the 1700’s anymore. It is an outdated, lost cause to try to use reason to break down and define some giant classification that every human being should think of themselves as from birth. Reason is great...but it has its limitations and tendencies. It’s not that we shouldn’t use reason to best organize our society economically...but we need to be self-aware of these limitations and tendencies. This is the point...what some thinkers in the Frankfurt School are getting at here...is that because reason is always aiming towards harnessing control over aspects of nature that benefit the person doing the reasoning...you can imagine how easily when it’s applied to the control of human beings...that it can devolve into fascism. This is the explanation for how it was possible for the world to be technologically and culturally more advanced than we had ever been in human history...only to devolve into the most inhuman crisis in history in WW2. That the natural end game...of Enlightenment Style, reason based thinking...is fascism. The more enlightened of a person that you become...the more you use reason to ground your beliefs in things...the LESS you believe in cosmically determined ways that human beings must behave. This is familiar...God is dead, right? In a post enlightenment world, in a world where there are no moral substrates and people have a tendency to harness control over nature in a way that benefits them...all it takes is one Adolph Hitler...one person that had a bad childhood and never went to therapy that likes the idea of people chanting their name and posters of their face and controlling people. All it takes is ONE OF THOSE... for fascism to potentially emerge. Now of course I’m joking about the bad childhood thing, but it’s actually not that far off the way that the Frankfurt School thought we should be looking at someone like an Adolph Hitler. Theodor Adorno... one

of the thinkers of the Frankfurt School actually devised a personality test called The California F-Scale...F standing for fascism. It's essentially just a bunch of questions designed to determine how fascist or likely to support a fascist you are. Now, that personality test in particular was heavily criticized, but the point Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt school want to make... is that fascism may be NATURALLY where enlightenment style thinking goes...but it's not NECESSARILY where it has to go. And that as a species living in this post-enlightenment world...we need to be aware of the increased risk level we're at for fascist movements emerging and we should probably be taking steps towards identifying the Adolph Hitlers...when they're in art school...before they become the Adolph hitlers invading Czechoslovakia where we have to fight a bloody war where tens of millions of people die. The thinking behind the F-Scale... was that it takes a pretty extreme psychological outlook on the world to think that it's a good idea for you to become the next Adolph Hitler...maybe if we mandated that everyone took this F-Scale test throughout their life...we'd be able to catch that sort of black and white thinking that leads to you BECOMING an Adolph Hitler. So again, we shouldn't do AWAY with enlightenment style thinking just because it leads to fascism...it's kind of like having a pool installed in your backyard and you have small children around. It's not that pools are bad because there's this new danger we have to consider...it's not that you can't have a pool...we just need to make sure we put up a good fence around the pool...we need to make sure we develop some fascism safeguards to make sure things don't get super out of control like they did in 1930's Germany. Now let's move on to some of the actual critique of modern, Western society particularly in the United States. One of the most influential thinkers of the Frankfurt School was a guy named Herbert Marcuse...he wrote a book called One Dimensional Man that would go on to be massively influential in the New Left protests of the 1960's. Marcuse comes out swinging in chapter one, he says: "By virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian. For "totalitarian" is not only a terroristic political coordination of society, but also a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests." Now, you may hear that and

think...well that seems a little extreme. The United States is not even CLOSE to being a totalitarian society...what's Marcuse talking about? Here's the definition of Totalitarian as given to me by dictionary.com: adjective 1. of or relating to a centralized government that does not tolerate parties of differing opinion and that exercises dictatorial control over many aspects of life. 2. exercising control over the freedom, will, or thought of others; authoritarian; autocratic. What Marcuse would say is that you can have your sort of run of the mill, cliché Totalitarian society where the government forces citizens to do things, centralized political power... typically in a one-party system... and any political opposition that gets too loud is immediately introduced to the bottom of the nearest lake. You can have that. You can also have a government that claims not to be Totalitarian, but any reasonable person looking at them from the outside would OBVIOUSLY call what they're doing Totalitarianism. Look we're not FORCING upon you what you do all day...you have a choice!...you can dig ditches all day, you can crush rocks...you can help build this statue that's a monument to our supreme leader, you can be in the military. Look, we WELCOME political opposition in our great land...that's why we have democratic elections every year...yeah 99% of the vote always comes in for one guy, but that just speaks to how great of a candidate he is. In other words, a society that masquerades as though it's NOT totalitarian...gives its citizens the ILLUSION of freedom without them actually having a choice in the matter at all. Marcuse says that when you take a close look at the United States...when you look at the government and culture exerting control over the behavior of the citizens...when you look at the illusion of political involvement that is given to people...when you look at the barriers put in place to keep any extreme dissenting ideas out...the United States starts to resemble one of these Totalitarian societies enslaving its people...but instead of the ultimate goal being so that the Supreme Leader can hang out with Dennis Rodman...the goal of THIS particular totalitarian society is hyper-technological progress. Let's break this down, let's first talk about the illusion of political involvement Marcuses referencing. Marcuse would say that one of the inevitable byproducts of a Capitalist system...is the conflation of political power with money. You see it all around you...you wonder why nobody ever changes

anything. Marcuse says the reason why is because that's... just... capitalism. It's always going to happen, even if it's just in private. The people and companies with the most money are always going to be able to pay politicians to influence legislation in their favor. These are the people that REALLY have political influence. Couple that with the fact that there is a real, demonstrable connection between the number of advertising dollars spent on a political campaign, and the number of people voting for the candidate. People get their political opinions...from that box in their front room that gives them all their other opinions. Even if you were the most well intentioned individual in the world that wanted to run for Congress and change things from the inside...to even be able to sit on the committees influential enough to change these things, you'd need 20 years in Congress...that's 20 years of spending your days fundraising because you need money...because the way you win elections is by spending more money on smear ads than the person you're running against. It's a system designed around linking money to political influence. I mean if you were some billionaire...and you had NEVER been in politics ever...NO idea how it works on the inside...if you had enough money...you could theoretically self fund most of your own campaign and there's a very REAL chance you could convince enough people to vote for you just because you ran a lot of TV ads and the people only had two choices. That's another thing Marcuse talks about...the whole two party structure. These two parties seem to disagree on a lot of stuff...they disagree on stem cells and illegal immigration and whether or not we should legalize marijuana. But Marcuse would want to direct your attention to all the things these two parties DO agree on that leave you as a voter, effectively without a choice in the matter. Any time you have a bi-partisan consensus on anything...as a voter...you essentially don't have a choice. Marcuse would say the two parties are just competing to preserve the existing framework...not exploring real alternatives that may be better for people. And you may say, what are you talking about...we have third party candidates! Marcuse would say: right...they're just not allowed at the prime time televised debates...not covered by any major news outlets...it would require a voter to do some digging to even know who they are...there's of course the feeling that you're throwing away your vote when it should be

used on the REAL election going on. The existence of these third parties provides the illusion of a diverse array of political opinions to choose from...when in reality everyone's gonna go to Fox News and CNN to reinforce their outlook on the world anyway. Marcuse would say that you're living in a society... where from the moment you're born you are conditioned with the idea that you are first and foremost a worker and a consumer. When you're a kid, people ask you what you want to be when you grow up...the implication there being, what work are you going to be doing that will allow you to get money to consume the things you want to consume. Our whole public school system is designed around the idea that it benefits us as a nation if our children have a baseline of an understanding that will turn them into tax-paying productive citizens. Paying taxes on earned income from working 8 hours a day...paying taxes on consumption. When somebody says to you, tell me about yourself. The first thing most people offer up that describes who they are...is their work. When they're done telling you about their work...they'll often go on to tell you all the things they like to consume in their free time. Your job in this world is to wake up...work for the majority of your day...then come home, and consume things that make you feel just good enough to go back to your job the next day...all so that this engine of hyper-technological advancement keeps powering forward. Some of you out there may love your job...the reality of the global population is that most people don't. Most people don't hate their job...they've learned to accept it as an inevitability...but they'd never be doing this stuff if it wasn't required of them to earn enough green paper to sustain a living. Right there...Marcuse would say...life, isn't an end in itself in the United States...no, in this society you have to EARN the right to life by providing some good or service to people around you in your society. You know it's been said of Capitalism that it's a beautiful system because it's sort of like a forced altruism. You give the people around you something they like, or else you starve to death. We're just human beings engaging in mutually beneficial transactions giving each other what we want. Marcuse would say...yeah exactly...it's FORCED altruism. Look at how the very structure of Capitalism FORCES people to conform to the way that things already are and not change anything too much. What he means is: that in a society where people

didn't have to earn green paper or else starve to death...in a society where people just do whatever interests them each day...no idea or activity is too far outside of what the status quo is for them to be able to explore it...whereas in a Capitalist society where you give me something I want or else you starve to death...the existing culture and what people want... dictates the limitations of what you can do and serves to reinforce the way things already are. For example imagine a culture where nobody saw value in reading and interpreting philosophy. Marcuse would say...no matter how much you think it would benefit the world to give people access to philosophy...you're not gonna be doing a philosophy podcast...you need people on Patreon that believe in the cause as well or else you're gonna starve to death. And Marcuse says in reality what happens is you don't want to be a social outcast and so you just conform to provide some good or service that is endorsed by the current way that the culture is. It perpetuates itself. Some of you out there may be saying: ok I don't think of myself as fundamentally a worker and consumer...and I don't feel this enormous sense of pressure to work or else I'm going to starve to death. And by the way all of this is sounding very conspiratorial...like who's enforcing this world you're talking about...what are you gonna tell me next? The bankers or the illuminati are pulling the puppet strings making sure I stay conditioned to love my chains so much that I don't even FEEL like I'm being enslaved as I'm BEING enslaved? No, Marcuse would say: it's far more insidious than that. The reality is: good people with good intentions every day are perpetuating the system without even realizing it because they're immersed in it. Next time we're going to be talking about something the Frankfurt School calls The Culture Industry...Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer...we're gonna talk about all the different ways they think movies, TV Shows, advertising, social media program you to feel like you need things you don't actually need, keeping you alienated from other people chasing something to consume that's going to solve your problems if only you work hard enough to afford it, to keep you working and consuming. Another response you may have to Marcuse is, ok...let's say I'm just some wage slave that's been indoctrinated to love my chains. Is there nothing to be said for the fact that the system works? In other words...there's no guarantee in this

universe that a political or economic system is going to work when it's tried...even if you see me as a slave, even if I'm just living in some really clever and insidious totalitarian society...you can't deny the system WORKS, Marcuse. Technology is improving at a rapid rate. Society 99% of the time functions well. For most people, at least in the United States, there's the possibility of economic mobility, the benefits OF this focus on technological progress are distributed to the consumers...is there nothing to be said for any of that? Marcuse would say...you're right! That's one of the most diabolical parts of all of this...that attitude is based on rational thought, but it's that attitude that sustains the way things are. Marcuse would say, sure...rapid technological progress IS being made...but is that progress overall as a species? Is having the iPhone 12 more important than the people putting it together that are jumping off the factories committing suicide during their lunch break? Yes, the system works...but what do we have to sacrifice as a species to be able to achieve that world? By the way, Marcuse's not saying we should throw out capitalism tomorrow and implement Marxism and everything would be great. He's not advocating for some revolution to occur. He explicitly says that if you instantly did away with Capitalism it would probably be the greatest catastrophe in the history of the world. You can't just take people...that have been conditioned from birth to look at every aspect of their lives in terms of socially isolated labor and consumption...drop them in a Marxist society and expect them to do well. Nobody's going to work...everyone's gonna be looking for happiness in the wrong places they've been conditioned to look for it. It would be a disaster. No, if this country ever does away with the Capitalist model...Marcuse says it's going to happen slowly over the course of generations. It's gonna be a slow awakening and re-education of people to be aware of the chains...to be aware of the suffering of the people that make the system possible...to be aware of the ways their behavior is conditioned and maintained. Marcuse would ask, is this true freedom?

The Frankfurt School pt. 3 - The Culture Industry

Episode #110

This is a transcript of episode #110 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So it's been said about the workers in the United States post WW2... that they found themselves in a very unique situation in terms of what options are made available to them. Capitalism... massive improvements that come along with it in technology and efficiency...has made it possible for the average person, to do things only the super rich had been able to do throughout human history. That for consumers in this post WW2 world...people no longer need to live together under one roof like it's little house on the prairie, sharing a communal horse and doing shadow puppetry on the walls for entertainment...no we live in a new world now. We live in a world where, it is entirely feasible for the average consumer, to buy their own house (far better than a shack on a prairie) buy their own car (with the power 300 of those communal horses) and through the advent of mass media and entertainment broadcasting have instant access to MOUNTAINS of art and cultural artifacts to consume with the push of a button. (little bit better than trying to make your hand look like an alligator chomping on the wall) Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two members of the Frankfurt School who co-wrote the book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, would no doubt agree that Capitalism is responsible for these changes in what is possible for the average person. But they'd want to ask the question: Why is it... that there seems to be such a strong correlation between the trappings of Capitalism, and the alienation of society? In other words, when people get the house and they get the car and they have access to more art than they could ever consume...why is it that the worker in the 20th century seems to be the most alienated from other people around them, and the most alienated from the process of creating world they're living in... in human history? That another way to think of that house that everyone's able to buy now...is that it's a box. That instead of being a member of a local community and feeling like an integral part of a group of people...now,

practically nobody knows their neighbors, they just go home and shut themselves away in this box, and here's the important part: it's a product that was sold to you... that house is a product...that if you aren't mindful and take effort to prevent it from happening, it's a product that aids in this process of alienation from other people. But that's not the only box we live in...think about it, instead of sharing a communal horse where you might have to talk to some people...you might have to figure out who gets the horse when, you might have a conversation with a fellow traveler on the road...now, nobody talks to other drivers going down the freeway...again, they just get in their car and shut themselves away in this box, a product that was sold to them where if they're not careful aids in this process of alienation. What Adorno and Horkheimer are going to go on to say here...is that this other box in your front room that delivers you all the TV shows and movies and music and all the other culture that you consume...that these things are ALSO products that are sold to you, that serve this process of alienation. See where they're coming from is an old Marxist critique of capitalist society...that in a more simple, non-capitalist structure people do work and there's a very obvious connection between the specific task they're doing and some benefit either to themselves or to the community they're involved in. Let's give two examples, one more simple one less simple. Let's say your community needs water and you have to dig a well. Now, nobody out there is passionate about well digging. Digging that well may be horrible work, it may take you all day...you may be sweating and covered in dirt and want a back rub at the end of the day...but at least as you are digging that well...you feel a connection to the work that you're doing. You know that you are digging that well so that you, your family and the families living around you that you care about will have drinking water. Not only do you feel connected to the work though, but there's a sense in which you are creating the world that you're living in, alright everybody we have a problem: we don't have any water...the solution to this problem is we're going to dig a well...grab a shovel and let's do this. You're not profiting in terms of green paper, you're profiting in terms of social recognition...when you're walking around town...you're the person who dug the well so that everyone else could have drinking water. Now new example...let's say you were a part of a non-capitalistic

trading based culture. Say you're an artisan that specializes in making clocks. Well in that sort of world it is still likely you feel a sense of connection to the work that you're doing. I mean, being able to tell the time is an absolutely crucial thing for society to function properly. Say I need a job to do...and it turns out I'm really good at making clocks... I'm Steve the clockmaker...now in that world my work may not be fun and games all the time I may dropkick a clock or two across my shop...But later on when I go out in public...when I see my clocks all over town helping people...keeping society in sync and on time...I feel like I'm a part of what makes this town work...I feel like I play a small role in the creation and maintenance of this town. Now how does Marx think this dynamic changes in a Capitalist society? Well what do we love about Capitalism? Not only are people in competition to constantly build a better mousetrap...but they're in competition to build that mousetrap more efficiently than the people they're competing with. Hyper efficiency becomes an extremely important aspect of how goods and services are produced. Marx would say this is dangerous...that when an economic system stops looking at people as ends in themselves and starts looking at them in terms of being a means to some end of hyper technological progress and efficiency...there is no guarantee you're going to be doing work that you feel connected to. See because let's say I'm clockmaker Steve and I'm really good at making clocks, I have a system and on a good day I can produce around 10 clocks start to finish. Well take 100 people and put them on an assembly line...make their job when the clock comes by you put this piece of metal into this groove and send it down the line...those people can make 10,000 clocks in a day. Now that's super efficient. That satisfies the needs of capitalism perfectly. But Marx would ask at what cost? What that does is alienate the worker from feeling connected to the purpose of their work. They don't feel like they're part of the process of creating the world they're living in...there's just this product being given to them by designers on high that they've never met... and their job is to put a piece of metal in a groove and fuel this process of churning out products as efficiently as possible. Sure many of you out there can relate to this with your job. So I used to work in a Grocery Warehouse. What you'd expect...long days...physical labor...stores order the food they need and the job was

stacking cases of food onto pallets that then get shipped off to the store. Now doing that job, technically you are doing work that performs an important function for society, you're delivering people their food, but I can tell you none of the people working there thought of the job like they were Farmer Brown and I'm bringing the people of the world the nutritious food they need to nourish their bodies. No, it just becomes an 8-10 hour drone of stacking heavy boxes onto a pallet. The people working there would say things all the time like, yeah the job is boring and it's hard and it is kind of grunt work...but it pays well, we have a really good union and great benefits. And that's the argument against Marx on the Capitalist side, right? Well, there are many arguments against Marx that we'll get into but one of the primary ones is that yeah, the reality of the world is that some people have to do jobs that they don't necessarily like that need to get done...but those people that do those jobs generally get paid more to do those jobs that nobody else wants to do! Which then in turn allows them to go home, yes run down from a day's work, but able to experience a higher quality of life that most other people don't get to experience. It all balances itself out! What Adorno and Horkheimer would say to that is, cool so for eight hours a day, a third of their life these people get to go to a job that alienates them and sucks the life out of them...and their reward for doing that is more of this green paper that allows them to go home and consume stuff that makes them feel just good enough to get up and do it again the next day...in other words, perpetuating the cycle of working and consumption. That's what you are when it all comes down to it. Work and consume. Work and consume. Work in an environment that alienates you...then go home and feel even MORE alienated as you try to spiritually lift yourself up by going into consumption mode. See that's the thing they'd want to underscore and it's going to be an important point when it comes to their views on TV and movies and music so I wanna mention it briefly now...when you are a consumer...you don't have an unbridled level of freedom when it comes to choosing what things you're going to be consuming. I mean I guess in theory you could choose to just never buy anything for your entire life, but short of looking like Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, actually even HE had Wilson. 99.9% of people buy stuff... and there's this subtle, alienating dynamic of the

fact... that the life you build for yourself in our modern culture is highly connected to the things you're able to consume... and the choices you have for what you're gonna consume are always given to you by somebody else, again by some designer on high that you've never met. Because of this in a strange way, the products that are available for you to consume, set up the parameters for what you can do with your life. That as a consumer it can start to feel alienating...almost like what building your life even is at a fundamental level...is just navigating a world that doesn't feel like your own...you're just this consumer in world full of products that were designed by a handful of people for the sake of mass appeal, your role is just to pick which of these products you're going to consume each day. Now we'll expand on that in a sec, but the thing I really want to make clear here is how strongly Adorno and Horkheimer want to call into question the concept of "leisure time". Remember, the ultimate goal of the Frankfurt School during this time is to get to the bottom of how workers in the west can be in the conditions they're in but still not feel as though they're a member of an exploited class of people...and one of the first places they look to try to find an answer to this is to look at how workers spend their time after they get off of work. What they notice is that people tend to look at their lives in terms of this constant interplay between work time and leisure time. You're either at work doing what you have to do to sustain life...or you're enjoying some well deserved leisure time doing the things you actually want to be doing. They'd point out how in capitalist societies there's often this attitude of...work...well that's just something you gotta do, we ALL gotta earn a living...It's not fun, but it's gotta get done! I gotta wake up early...yeah it's pretty much the same thing day after day at work nothing really new...I can act like a version of myself there but I can't REALLY be myself I have to paint on a smile for Brenda in accounting...I have to use all the right politically correct terms that a professional decorum requires...certainly is a sacrifice, but look all that I have to sacrifice in terms of individuality and novelty in my work life...is more than made up for by the stuff I get to do in my leisure time...that's when I TRULY get to be who I am! That's the attitude people often have. Well Adorno would ask: how are people in these modern, industrialized societies typically spending their leisure time? Well I'll tell you what

they're NOT doing. They're not learning a foreign language or doing a biblical exegesis or memorizing the encyclopedia...in other words they're not doing things that are highly mentally taxing that make them into a better person more aware of the world around them...what do they usually do? They do stuff that requires little to no effort...they do stuff that's relaxing...and who could possibly blame them...they just worked all day. What do you want them to do? Come home and work more? Is that what life is? Constant working until you die of a heart attack when you're 33 years old? No, they want to relax. They want to be entertained...they don't want to have to entertain themselves. Now real quick just because I'm talking to THIS audience in particular...this is one of the few audiences where there might be a considerable number of people confused like what do you mean? I'm learning a language in my spare time...I'm actually doing a biblical exegesis while listening to this episode...Adorno and Horkheimer would say you're in the EXTREME minority and in my personal experience those people are usually people that love their work so they don't feel drained after working all day...they come home and want to challenge themselves with other stuff. Consider the fact that those people are the EXTREME minority in our culture...the typical response when someone gets off of work is a sigh of relief. Finally, it's over! Now I can go home and relax and be entertained. Well Adorno and Horkheimer would say: here's another great thing about Capitalist society: when there's a serious demand for something...somebody out there is going to find a way to create a product that meets that demand. Just so happens in this particular society there's a giant percentage of people that think of their lives in terms of work time vs leisure time...a giant percentage of people that the minute they clock out of their job have a strong desire go and do stuff that doesn't require much effort so that they can relax and recharge their batteries having been alienated at work all day. What this dynamic creates is a HUGE DEMAND for some product I can consume that allows me to just relax and be entertained. Now in the early 20th century... there was a brand new invention brought to market that turned out to be INCREDIBLE at solving this problem. Mass media. Widely disseminated. Convenient...you don't even have to go to the store to consume this product...it's in the front room of nearly everyone's house. You

can listen to the radio in your box as you drive back to your other box that has a third box filled with shows that you can just relax and be entertained by, take the edge off. That's the kind of TV show and movie and song that people are going to have a demand for in a capitalist society...think about it: if you're somebody creating a TV show that is a media product designed to fulfill a demand of what the masses want to watch during their leisure time...what kind of show do you make? What's gonna make you the most money? Do you do a public access show deconstructing quantum physics? Or do you do something like duck dynasty. Which product is going to be demanded more by the working class? Here's where they're going with this. It's not that there's some evil dude named Edward J House that invented the house so that people would become more alienated from each other. It's not that there's some cabal of people at the top of the entertainment industry that are hand-selecting shows that are going to keep people working and consuming. No when you have a society where the masses are told from birth to think of themselves as workers and consumers...existing in a world that they are alienated from...evangelized to about how crucial their own personal financial success is...in that world, things like the house, a private box I can go to and watch these entertaining shows and wind down from work...that's the natural product that people have a demand for and want to consume. Movies about superheroes or science fiction that take you out of this world and insert you into another world where you can forget about the problems of this one. Video games that immerse you into a fictitious world an escape from the trials of life. Novels about a thumpin' good wizard named Harry Potter and some bald dude without a nose. We want to focus on THESE worlds that don't really exist so we can escape having to think about the one we're actually living in. That's the product workers of a Capitalist society have a huge demand for. Now if that sounds a lot like Nietzsche's concept of true world theories and the tactic used by mythology and religion to get people focused on a different world to distract them away from the problems of this one...that's exactly what they're saying mass media has become for people. Adorno says: "In an age of spiritual disenchantment, the individual experiences the need for substitute images of the 'divine'. It obtains these through pseudo-culture.

Hollywood idols, soaps, novels, pop tunes, lyrics and film genres such as the Wild West or the Mafia movie, fashion substitute mythologies for the masses." Hollywood idols! We like to exalt these celebrities onto a pedestal and look at them as these messiah-like figures. Oh, its George Clooney! He's practically GLOWING! Formerly you may have walked in the path of some anointed figure described in a Holy Book...but now I'm gonna walk in the path of Clooney...if I just wear that jacket that he's wearing or I buy that special curling iron so I can do my hair like the girl from that other show or if I buy the same brand of soda they're drinking in that movie maybe I can be more like my idol! Note that there's always some product that you have to consume that is what's stopping you from walking in the path of Clooney. Imagine if to walk in the path of Christ you had to buy the sandals he was wearing. Consumption has been written in to the very moral fabric of this media age. That as fundamentally a worker and consumer...what your life IS within this culture is when you have a problem...you buy a product to solve that problem. After a while of that message being reinforced...people start to believe the fact that no matter what problem you have...there's some product out there that's going to be able to solve it. Advertisers realize this. They realize that most people feel alienated from other people around them. They realize that what most people crave that they don't have is close human interaction. So they use it to their benefit...they make ads that send you the message that if you buy this beverage product you're all of a sudden going to have a close knit group of friends that sit in a circle laughing, drinking it together like on the commercial. That if you buy this car...some really attractive person is going to make constant eye contact with you and smile. That if you buy this BBQ...all of a sudden there's going to be a close community of families in your back yard socializing and working together and your mom and dad haven't been in a loveless marriage for over 20 years. Now of course there's no guarantee once you get these products that any of these things are going to happen. There's not even a reasonable likelihood given how prone to alienation the average worker is. So what ends up happening is people get caught in this perpetual cycle of feeling empty inside, craving true close human interaction, seeing some advertisement for a product on TV that seems to have worked

for the people on the commercial, buying that product, still feeling empty inside, and there's always ANOTHER product that if only I work even harder at my job and make more money, THAT'S gonna put me over the edge. So again, let's consider: are these advertisers an evil group that want people to constantly feel empty and alienated looking to products to fill that void inside of them? No! They're just trying to make as much money as possible...they're just living within a capitalist system where profit is the ultimate goal. Fact is, no matter what you think about whether Capitalism is causing it, a need that a LOT of people have that isn't being filled is feeling like a loved and important member of a community. Why NOT link products to people having that feeling, it's an effective strategy! Now these cultural products in particular...TV shows, Movies, Radio...these new products available to people during the 20th century changed everything. You know, it's one thing to own a peanut butter business and to sit down with a team of designers and try to figure out how we can get this peanut butter to so line up with what consumers want...that whenever somebody goes to the grocery store they buy your peanut butter. There's a sense in which... the linking of popular demand... to the process of making the best peanut butter in the world is beneficial to the vast, vast majority of people. But Adorno and Horkheimer would ask: what happens when ART becomes the product that's being sold? What happens when the ultimate goal of producing cultural artifacts like movies, tv shows and radio...becomes how much money we can make? What happens, they would say, is the birth of The Culture Industry. We are in the business of producing for the masses cultural artifacts that they already have a demand for, so that we can make as much money as possible. See there's this thing we do...we reference this thing called pop-culture all the time. We reference popular culture...and there's this implication that the things that are popular are popular because they arose out of some demand from the masses. But if your favorite show is The Walking Dead...the people that wrote The Walking Dead didn't write it because they got millions of calls from people clamoring We want a zombie apocalypse show that showcases the bonds that human beings from different cultures form in times of stress! No, whoever wrote The Walking Dead designed a product that they thought enough

people would want to watch that they could make money from it. This is a subtle, but important distinction to make for Adorno and Horkheimer...because when it comes to the art you can consume...it always you choosing from the limited number of selections that the culture industry has produced for you, the first and foremost purpose behind the creation of the art being, to make money and correspond with mass appeal. But this isn't what art should BE to Theodor Adorno. The popularity of art shouldn't be determined by how much it corresponds to social norms. True art should get you to think. It should get you to consider an alternative way of looking at the world. True art shouldn't be easy to consume necessarily...you should have to concentrate hard to appreciate the depth of it...not veg out on the couch and get a thimble full of substance in a three hour movie. There's no stopping it in a Capitalist system though. When you link the market to culture, When you turn works of art into products the market is going to consume, cultural products... start to resemble all the ways OTHER products are. They undergo a process of standardization. The people making the products figure out a formula they can use to create a product they know the masses are going to buy...and then essentially just produce the same products over and over again with slight little details changed to create the illusion of novelty for the consumer. For example...what really is the difference between the 2016 model of a car and the 2017 model? Not much. The car company knows there's gonna be enough consumers that want a mid-sized sedan that has the features this car has. So what do they do? They essentially sell the exact same car next year...with some minor cosmetic changes to the outside maybe a better GPS system inside to make the consumer feel like this is a new and exciting thing, when in reality the form of the car overall is the same thing. When you get a new phone...the screen may be a little bigger, it may be a little easier to do certain things on it and you may look at those details and see them as big improvements, but in reality the overall form of the phone you just bought and the function it serves hasn't changed. Now neither of those things may bother you. So what? I like my new phone better than my old one. Call me a Capitalist pig, but I like having a better GPS system than the 2016 model. But what happens when this same dynamic is applied to TV Shows, Movies and Music? What you

get...is the same song written over and over again, following some formula they know is going to correspond with mass demand, with slight little details changed to create the illusion of novelty. The overall FORM of the song is the same thing...it's still you bragging for three minutes about your most recent big financial purchase...but the beat is a little different and it's a different person saying the words. Maybe in a different genre...the song is still about worshiping the Devil and how your step-dad doesn't understand you...but you switch the order that you play the three chords in and add a different guitar riff at the beginning and it allows consumers to get the same product that they know they like without actually experiencing any sort of real novelty. Theodor Adorno talks about how when judging a piece of art there's this emphasis we put on the details of the piece of art...oh the cinematography was AMAZING...or the dialogue was so tense right there! But it's the same movie that's been released every year for the last ten years. We focus on those little details because it's the only differentiation there IS between works of art in our time, that in general it's the exact same product warmed over spoon fed to us time and time again. Rom-coms. There may be little details switched around in an individual plot...but overall in form a Romantic comedy is the exact same movie performing the exact same function time and time again. Same thing with Westerns. Same thing with Sit-coms. Same thing with horror movies. These are formulaic templates... that we go into the theater KNOWING exactly what to expect and how it's going to turn out before we even see it. Now some of you out there may be saying...well, yeah that's kind of part of the overall charm of these kinds of movies, right? Yeah I know it's not Schindler's list...and in the back of my mind I know where it's going in the end...but look, somebody can love chocolate ice cream as a product because of how it makes them feel...can't they like Rom-coms as a product because of how they make them feel? Theodor Adorno would say, yeah...but understand that life imitates art. Don't underestimate the level of impact the consumption of these products is having on the way you look at the world. That we watch these movies and TV shows and listen to these songs...and there's a part of us that inserts ourselves into the story...and makes it real. Like have you ever watched a horror movie about some demon that's possessing some object...and then later on that

night or the next day you're in a dark room and you feel just a little bit more creeped out than you would otherwise be because what if the demon's haunting MY condo now. Yeah, you have to believe DEMONS are a possibility for that movie to affect how you see reality...let alone a Rom-com taking place in a world that greatly resembles yours. That's another thing Adorno points out...that in almost every movie, tv show, book, play and many songs...there is always a love interest. There are always two people romantically interested in each other, they work together to beat the bad guy, make out and live happily ever after together. What he says is that this sets people up to think of their life and the figurative movie that is playing out in terms of finding that one and only someone. That the arc of the story of my life is complete when I find that person that I love, they move all their IKEA furniture into my box that I live in and we live the rest of our lives out together isolated in a box. What he says is that this conditions people to think of this individual romantic involvement as the ultimate goal of life...all the while missing out on all the joy and satisfaction that could come by filling that void created by their alienation from other people...in other words, instead of being loved and appreciated by one person...being a loved and appreciated member of a community. People don't even consider that. See because again...it's not that there's an evil group of writers at the top of the culture industry that write what they do SO THAT people stay alienated living in a box happily ever after...it's that when you're writing a story...and you want to make the most money...the characters and plots of those stories naturally become characters and plots that the masses can relate to. People want to be able to easily relate to the characters and immerse themselves in the story. Which then creates this cycle of life imitating art and art imitating life. And because the average worker in this country doesn't get home from work and put on their Che Guevara beret...you know they're not a revolutionary constantly looking to be critical of injustices and alternative ways of doing things...no they just wind down from work and passively go along with the life they have...because of that dynamic, the characters in the movies they relate to are going to be generally the same kind of person. The plots of these movies are going to resemble a sort of: stay in your own lane...dont become an antagonist in the movie of

your life because the bad guy always loses...when life gives you lemons make lemonade and just enjoy your life as much as you can. This becomes the attitude portrayed by art that life begins to imitate. The culture industry is constantly working to turn everyone into the same person, so that they'll buy the cultural products that it produces. What's even crazier Adorno and Horkheimer point out...is that all this stuff...is not a mystery to most people. Most people realize at some point in their life that this is going on, that people are just sort of doing their best impression of a conglomeration of different characters they've seen on all the movies and TV shows they've watched. Just like music and movies all become the same warmed over product with slight differences in detail...people follow the same pattern. They say that in 20th century America: "personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them." Why would somebody do that? Why would people that see through what's going on with the culture industry still choose to participate in the game? Horkheimer would say, because they consider the alternative...what can an average worker REALLY do when it comes to changing it? They're not gonna run for president. They're not going to incite revolution. The only change that would come for them if they chose to not participate...is that now they work eight hours a day...and they have NO escape from the exploitation and alienation they face. This is why Adorno has such a vitriol for what The Culture Industry has become. He thinks that when you turn art into a commodity, you instantly hijack it and direct its creation towards mass appeal. But this isn't what art should be. Works of art have the power to give people a different perspective on things without violence. Works of art have the power to change the world. Theodor Adorno wouldn't agree with Simone De Beauvoir...that in order to overthrow an oppressive person you need to become an oppressor of that person yourself. What so a group of people oppress another group of people for 200 years...and then what...the oppressed group gets to oppress the other group now? And then this whole cycle just continues over again and again until the end of time? What if true art...not the garbage

that the Culture Industry pumps out...but TRUE art. What if that's the tool for change that is needed the most... in a world where there is not much of it? We'll talk about that next time on the Philosophize This! podcast. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

So it's been said about the workers in the United States post WW2... that they found themselves in a very unique situation in terms of what options are made available to them. Capitalism... massive improvements that come along with it in technology and efficiency...has made it possible for the average person, to do things only the super rich had been able to do throughout human history.

That for consumers in this post WW2 world...people no longer need to live together under one roof like it's little house on the prairie, sharing a communal horse and doing shadow puppetry on the walls for entertainment...no we live in a new world now. We live in a world where, it is entirely feasible for the average consumer, to buy their own house (far better than a shack on a prairie) buy their own car (with the power 300 of those communal horses) and through the advent of mass media and entertainment broadcasting have instant access to MOUNTAINS of art and cultural artifacts to consume with the push of a button. (little bit better than trying to make your hand look like an alligator chomping on the wall)

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, two members of the Frankfurt School who co-wrote the book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, would no doubt agree that Capitalism is responsible for these changes in what is possible for the average person. But they'd want to ask the question: Why is it... that there seems to be such a strong correlation between the trappings of Capitalism, and the alienation of society? In other words, when people get the house and they get the car and they have access to more art than they could ever consume...why is it that the worker in the 20th century seems to be the most

alienated from other people around them, and the most alienated from the process of creating world they're living in... in human history?

That another way to think of that house that everyone's able to buy now...is that it's a box. That instead of being a member of a local community and feeling like an integral part of a group of people...now, practically nobody knows their neighbors, they just go home and shut themselves away in this box, and here's the important part: it's a product that was sold to you... that house is a product...that if you aren't mindful and take effort to prevent it from happening, it's a product that aids in this process of alienation from other people. But that's not the only box we live in...think about it, instead of sharing a communal horse where you might have to talk to some people...you might have to figure out who gets the horse when, you might have a conversation with a fellow traveler on the road...now, nobody talks to other drivers going down the freeway...again, they just get in their car and shut themselves away in this box, a product that was sold to them where if they're not careful aids in this process of alienation. What Adorno and Horkheimer are going to go on to say here...is that this other box in your front room that delivers you all the TV shows and movies and music and all the other culture that you consume...that these things are ALSO products that are sold to you, that serve this process of alienation.

See where they're coming from is an old Marxist critique of capitalist society...that in a more simple, non-capitalist structure people do work and there's a very obvious connection between the specific task they're doing and some benefit either to themselves or to the community they're involved in. Let's give two examples, one more simple one less simple. Let's say your community needs water and you have to dig a well. Now, nobody out there is passionate about well digging. Digging that well may be horrible work, it may take you all day...you may be sweating and covered in dirt and want a back rub at the end of the day...but at least as you are digging that well...you feel a connection to the work that you're doing. You know that you are digging that well so that you, your family and the families living around you that you care about will have drinking water.

Not only do you feel connected to the work though, but there's a sense in which you are creating the world that you're living in, alright everybody we have a problem: we don't have any water...the solution to this problem is we're going to dig a well...grab a shovel and let's do this. You're not profiting in terms of green paper, you're profiting in terms of social recognition...when you're walking around town...you're the person who dug the well so that everyone else could have drinking water.

Now new example...let's say you were a part of a non-capitalistic trading based culture. Say you're an artisan that specializes in making clocks. Well in that sort of world it is still likely you feel a sense of connection to the work that you're doing. I mean, being able to tell the time is an absolutely crucial thing for society to function properly. Say I need a job to do...and it turns out I'm really good at making clocks... I'm Steve the clockmaker...now in that world my work may not be fun and games all the time I may dropkick a clock or two across my shop...But later on when I go out in public...when I see my clocks all over town helping people...keeping society in sync and on time...I feel like I'm a part of what makes this town work...I feel like I play a small role in the creation and maintenance of this town.

Now how does Marx think this dynamic changes in a Capitalist society? Well what do we love about Capitalism? Not only are people in competition to constantly build a better mousetrap...but they're in competition to build that mousetrap more efficiently than the people they're competing with. Hyper efficiency becomes an extremely important aspect of how goods and services are produced. Marx would say this is dangerous...that when an economic system stops looking at people as ends in themselves and starts looking at them in terms of being a means to some end of hyper technological progress and efficiency...there is no guarantee you're going to be doing work that you feel connected to.

See because let's say I'm clockmaker Steve and I'm really good at making clocks, I have a

system and on a good day I can produce around 10 clocks start to finish. Well take 100 people and put them on an assembly line...make their job when the clock comes by you put this piece of metal into this groove and send it down the line...those people can make 10,000 clocks in a day. Now that's super efficient. That satisfies the needs of capitalism perfectly. But Marx would ask at what cost? What that does is alienate the worker from feeling connected to the purpose of their work. They don't feel like they're part of the process of creating the world they're living in...there's just this product being given to them by designers on high that they've never met... and their job is to put a piece of metal in a groove and fuel this process of churning out products as efficiently as possible.

Sure many of you out there can relate to this with your job. So I used to work in a Grocery Warehouse. What you'd expect...long days...physical labor...stores order the food they need and the job was stacking cases of food onto pallets that then get shipped off to the store. Now doing that job, technically you are doing work that performs an important function for society, you're delivering people their food, but I can tell you none of the people working there thought of the job like they were Farmer Brown and I'm bringing the people of the world the nutritious food they need nourish their bodies. No, it just becomes an 8-10 hour drone of stacking heavy boxes onto a pallet. The people working there would say things all the time like, yeah the job is boring and it's hard and it is kind of grunt work...but it pays well, we have a really good union and great benefits.

And that's the argument against Marx on the Capitalist side, right? Well, there are many arguments against Marx that we'll get into but one of the primary ones is that yeah, the reality of the world is that some people have to do jobs that they don't necessarily like that need to get done...but those people that do those jobs generally get paid more to do those jobs that nobody else wants to do! Which then in turn allows them to go home, yes run down from a days work, but able to experience a higher quality of life that most other people don't get to experience. It all balances itself out!

What Adorno and Horkheimer would say to that is, cool so for eight hours a day, a third of their life these people get to go to a job that alienates them and sucks the life out of them...and their reward for doing that is more of this green paper that allows them to go home and consume stuff that makes them feel just good enough to get up and do it again the next day...in other words, perpetuating the cycle of working and consumption. That's what you are when it all comes down to it. Work and consume. Work and consume. Work in an environment that alienates you...then go home and feel even MORE alienated as you try to spiritually lift yourself up by going into consumption mode.

See that's the thing they'd want to underscore and it's going to be an important point when it comes to their views on TV and movies and music so I wanna mention it briefly now...when you are a consumer...you don't have an unbridled level of freedom when it comes to choosing what things you're going to be consuming. I mean I guess in theory you could choose to just never buy anything for your entire life, but short of looking like Tom Hanks in castaway, actually even HE had Wilson. 99.9% of people buy stuff... and there's this subtle, alienating dynamic of the fact... that the life you build for yourself in our modern culture is highly connected to the things you're able to consume... and the choices you have for what you're gonna consume are always given to you by somebody else, again by some designer on high that you've never met. Because of this in a strange way, the products that are available for you to consume, set up the parameters for what you can do with your life. That as a consumer it can start to feel alienating...almost like what building your life even is at a fundamental level...is just navigating a world that doesn't feel like your own...you're just this consumer in world full of products that were designed by a handful of people for the sake of mass appeal, your role is just to pick which of these products you're going to consume each day.

Now we'll expand on that in a sec, but the thing I really want to make clear here is how strongly Adorno and Horkheimer want to call into question the concept of "leisure time".

Remember, the ultimate goal of the Frankfurt School during this time is to get to the bottom of how workers in the west can be in the conditions they're in but still not feel as though they're a member of an exploited class of people...and one of the first places they look to try to find an answer to this is to look at how workers spend their time after they get off of work.

What they notice is that people tend to look at their lives in terms of this constant interplay between work time and leisure time. You're either at work doing what you have to do to sustain life...or you're enjoying some well deserved leisure time doing the things you actually want to be doing. They'd point out how in capitalist societies there's often this attitude of...work...well that's just something you gotta do, we ALL gotta earn a living...It's not fun, but it's gotta get done! I gotta wake up early...yeah it's pretty much the same thing day after day at work nothing really new...I can act like a version of myself there but I can't REALLY be myself I have to paint on a smile for Brenda in accounting...I have to use all the right politically correct terms that a professional decorum requires...certainly is a sacrifice, but look all that I have to sacrifice in terms of individuality and novelty in my work life...is more than made up for by the stuff I get to do in my leisure time...that's when I TRULY get to be who I am! That's the attitude people often have.

Well Adorno would ask: how are people in these modern, industrialized societies typically spending their leisure time? Well I'll tell you what they're NOT doing. They're not learning a foreign language or doing a biblical exegesis or memorizing the encyclopedia...in other words they're not doing things that are highly mentally taxing that make them into a better person more aware of the world around them...what do they usually do? They do stuff that requires little to no effort...they do stuff that's relaxing...and who could possibly blame them...they just worked all day. What do you want them to do? Come home and work more? Is that what life is? Constant working until you die of a heart attack when you're 33 years old? No, they want to relax. They

want to be entertained...they don't want to have to entertain themselves.

Now real quick just because I'm talking to THIS audience in particular...this is one of the few audiences where there might be a considerable number of people confused like what do you mean? I'm learning a language in my spare time...I'm actually doing a biblical exegesis while listening to this episode...Adorno and Horkheimer would say you're in the EXTREME minority and in my personal experience those people are usually people that love their work so they don't feel drained after working all day...they come home and want to challenge themselves with other stuff. Consider the fact that those people are the EXTREME minority in our culture...the typical response when someone gets off of work is a sigh of relief. Finally, it's over! Now I can go home and relax and be entertained.

Well Adorno and Horkheimer would say: here's another great thing about Capitalist society: when there's a serious demand for something...somebody out there is going to find a way to create a product that meets that demand. Just so happens in this particular society there's a giant percentage of people that think of their lives in terms of work time vs leisure time...a giant percentage of people that the minute they clock out of their job have a strong desire go and do stuff that doesn't require much effort so that they can relax and recharge their batteries having been alienated at work all day. What this dynamic creates is a HUGE DEMAND for some product I can consume that allows me to just relax and be entertained.

Now in the early 20th century... there was a brand new invention brought to market that turned out to be INCREDIBLE at solving this problem. Mass media. Widely disseminated. Convenient...you don't even have to go to the store to consume this product...it's in the front room of nearly everyone's house. You can listen to the radio in your box as you drive back to your other box that has a third box filled with shows that you can just relax and be entertained by, take the edge off.

That's the kind of TV show and movie and song that people are going to have a demand for in a capitalist society...think about it: if you're somebody creating a TV show that is a media product designed to fulfill a demand of what the masses want to watch during their leisure time...what kind of show do you make? What's gonna make you the most money? Do you do a public access show deconstructing quantum physics? Or do you do something like duck dynasty. Which product is going to be demanded more by the working class?

Here's where they're going with this. It's not that there's some evil dude named Edward J House that invented the house so that people would become more alienated from each other. It's not that there's some cabal of people at the top of the entertainment industry that are hand-selecting shows that are going to keep people working and consuming. No when you have a society where the masses are told from birth to think of themselves as workers and consumers...existing in a world that they are alienated from...evangelized to about how crucial their own personal financial success is...in that world, things like the house, a private box I can go to and watch these entertaining shows and wind down from work...that's the natural product that people have a demand for and want to consume. Movies about superheroes or science fiction that take you out of this world and insert you into another world where you can forget about the problems of this one. Video games that immerse you into a fictitious world an escape from the trials of life. Novels about a thumpin' good wizard named Harry Potter and some bald dude without a nose. We want to focus on THESE worlds that don't really exist so we can escape having to think about the one we're actually living in. That's the product workers of a Capitalist society have a huge demand for.

Now if that sounds a lot like Nietzsche's concept of true world theories and the tactic used by mythology and religion to get people focused on a different world to distract them away from the problems of this one...that's exactly what they're saying mass media

has become for people.

Adorno says:

"In an age of spiritual disenchantment, the individual experiences the need for substitute images of the 'divine'. It obtains these through pseudo-culture. Hollywood idols, soaps, novels, pop tunes, lyrics and film genres such as the Wild West or the Mafia movie, fashion substitute mythologies for the masses."

Hollywood idols! We like to exalt these celebrities onto a pedestal and look at them as these messiah-like figures. Oh, its George Clooney! He's practically GLOWING! Formerly you may have walked in the path of some anointed figure described in a Holy Book...but now I'm gonna walk in the path of Clooney...if I just wear that jacket that he's wearing or I buy that special curling iron so I can do my hair like the girl from that other show or if I buy the same brand of soda they're drinking in that movie maybe I can be more like my idol!

Note that there's always some product that you have to consume that is what's stopping you from walking in the path of Clooney. Imagine if to walk in the path of Christ you had to buy the sandals he was wearing. Consumption has been written in to the very moral fabric of this media age. That as fundamentally a worker and consumer...what your life IS within this culture is when you have a problem...you buy a product to solve that problem. After a while of that message being reinforced...people start to believe the fact that no matter what problem you have...there's some product out there that's going to be able to solve it. Advertisers realize this.

They realize that most people feel alienated from other people around them. They realize that what most people crave that they don't have is close human interaction. So they use it to their benefit...they make ads that send you the message that if you buy this beverage

product you're all of a sudden going to have a close knit group of friends that sit in a circle laughing, drinking it together like on the commercial. That if you buy this car...some really attractive person is going to make constant eye contact with you and smile. That if you buy this BBQ...all of a sudden there's going to be a close community of families in your back yard socializing and working together and your mom and dad haven't been in a loveless marriage for over 20 years.

Now of course there's no guarantee once you get these products that any of these things are going to happen. There's not even a reasonable likelihood given how prone to alienation the average worker is. So what ends up happening is people get caught in this perpetual cycle of feeling empty inside, craving true close human interaction, seeing some advertisement for a product on TV that seems to have worked for the people on the commercial, buying that product, still feeling empty inside, and there's always ANOTHER product that if only I work even harder at my job and make more money, THAT'S gonna put me over the edge.

So again, let's consider: are these advertisers an evil group that want people to constantly feel empty and alienated looking to products to fill that void inside of them? No! They're just trying to make as much money as possible...they're just living within a capitalist system where profit is the ultimate goal. Fact is, no matter what you think about whether Capitalism is causing it, a need that a LOT of people have that isn't being filled is feeling like a loved and important member of a community. Why NOT link products to people having that feeling, it's an effective strategy!

Now these cultural products in particular...TV shows, Movies, Radio...these new products available to people during the 20th century changed everything. You know, it's one thing to own a peanut butter business and to sit down with a team of designers and try to figure out how we can get this peanut butter to so line up with what consumers want...that whenever somebody goes to the grocery store they buy your peanut butter.

There's a sense in which... the linking of popular demand... to the process of making the best peanut butter in the world is beneficial to the vast, vast majority of people. But Adorno and Horkheimer would ask: what happens when ART becomes the product that's being sold? What happens when the ultimate goal of producing cultural artifacts like movies, tv shows and radio...becomes how much money we can make?

What happens, they would say, is the birth of The Culture Industry. We are in the business of producing for the masses cultural artifacts that they already have a demand for, so that we can make as much money as possible.

See there's this thing we do...we reference this thing called pop-culture all the time. We reference popular culture...and there's this implication that the things that are popular are popular because they arose out of some demand from the masses. But if your favorite show is The Walking Dead...the people that wrote The Walking Dead didn't write it because they got millions of calls from people clamoring We want a zombie apocalypse show that showcases the bonds that human beings from different cultures form in times of stress! No, whoever wrote The Walking Dead designed a product that they thought enough people would want to watch that they could make money from it. This is a subtle, but important distinction to make for Adorno and Horkheimer...because when it comes to the art you can consume...it always you choosing from the limited number of selections that the culture industry has produced for you, the first and foremost purpose behind the creation of the art being, to make money and correspond with mass appeal.

But this isn't what art should BE to Theodor Adorno. The popularity of art shouldn't be determined by how much it corresponds to social norms. True art should get you to think. It should get you to consider an alternative way of looking at the world. True art shouldn't be easy to consume necessarily...you should have to concentrate hard to appreciate the depth of it...not veg out on the couch and get a thimble full of substance in a three hour movie.

There's no stopping it in a Capitalist system though. When you link the market to culture, When you turn works of art into products the market is going to consume, cultural products... start to resemble all the ways OTHER products are. They undergo a process of standardization. The people making the products figure out a formula they can use to create a product they know the masses are going to buy...and then essentially just produce the same products over and over again with slight little details changed to create the illusion of novelty for the consumer.

For example...what really is the difference between the 2016 model of a car and the 2017 model? Not much. The car company knows there's gonna be enough consumers that want a mid-sized sedan that has the features this car has. So what do they do? They essentially sell the exact same car next year...with some minor cosmetic changes to the outside maybe a better GPS system inside to make the consumer feel like this is a new and exciting thing, when in reality the form of the car overall is the same thing.

When you get a new phone...the screen may be a little bigger, it may be a little easier to do certain things on it and you may look at those details and see them as big improvements, but in reality the overall form of the phone you just bought and the function it serves hasn't changed.

Now neither of those things may bother you. So what? I like my new phone better than my old one. Call me a Capitalist pig, but I like having a better GPS system than the 2016 model. But what happens when this same dynamic is applied to TV Shows, Movies and Music? What you get...is the same song written over and over again, following some formula they know is going to correspond with mass demand, with slight little details changed to create the illusion of novelty. The overall FORM of the song is the same thing...it's still you bragging for three minutes about your most recent big financial

purchase...but the beat is a little different and it's a different person saying the words. Maybe in a different genre...the song is still about worshiping the Devil and how your step-dad doesn't understand you...but you switch the order that you play the three chords in and add a different guitar riff at the beginning and it allows consumers to get the same product that they know they like without actually experiencing any sort of real novelty.

Theodor Adorno talks about how when judging a piece of art there's this emphasis we put on the details of the piece of art...oh the cinematography was AMAZING...or the dialogue was so tense right there! But it's the same movie that's been released every year for the last ten years. We focus on those little details because it's the only differentiation there IS between works of art in our time, that in general it's the exact same product warmed over spoon fed to us time and time again.

Rom-coms. There may be little details switched around in an individual plot...but overall in form a Romantic comedy is the exact same movie performing the exact same function time and time again. Same thing with Westerns. Same thing with Sit-coms. Same thing with horror movies. These are formulaic templates... that we go into the theater KNOWING exactly what to expect and how it's going to turn out before we even see it.

Now some of you out there may be saying...well, yeah that's kind of part of the overall charm of these kinds of movies, right? Yeah I know it's not Schindler's list...and in the back of my mind I know where it's going in the end...but look, somebody can love chocolate ice cream as a product because of how it makes them feel...can't they like Rom-coms as a product because of how they make them feel?

Theodor Adorno would say, yeah...but understand that life imitates art. Don't underestimate the level of impact the consumption of these products is having on the way you look at the world. That we watch these movies and TV shows and listen to these

songs...and there's a part of us that inserts ourselves into the story...and makes it real. Like have you ever watched a horror movie about some demon that's possessing some object...and then later on that night or the next day you're in a dark room and you feel just a little bit more creeped out than you would otherwise be because what if the demon's haunting MY condo now. Yeah, you have to believe DEMONS are a possibility for that movie to affect how you see reality...let alone a Rom-com taking place in a world that greatly resembles yours.

That's another thing Adorno points out...that in almost every movie, tv show, book, play and many songs...there is always a love interest. There are always two people romantically interested in each other, they work together to beat the bad guy, make out and live happily ever after together. What he says is that this sets people up to think of their life and the figurative movie that is playing out in terms of finding that one and only someone. That the arc of the story of my life is complete when I find that person that I love, they move all their IKEA furniture into my box that I live in and we live the rest of our lives out together isolated in a box. What he says is that this conditions people to think of this individual romantic involvement as the ultimate goal of life...all the while missing out on all the joy and satisfaction that could come by filling that void created by their alienation from other people...in other words, instead of being loved and appreciated by one person...being a loved and appreciated member of a community. People don't even consider that.

See because again...it's not that there's an evil group of writers at the top of the culture industry that write what they do SO THAT people stay alienated living in a box happily ever after...it's that when you're writing a story...and you want to make the most money...the characters and plots of those stories naturally become characters and plots that the masses can relate to.

People want to be able to easily relate to the characters and immerse themselves in the

story. Which then creates this cycle of life imitating art and art imitating life. And because the average worker in this country doesn't get home from work and put on their Che Guevara beret...you know they're not a revolutionary constantly looking to be critical of injustices and alternative ways of doing things...no they just wind down from work and passively go along with the life they have...because of that dynamic, the characters in the movies they relate to are going to be generally the same kind of person. The plots of these movies are going to resemble a sort of: stay in your own lane...dont become an antagonist in the movie of your life because the bad guy always loses...when life gives you lemons make lemonade and just enjoy your life as much as you can. This becomes the attitude portrayed by art that life begins to imitate. The culture industry is constantly working to turn everyone into the same person, so that they'll buy the cultural products that it produces.

What's even crazier Adorno and Horkheimer point out...is that all this stuff...is not a mystery to most people. Most people realize at some point in their life that this is going on, that people are just sort of doing their best impression of a conglomeration of different characters they've seen on all the movies and TV shows they've watched. Just like music and movies all become the same warmed over product with slight differences in detail...people follow the same pattern. They say that in 20th century America:

"personality scarcely signifies anything more than shining white teeth and freedom from body odour and emotions. The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them."

Why would somebody do that? Why would people that see through what's going on with the culture industry still choose to participate in the game? Horkheimer would say, because they consider the alternative...what can an average worker REALLY do when it comes to changing it? They're not gonna run for president. They're not going to incite

revolution. The only change that would come for them if they chose to not participate...is that now they work eight hours a day...and they have NO escape from the exploitation and alienation they face.

This is why Adorno has such a vitriol for what The Culture Industry has become. He thinks that when you turn art into a commodity, you instantly hijack it and direct its creation towards mass appeal. But this isn't what art should be. Works of art have the power to give people a different perspective on things without violence. Works of art have the power to change the world. Theodor Adorno wouldn't agree with Simone De Beauvoir...that in order to overthrow an oppressive person you need to become an oppressor of that person yourself. What so a group of people oppress another group of people for 200 years...and then what...the oppressed group gets to oppress the other group now? And then this whole cycle just continues over again and again until the end of time? What if true art...not the garbage that the Culture Industry pumps out...but TRUE art. What if that's the tool for change that is needed the most... in a world where there is not much of it? We'll talk about that next time on the Philosophize This! podcast.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School pt. 4 - Eros

Episode #111

This is a transcript of episode #111 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So it's taken me a while to figure out exactly where I want to go with the rest of the Frankfurt School series. You know, distilling the work of one thinker down into a few episodes is impossible enough, when you have a whole group of people it becomes exponentially more difficult...but I think I found a way and I want to start the show today by talking about a Capitalist response to all this...it's a response that over the years talking to people seems to be a common rebuttal from people who hear everything the Frankfurt School has said so far, but still believe that Capitalism is the best way to be doing things. It's kind of a nuanced way of being a proponent of Capitalism and it goes like this: What if everything the Frankfurt School has said about Capitalism...is true? What if they're right? What if from birth I have been programmed to think of myself as fundamentally a worker and consumer. I go to a job that sucks the life out of me, I buy things to make me feel better. What if I'm not close to the other human beings around me, what if I'm among the most alienated people that has ever lived? And what IF money is intrinsically connected to political power and what I have is a choice between two people peddling the status quo? Let's use your word, Frankfurt School, let's say that I'm a member of an "exploited" class of people...just like a slave in a slave based economy, just like a peasant in the feudal system, I am exploited. Ok. Well pardon me if I'm nitpicking here...but isn't it not very useful for you to use the word "exploited" interchangeably there? As though the life of a peasant in the feudal system...and my life in a modern capitalist society...well, exploited...pretty much the same thing. No, you'd have to acknowledge if you're being intellectually honest that there are huge differences between those two states of affairs. In terms of almost every metric you could use to measure it...my life is massively better than the life of a peasant in the 1300's. It just is. You can label us both exploited...but just as a preliminary argument... I want to point out that

things have at least been moving in the right direction since the 1300s...ok, now, consider that positive trajectory, and now ALSO consider for a second the fact, that when Marx looks back at history... and sees that every economic system that has functioned well for any length of time has this ruling vs. exploited class dynamic about it...maybe there's a good reason for that! That as you, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have aptly pointed out, harnessing control over nature is fundamentally what we're trying to do when we construct systems using enlightenment style thinking. Look, nobody out there is TOTALLY free. Nobody just does whatever they want to do all the time...to be a human being is necessarily to be repressed in certain ways. We used to be viciously repressed by nature famine, dehydration, disease, extreme cold or heat...that's what life used to be for us and we got tired of it...that's why, right around the 17th century we doubled down and got very serious about figuring out a way to control nature and be repressed a little more on our terms. What a coincidence...these people would say...that in the exact same span of time since we started doing this... there's been this massive increase in terms of the quality of life of the average person born into a western culture! Harnessing control over nature is what we're trying to do here...and yes...the volatility of totally unregulated human behavior is as much a part of nature as a hurricane is...and it benefits everyone to protect against it. What I'm saying is, these political and economic and ethical systems that we've set up over the last few hundred years...have been forged in the fires of controlling nature and along with it, controlling human behavior...and that maybe the ONLY way these systems work well, the reason Marx sees it in every successful economic system in history...is that the recipe for making these systems function requires this regulating influence over people's behavior. You know, it would be great in a perfect world if we could have a society where everybody just wakes up and does whatever interests them each day, that would be amazing. But what if the only way we can ever experience the benefits of an advanced economic system...is if the average person out there...has a clear role within that economic system that they fall into at birth? What if when you take into account certain aspects of individual human psychology, which Marx did not, what if the average person just needs to be coerced into a role that they

play or else we run the risk of things being too directionless? Or people not doing anything at all? You can call filling this role "exploitation" if you want...you can call it "repression" of human freedom, but what if our goal shouldn't be to remove this exploitation altogether, the system can't function without it...what if INSTEAD our goal should be to strive to make the life of the average "exploited" person so prosperous, so abundant, so free in terms of the options available to them...that only a maniac would feel like they were actually being exploited. This is what Capitalism does and continues to strive towards better than any other system devised in history..and what if limiting your freedom slightly and becoming a worker and consumer is the price of admission for experiencing all the benefits that come along with being a member of an advanced economic system? Sigmund Freud made an argument very similar to this but not just at an economic level...he took it even further to the foundations of civilization itself. He writes about it in his book, "Civilization and its Discontents" and it puts the members of the Frankfurt School in a bit of a precarious situation during their time. On one hand...as you remember: their entire project of critiquing western culture is centered around looking at society through a different lens... which includes, among other things, Freudian Psychoanalysis. They're huge fans of Freud. But on the other hand, here's Freud making a claim that seems to justify domination and control over human behavior as an unavoidable and necessary part of society. Herbert Marcuse, who we talked about on another episode of this series writes what he considers the most important work of his life in response to Freud titled "Eros and Civilization". What I want to do is talk about where Marcuse thinks Freud is coming from with his argument. What I don't want to get too hung up on here are all the complex innerworkings of Freudian Psychoanalysis. Not only because it's been done so many times before...not only because they aren't necessary to understand Marcuse's goals in Eros and Civilization, but also just because interpreting Freud's work is a notoriously complex and polarizing thing to do...I mean there are people out there that practically worship at the guy's altar...there are other people that think he was so off-base he shouldn't even be taught in schools. That's not my determination to make, and I think it just is going to distract from the point of this

episode to talk about it...but the good news is, the general point Freud is making is his book *Civilization and its Discontents* doesn't require us to understand all the controversy surrounding his work. The absolute basic point that's important for us to understand this particular work...is that to Freud...part of being a human being is that we have certain instinctual drives that affect our behavior...sort of like a motor that's constantly running that makes us want to do certain things...but that in actual reality, nobody ever acts on these instincts 100% of the time...that there's another part of our psychology that has the ability to step in and say no, I may want to do this right now, but what's best for me in the long run is to NOT act on this instinct in this moment. Not that it's a perfect comparison, because as I said what Freud is talking about is much more complex than this, but because this is a philosophy podcast maybe it would be useful to reference something we've seen in ethics since Plato and Aristotle. The idea of reason vs. the passions, right? Some variation of the idea that we have certain passions that drive our feelings about things...you want to eat a gallon of ice cream for dinner...you want to gamble away your life savings...you want to throw a temper tantrum in public and beat somebody with a stick, whatever it is...point is, these passions could take over all of our behavior if we aren't vigilant... and that part of being a human being is using this capacity to reason to subordinate the passions. To make a decision not based on what you immediately feel like doing in this moment, but to think ahead, repress those urges to act irresponsibly and ultimately do what's best for you in the long run. To many of the thinkers in the early stages of western philosophy...this is what it is to be a human being: we are at our very essence rational animals. We have these animalistic, primal desires that we could act on constantly...but the only thing that separates you from all the other animals out there is that you have a choice... you can use your ability to reason and choose to NOT act on instinct. The wiser of a person you are...the BETTER of a human being you are in many cases to them...is directly connected to your ability to subordinate these passions to your rationality. Now just think about what that's implying for a second. Somebody that never uses their capacity to reason and just acts on instincts 100% of the time essentially isn't even granted the status of "human". I mean if what we are at our core are rational

animals and you take away the rationality part of that equation what are you left with? You're just an animal. This oversimplification of human psychology and how it works would go on to influence a lot of western philosophers...and don't forget this sort of rite of passage towards being considered a human being, Marcuse's going to bring it up later. Freud would ask the question though, what is it that we're talking about when we reference this ethereal thing we call civilization? I mean, we say it all the time...civilization...but what does it mean to be a human being participating in this game of civilization at all? Freud thinks that what it is at its very foundation...is a group of human beings coming together, a group that's obviously aware of all the benefits that come along with working in coalition with other people, but they also understand how fragile something like that can be...and so to safeguard against that possibility of societal collapse... they collectively agree upon a set of cultural rules and norms... that repress certain instinctual human behaviors that would otherwise be destructive to society as a whole. In other words: what cultural norms and social taboos are when it comes down to it...are the rules a given society puts in place to repress default human behavior for the sake of the benefit to society it provides, for example. Let's say you lived out in the middle of the woods by yourself for your entire life...when you get a cold and you have to cough or sneeze...you'd probably just cough or sneeze the same way a walrus at the zoo coughs or sneezes...you'd sneeze with impunity, you know? But when you're a member of a civilization...you can't just go down to the grocery store and sneeze in someone's face...no, we get mad at that person and tell them to cover their mouth...and why do we do that? Because it benefits society as a whole to not have a bunch of germs and disease flying around. Let's say you were a bear living next to Yellowstone National Park...and for your whole life you never really needed to hunt for food, whenever you were hungry you could go down to the trashcans and eat whatever the humans left behind that day. You're probably not going to get much resistance from your bear compadres for taking advantage of this resource that's available to you. But on the other hand if you're a member of a civilization taking advantage of all the benefits...and you're a 47 year old man that lives in your sister's basement that has never worked a day in his life...cultural

norms label you as a pariah because we need people being productive and participating for society to continue functioning well. There are endless examples of this as you can imagine...and the point Freud is making here: is that the structure of civilization becomes a direct mirror of what is going on within individual human psychology. That in the same way I may want to eat a gallon of ice cream for dinner every night, but this other aspect of my psychology steps in and governs that drive for the good of my long term survival...so too there are instinctual ways human beings could behave that would be detrimental to society, so we erect these rules and taboos to repress human behavior and keep society functioning well. The bigger point Freud wants to make here is that this is not just some coincidence...this is WHAT a civilization is. The very concept of civilization REQUIRES the repression of unregulated human behavior. The price of admission for experiencing all the benefits of civilization is to play by the rules of certain cultural norms. Marcuse would mostly agree with all this. He would agree that civilizations, especially in the past, have required a certain amount of repression to be able to function well...the question we should be asking ourselves is how much of this repression is necessary? Also, is all repression just garden variety repression...no distinction when it comes to the severity of it...it's just a necessary part of civilization? See the thing Marcuse points out about cultural norms...is that there's no grand arbiter that oversees where these rules begin and end. These cultural norms that we live by just sort of emerge historically...the same way it is today...what made something culturally taboo back in the 1700's was only dictated by whether it helped society function well, not necessarily what's ethical. So what naturally follows from that...is that if the society you're a part of in the 1700's is an agricultural slave based culture...there's not going to be a social taboo for being someone that owns slaves...nobody's going to get mad at you for owning slaves like they get mad at the person that sneezes in their face...no, on the contrary...the ownership of slaves is part of what allows the economy to function well in that society. Marcuse would ask: do you think there's anything that allows our economy to function well that is equally as unethical? Because just because it wasn't a cultural taboo at the time, does that make slavery okay? No. Was slavery ever ok despite the fact

there was a time when nobody thought anything of it? No. The thing Marcuse would want us to ask ourselves...is how many of the cultural norms that you're participating in today... in 200 years are going to be seen as equally barbaric...because here's the thing: you're currently participating in a LOT of them. No matter how ethical or socially progressive you think you are...the fact is everything about the way that you think about things COMES from this culture that you're a part of or the cultures you have access to. That you can't HELP but be an instantiation of the culture you were born into...and that even if you are totally against EVERYTHING your culture stands for...who you are is still defined by your opposition to...that culture. This is bordering on an idea that was pretty popular among thinkers in the mid 20th century called structuralism, and we're going to be talking about it soon on this show. What Marcuse points out...is that because there is no grand arbiter determining cultural norms...and that because cultural norms and enlightenment style thinking by their very nature are in the business of repressing human freedom and behavior...yes for the benefit of society, but still in that business...it becomes incredibly easy to wake up in a society that engages in things like slavery, but never thinks twice about them because they're culturally accepted. More than that...again, because there's no arbiter of these things...it's easy to find yourself living in a society that represses things that people want to do...that 200 years ago, certainly benefitted society...but only serve to needlessly repress people in today's world. See the Frankfurt School is not saying that we should do away with cultural norms or do away with Enlightenment style thinking just because they aim to control nature and human behavior. No, the lives we live are without question way better than the peasant in the Feudal system mostly BECAUSE of enlightenment style thinking, we can't get rid of that. What they're calling for is us to be more self aware of the natural destination we arrive at when we use reason to harness control over nature: the repression of human freedom. What I've called enlightenment style thinking so far the Frankfurt School calls Traditional Theory. The maxim that everyone in academia repeats ad nauseum is that traditional theory aims to understand and control...critical theory aims to liberate. What they mean is Traditional Theory is the type of thinking we're doing when we harness

control over nature...now because we know that that's naturally going to lead to the repression of human freedom...to safeguard against what has happened time and time again all throughout history, we need to have some different kind of theory that's sole purpose is to identify this repression that naturally occurs...and catch it before it turns into something like slavery. They call this theory: critical theory. In other words: Traditional theory aims to understand and control, that's a good thing...Critical theory aims to liberate people from the necessary effects of us controlling nature and making the world a better place. So again, Marcuse acknowledges that a certain amount of repression of freedom is necessary for a society to function properly...the question is: how much repression is too much, and is it wise to have certain major pieces of a society like its economy FOUNDED on extreme repression to the point it doesn't function without it? Marcuse thinks the only way to determine what repression is necessary...and what repression is just historical baggage we're carrying around from a bygone age, is we have to constantly reevaluate our cultural norms and figure out which ones are still helping us, and which ones just repress people for no reason. Marcuse writes this book in the 1950's United States. One example of a cultural taboo he thinks is outdated and only serves to repress people is the way that our culture viewed sexuality back then. He'd probably start by saying: look back at the history of the world...what is a cultural taboo that exists pretty ubiquitously across most cultures in the history of civilization? Generally speaking...it is not okay for you to have indiscriminate, wanton sex with whoever you want all the time. That's pretty much across the board with few exceptions...now why do people typically have this rule? Well, historically speaking: monogamous, stable relationships benefit society when we're not in a tribal setting. When society is structured in a way where it's one family, under one roof, raising children together...generally speaking a bunch of people going around having babies with people they have no intention of raising the child with is a recipe for disaster. This is an example of one of those areas where human instinct needs to be repressed for the sake of society functioning well. Now, keep in mind...it's not like people can just easily flip the switch and turn instincts off...this repression goes on within the minds of people and

often causes a lot of inner turmoil. Just think about that: all throughout history, we've had people that have had these instinctual desires of wanting to be more promiscuous, and the culture's that they were born into have told them... that they are wrong for having those feelings. That BAD people have those feelings. Sub-human, flawed people have those feelings in some cases. Not only should you be ASHAMED for having these feelings...but you're not gonna talk about it...and you need to live every day of your life pretending as though these thoughts aren't going on inside of your head. I mean, just think about that...BILLIONS of people throughout history for their entire lives feeling guilty about some urge that they can't control. Now, Marcuse would say: historically speaking...this cultural taboo has helped us tremendously. The question we have to ask ourselves is: is it STILL helping us in 1955 in the United States? Marcuse would say, no. It doesn't. The reality of the world that we live in now, is that technology has advanced to the point to produce many different kinds of birth control that make having a baby with someone practically impossible. In other words: advancements in technology have produced essentially a different world...it's a world where heterosexuals don't need to repress this part of themselves and live these lives of quiet desperation anymore. Unfortunately for others it would take more than technology for culture to legitimize their internal clash with the social norms of the time they're living...Foucault's coming, but this is a great example of critical theory in action: here's a cultural taboo that was put in place at one point in time when it helped society... that in the 1950's United States was leading to a lot of needless repression. Look to the sexual liberation movement of the 1960's to see the direct effects of this...and this is just one example: Marcuse would say that we have a moral obligation to constantly scrutinize these cultural norms or else we run the risk of living in a much more repressive society than we need to be. Now maybe you can see where Marcuse's going with this. So if technology has produced a world where people no longer need to be as puritanical when it comes to their sexuality, what's another area technology has allowed for people to not need to be needlessly repressed? You know, a common response I've gotten to the last few episodes is, well maybe we are workers and consumers...but we don't seem too far away from some sort of technological

singularity where AIs and machines just do all the work for us, while the life of the average person is to stay at home, receive some sort universal basic income and take advantage of all their new free time. Marcuse would respond to that and say, hey...that's a GREAT idea! Let's do it now! Let's do it. We COULD do it right now...I mean, if we were willing to take our foot off the gas of hyper technological progress and efficiency, we could have a world where 99.9% of the work is done by machines. Why don't we do it, though? Marcuse says that throughout history it has been necessary for people to work to be able to sustain a living. The reality was that if everyone DIDN'T put in 40, 50, 60 hours a week, society would cease to produce what was necessary for everyone to survive. But that's not the world we live in anymore...industry and technology have produced machines...that theoretically if everybody wanted to tomorrow...could produce all that we need to survive and people wouldn't have to work. See it used to be that we go to work to provide the things we need...now we go to work to buy things that we're told we need. I gotta work the overtime shift so I can buy that car so that the girl on the commercial will like me and I can start that family and not be so empty inside. I need to go to work so I can make the payments on that phone so that I too can become the type of person on the commercial that uses the 8000 megapixel camera to take pictures of those close friends I don't have. This manufacturing of false needs is designed to keep people going back to work for forty hours a week chasing a ghost. See Marcuse would hear the capitalist argument at the beginning of the episode and say, ok...let's say that repression is necessary for society to function. Let's say that to experience the benefits of an advanced economic society, people need to fall into this role of worker and consumer at birth. Again, some repression may be necessary...the question is: how much repression is necessary? In this case: how much work is necessary before they've earned the right to the benefits of Capitalism? How much work? Is it 40 hours a week? Where did that number come from? Why not 39 hours a week...is that enough? Why not five hours a week? Like if you went down to the factory and talked to the person breaking their back doing 40 hours of manual labor, would they say something like...oh yeah, I know we could be having machines doing all of this and that I could have a lot more free time...but

I'm personally just a HUGE fan of hyper technological progress, so I'm willing to sacrifice my body to see what's coming up! That's no where even NEAR how they think about their job. When was the last time a political candidate ran on the platform of: I'm going to slow down the rate of growth of our economy so that the average person can be happier! You mean you're not going to GROW the economy? You'd be laughed out of the primaries effectively silencing this political alternative even if possibly it might be better for people, this whole process not unlike, Marcuse would say, a Totalitarian society. You know as I touched on before...when Marcuse says that we live in what greatly resembles a Totalitarian society...it's really easy to write him off as being dramatic because I know what a REAL totalitarian society looks like. North Korea...that's Totalitarian. 1930s Germany...that's Totalitarian. Marcuse would say, absolutely...you are NOT living under a North Korean style of Totalitarianism. Because at least in that society a military coup and a public uprising has a shot. What you're living under is the most insidious, self-perpetuating, genius totalitarianism that has ever existed. For all intents and purposes...you don't live in a capitalist system as described by Adam Smith in the wealth of nations, I mean it loosely resembles it. You don't live in the same kind of society that Marx offered criticisms of in the 1800s. Capitalism in the west has turned into what may as well be a completely different economic system...one where any voice of opposition to the way that things currently are becomes coopted by the system and used as a money making endeavor that keeps things going. Where even the books that directly criticize Capitalism with the faces of Marx and Engels on the cover become just mere products that are vetted and endorsed by the Capitalist system in the eyes of the consumer. Where even the most revolutionary person among us who hates the way that things are...buys all those books on Marxism, memorizes the arguments, forced to continue going to their job everyday in a constant state of self-loathing, looking around them at the naive people that just buy products like cars and trucks to make themselves feel just good enough to go back to work again the next day...that even to that person...those books are the products that they buy that pacify them. Buying those books allows them to FEEL as though they're counter-culture and revolutionary...appeasing them just enough to go

back to their job the next day feeling intellectually superior, not ever doing anything about it. We're not living in the age of Capitalism anymore...we're living in the age of Monopoly Capitalism. Marcuse thinks there's a way out. We'll talk about it next time on the show. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

So it's taken me a while to figure out exactly where I want to go with the rest of the Frankfurt School series. You know, distilling the work of one thinker down into a few episodes is impossible enough, when you have a whole group of people it becomes exponentially more difficult...but I think I found a way and I want to start the show today by talking about a Capitalist response to all this...it's a response that over the years talking to people seems to be a common rebuttal from people who hear everything the Frankfurt School has said so far, but still believe that Capitalism is the best way to be doing things. It's kind of a nuanced way of being a proponent of Capitalism and it goes like this: What if everything the Frankfurt School has said about Capitalism...is true? What if they're right? What if from birth I have been programmed to think of myself as fundamentally a worker and consumer. I go to a job that sucks the life out of me, I buy things to make me feel better. What if I'm not close to the other human beings around me, what if I'm among the most alienated people that has ever lived? And what IF money is intrinsically connected to political power and what I have is a choice between two people peddling the status quo?

Let's use your word, Frankfurt School, let's say that I'm a member of an "exploited" class of people...just like a slave in a slave based economy, just like a peasant in the feudal system, I am exploited. Ok. Well pardon me if I'm nitpicking here...but isn't it not very useful for you to use the word "exploited" interchangeably there? As though the life of a peasant in the feudal system...and my life in a modern capitalist society...well, exploited...pretty much the same thing. No, you'd have to acknowledge if you're being intellectually honest that there are huge differences between those two states of affairs. In terms of almost every metric you could use to measure it...my life is massively better than the life of a peasant in the 1300's. It just is. You can label us both

exploited...but just as a preliminary argument... I want to point out that things have at least been moving in the right direction since the 1300s...ok, now, consider that positive trajectory, and now ALSO consider for a second the fact, that when Marx looks back at history... and sees that every economic system that has functioned well for any length of time has this ruling vs. exploited class dynamic about it...maybe there's a good reason for that!

That as you, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School have aptly pointed out, harnessing control over nature is fundamentally what we're trying to do when we construct systems using enlightenment style thinking. Look, nobody out there is TOTALLY free. Nobody just does whatever they want to do all the time...to be a human being is necessarily to be repressed in certain ways. We used to be viciously repressed by nature famine, dehydration, disease, extreme cold or heat...that's what life used to be for us and we got tired of it...that's why, right around the 17th century we doubled down and got very serious about figuring out a way to control nature and be repressed a little more on our terms. What a coincidence...these people would say...that in the exact same span of time since we started doing this... there's been this massive increase in terms of the quality of life of the average person born into a western culture! Harnessing control over nature is what we're trying to do here...and yes...the volatility of totally unregulated human behavior is as much a part of nature as a hurricane is...and it benefits everyone to protect against it.

What I'm saying is, these political and economic and ethical systems that we've set up over the last few hundred years...have been forged in the fires of controlling nature and along with it, controlling human behavior...and that maybe the ONLY way these systems work well, the reason Marx sees it in every successful economic system in history...is that the recipe for making these systems function requires this regulating influence over people's behavior. You know, it would be great in a perfect world if we could have a society where everybody just wakes up and does whatever interests them each day, that

would be amazing.

But what if the only way we can ever experience the benefits of an advanced economic system...is if the average person out there...has a clear role within that economic system that they fall into at birth? What if when you take into account certain aspects of individual human psychology, which Marx did not, what if the average person just needs to be coerced into a role that they play or else we run the risk of things being too directionless? Or people not doing anything at all?

You can call filling this role "exploitation" if you want...you can call it "repression" of human freedom, but what if our goal shouldn't be to remove this exploitation altogether, the system can't function without it...what if INSTEAD our goal should be to strive to make the life of the average "exploited" person so prosperous, so abundant, so free in terms of the options available to them...that only a maniac would feel like they were actually being exploited. This is what Capitalism does and continues to strive towards better than any other system devised in history..and what if limiting your freedom slightly and becoming a worker and consumer is the price of admission for experiencing all the benefits that come along with being a member of an advanced economic system?

Sigmund Freud made an argument very similar to this but not just at an economic level...he took it even further to the foundations of civilization itself. He writes about it in his book, "Civilization and its Discontents" and it puts the members of the Frankfurt School in a bit of a precarious situation during their time. On one hand...as you remember: their entire project of critiquing western culture is centered around looking at society through a different lens... which includes, among other things, Freudian Psychoanalysis. They're huge fans of Freud. But on the other hand, here's Freud making a claim that seems to justify domination and control over human behavior as an unavoidable and necessary part of society. Herbert Marcuse, who we talked about on another episode of this series writes what he considers the most important work of his

life in response to Freud titled "Eros and Civilization". What I want to do is talk about where Marcuse thinks Freud is coming from with his argument.

What I don't want to get too hung up on here are all the complex innerworkings of Freudian Psychoanalysis. Not only because it's been done so many times before...not only because they aren't necessary to understand Marcuse's goals in Eros and Civilization, but also just because interpreting Freud's work is a notoriously complex and polarizing thing to do...I mean there are people out there that practically worship at the guy's altar...there are other people that think he was so off-base he shouldn't even be taught in schools. That's not my determination to make, and I think it just is going to distract from the point of this episode to talk about it...but the good news is, the general point Freud is making in his book Civilization and its Discontents doesn't require us to understand all the controversy surrounding his work.

The absolute basic point that's important for us to understand this particular work...is that to Freud...part of being a human being is that we have certain instinctual drives that affect our behavior...sort of like a motor that's constantly running that makes us want to do certain things...but that in actual reality, nobody ever acts on these instincts 100% of the time...that there's another part of our psychology that has the ability to step in and say no, I may want to do this right now, but what's best for me in the long run is to NOT act on this instinct in this moment.

Not that it's a perfect comparison, because as I said what Freud is talking about is much more complex than this, but because this is a philosophy podcast maybe it would be useful to reference something we've seen in ethics since Plato and Aristotle. The idea of reason vs. the passions, right? Some variation of the idea that we have certain passions that drive our feelings about things...you want to eat a gallon of ice cream for dinner...you want to gamble away your life savings...you want to throw a temper tantrum in public and beat somebody with a stick, whatever it is...point is, these passions could

take over all of our behavior if we aren't vigilant... and that part of being a human being is using this capacity to reason to subordinate the passions. To make a decision not based on what you immediately feel like doing in this moment, but to think ahead, repress those urges to act irresponsibly and ultimately do what's best for you in the long run.

To many of the thinkers in the early stages of western philosophy...this is what it is to be a human being: we are at our very essence rational animals. We have these animalistic, primal desires that we could act on constantly...but the only thing that separates you from all the other animals out there is that you have a choice... you can use your ability to reason and choose to NOT act on instinct. The wiser of a person you are...the BETTER of a human being you are in many cases to them...is directly connected to your ability to subordinate these passions to your rationality.

Now just think about what that's implying for a second. Somebody that never uses their capacity to reason and just acts on instincts 100% of the time essentially isn't even granted the status of "human". I mean if what we are at our core are rational animals and you take away the rationality part of that equation what are you left with? You're just an animal. This oversimplification of human psychology and how it works would go on to influence a lot of western philosophers...and don't forget this sort of rite of passage towards being considered a human being, Marcuse's going to bring it up later.

Freud would ask the question though, what is it that we're talking about when we reference this ethereal thing we call civilization? I mean, we say it all the time...civilization...but what does it mean to be a human being participating in this game of civilization at all? Freud thinks that what it is at its very foundation...is a group of human beings coming together, a group that's obviously aware of all the benefits that come along with working in coalition with other people, but they also understand how fragile something like that can be...and so to safeguard against that possibility of societal collapse... they collectively agree upon a set of cultural rules and norms... that repress

certain instinctual human behaviors that would otherwise be destructive to society as a whole. In other words: what cultural norms and social taboos are when it comes down to it...are the rules a given society puts in place to repress default human behavior for the sake of the benefit to society it provides, for example.

Let's say you lived out in the middle of the woods by yourself for your entire life...when you get a cold and you have to cough or sneeze...you'd probably just cough or sneeze the same way a walrus at the zoo coughs or sneezes...you'd sneeze with impunity, you know? But when you're a member of a civilization...you can't just go down to the grocery store and sneeze in someone's face...no, we get mad at that person and tell them to cover their mouth...and why do we do that? Because it benefits society as a whole to not have a bunch of germs and disease flying around.

Let's say you were a bear living next to Yellowstone National Park...and for your whole life you never really needed to hunt for food, whenever you were hungry you could go down to the trashcans and eat whatever the humans left behind that day. You're probably not going to get much resistance from your bear compadres for taking advantage of this resource that's available to you. But on the other hand if you're a member of a civilization taking advantage of all the benefits...and you're a 47 year old man that lives in your sister's basement that has never worked a day in his life...cultural norms label you as a pariah because we need people being productive and participating for society to continue functioning well.

There are endless examples of this as you can imagine...and the point Freud is making here: is that the structure of civilization becomes a direct mirror of what is going on within individual human psychology. That in the same way I may want to eat a gallon of ice cream for dinner every night, but this other aspect of my psychology steps in and governs that drive for the good of my long term survival...so too there are instinctual ways human beings could behave that would be detrimental to society, so we erect these

rules and taboos to repress human behavior and keep society functioning well. The bigger point Freud wants to make here is that this is not just some coincidence...this is WHAT a civilization is. The very concept of civilization REQUIRES the repression of unregulated human behavior. The price of admission for experiencing all the benefits of civilization is to play by the rules of certain cultural norms.

Marcuse would mostly agree with all this. He would agree that civilizations, especially in the past, have required a certain amount of repression to be able to function well...the question we should be asking ourselves is how much of this repression is necessary? Also, is all repression just garden variety repression...no distinction when it comes to the severity of it...it's just a necessary part of civilization? See the thing Marcuse points out about cultural norms...is that there's no grand arbiter that oversees where these rules begin and end. These cultural norms that we live by just sort of emerge historically...the same way it is today...what made something culturally taboo back in the 1700's was only dictated by whether it helped society function well, not necessarily what's ethical. So what naturally follows from that...is that if the society you're a part of in the 1700's is an agricultural slave based culture...there's not going to be a social taboo for being someone that owns slaves...nobody's going to get mad at you for owning slaves like they get mad at the person that sneezes in their face...no, on the contrary...the ownership of slaves is part of what allows the economy to function well in that society. Marcuse would ask: do you think there's anything that allows our economy to function well that is equally as unethical?

Because just because it wasn't a cultural taboo at the time, does that make slavery okay? No. Was slavery ever ok despite the fact there was a time when nobody thought anything of it? No. The thing Marcuse would want us to ask ourselves...is how many of the cultural norms that you're participating in today... in 200 years are going to be seen as equally barbaric...because here's the thing: you're currently participating in a LOT of them. No matter how ethical or socially progressive you think you are...the fact is everything about

the way that you think about things COMES from this culture that you're a part of or the cultures you have access to. That you can't HELP but be an instantiation of the culture you were born into...and that even if you are totally against EVERYTHING your culture stands for...who you are is still defined by your opposition to...that culture. This is bordering on an idea that was pretty popular among thinkers in the mid 20th century called structuralism, and we're going to be talking about it soon on this show.

What Marcuse points out...is that because there is no grand arbiter determining cultural norms...and that because cultural norms and enlightenment style thinking by their very nature are in the business of repressing human freedom and behavior...yes for the benefit of society, but still in that business...it becomes incredibly easy to wake up in a society that engages in things like slavery, but never thinks twice about them because they're culturally accepted. More than that...again, because there's no arbiter of these things...it's easy to find yourself living in a society that represses things that people want to do...that 200 years ago, certainly benefitted society...but only serve to needlessly repress people in today's world.

See the Frankfurt School is not saying that we should do away with cultural norms or do away with Enlightenment style thinking just because they aim to control nature and human behavior. No, the lives we live are without question way better than the peasant in the Feudal system mostly BECAUSE of enlightenment style thinking, we can't get rid of that. What they're calling for is us to be more self aware of the natural destination we arrive at when we use reason to harness control over nature: the repression of human freedom.

What I've called enlightenment style thinking so far the Frankfurt School calls Traditional Theory. The maxim that everyone in academia repeats ad nauseum is that traditional theory aims to understand and control...critical theory aims to liberate. What they mean is Traditional Theory is the type of thinking we're doing when we harness

control over nature...now because we know that that's naturally going to lead to the repression of human freedom...to safeguard against what has happened time and time again all throughout history, we need to have some different kind of theory that's sole purpose is to identify this repression that naturally occurs...and catch it before it turns into something like slavery. They call this theory: critical theory. In other words: Traditional theory aims to understand and control, that's a good thing...Critical theory aims to liberate people from the necessary effects of us controlling nature and making the world a better place.

So again, Marcuse acknowledges that a certain amount of repression of freedom is necessary for a society to function properly...the question is: how much repression is too much, and is it wise to have certain major pieces of a society like its economy FOUNDED on extreme repression to the point it doesn't function without it? Marcuse thinks the only way to determine what repression is necessary...and what repression is just historical baggage we're carrying around from a bygone age, is we have to constantly reevaluate our cultural norms and figure out which ones are still helping us, and which ones just repress people for no reason.

Marcuse writes this book in the 1950's United States. One example of a cultural taboo he thinks is outdated and only serves to repress people is the way that our culture viewed sexuality back then. He'd probably start by saying: look back at the history of the world...what is a cultural taboo that exists pretty ubiquitously across most cultures in the history of civilization? Generally speaking...it is not okay for you to have indiscriminate, wanton sex with whoever you want all the time. That's pretty much across the board with few exceptions...now why do people typically have this rule? Well, historically speaking: monogamous, stable relationships benefit society when we're not in a tribal setting. When society is structured in a way where it's one family, under one roof, raising children together...generally speaking a bunch of people going around having babies with people they have no intention of raising the child with is a recipe for disaster.

This is an example of one of those areas where human instinct needs to be repressed for the sake of society functioning well. Now, keep in mind...it's not like people can just easily flip the switch and turn instincts off...this repression goes on within the minds of people and often causes a lot of inner turmoil. Just think about that: all throughout history, we've had people that have had these instinctual desires of wanting to be more promiscuous, and the culture's that they were born into have told them... that they are wrong for having those feelings. That BAD people have those feelings. Sub-human, flawed people have those feelings in some cases. Not only should you be ASHAMED for having these feelings...but you're not gonna talk about it...and you need to live every day of your life pretending as though these thoughts aren't going on inside of your head. I mean, just think about that...BILLIONS of people throughout history for their entire lives feeling guilty about some urge that they can't control.

Now, Marcuse would say: historically speaking...this cultural taboo has helped us tremendously. The question we have to ask ourselves is: is it STILL helping us in 1955 in the United States? Marcuse would say, no. It doesn't. The reality of the world that we live in now, is that technology has advanced to the point to produce many different kinds of birth control that make having a baby with someone practically impossible. In other words: advancements in technology have produced essentially a different world...it's a world where heterosexuals don't need to repress this part of themselves and live these lives of quiet desperation anymore. Unfortunately for others it would take more than technology for culture to legitimize their internal clash with the social norms of the time they're living...Foucault's coming, but this is a great example of critical theory in action: here's a cultural taboo that was put in place at one point in time when it helped society... that in the 1950's United States was leading to a lot of needless repression. Look to the sexual liberation movement of the 1960's to see the direct effects of this...and this is just one example: Marcuse would say that we have a moral obligation to constantly scrutinize

these cultural norms or else we run the risk of living in a much more repressive society than we need to be.

Now maybe you can see where Marcuse's going with this. So if technology has produced a world where people no longer need to be as puritanical when it comes to their sexuality, what's another area technology has allowed for people to not need to be needlessly repressed? You know, a common response I've gotten to the last few episodes is, well maybe we are workers and consumers...but we don't seem too far away from some sort of technological singularity where AIs and machines just do all the work for us, while the life of the average person is to stay at home, receive some sort universal basic income and take advantage of all their new free time. Marcuse would respond to that and say, hey...that's a GREAT idea! Let's do it now! Let's do it. We COULD do it right now...I mean, if we were willing to take our foot off the gas of hyper technological progress and efficiency, we could have a world where 99.9% of the work is done by machines. Why don't we do it, though?

Marcuse says that throughout history it has been necessary for people to work to be able to sustain a living. The reality was that if everyone DIDN'T put in 40, 50, 60 hours a week, society would cease to produce what was necessary for everyone to survive. But that's not the world we live in anymore...industry and technology have produced machines...that theoretically if everybody wanted to tomorrow...could produce all that we need to survive and people wouldn't have to work. See it used to be that we go to work to provide the things we need...now we go to work to buy things that we're told we need. I gotta work the overtime shift so I can buy that car so that the girl on the commercial will like me and I can start that family and not be so empty inside. I need to go to work so I can make the payments on that phone so that I too can become the type of person on the commercial that uses the 8000 megapixel camera to take pictures of those close friends I don't have. This manufacturing of false needs is designed to keep people going back to work for forty hours a week chasing a ghost.

See Marcuse would hear the capitalist argument at the beginning of the episode and say, ok...let's say that repression is necessary for society to function. Let's say that to experience the benefits of an advanced economic society, people need to fall into this role of worker and consumer at birth. Again, some repression may be necessary...the question is: how much repression is necessary? In this case: how much work is necessary before they've earned the right to the benefits of Capitalism? How much work? Is it 40 hours a week? Where did that number come from? Why not 39 hours a week...is that enough? Why not five hours a week? Like if you went down to the factory and talked to the person breaking their back doing 40 hours of manual labor, would they say something like...oh yeah, I know we could be having machines doing all of this and that I could have a lot more free time...but I'm personally just a HUGE fan of hyper technological progress, so I'm willing to sacrifice my body to see what's coming up! That's no where even NEAR how they think about their job. When was the last time a political candidate ran on the platform of: I'm going to slow down the rate of growth of our economy so that the average person can be happier! You mean you're not going to GROW the economy? You'd be laughed out of the primaries effectively silencing this political alternative even if possibly it might be better for people, this whole process not unlike, Marcuse would say, a Totalitarian society.

You know as I touched on before...when Marcuse says that we live in what greatly resembles a Totalitarian society...it's really easy to write him off as being dramatic because I know what a REAL totalitarian society looks like. North Korea...that's Totalitarian. 1930s Germany...that's Totalitarian. Marcuse would say, absolutely...you are NOT living under a North Korean style of Totalitarianism. Because at least in that society a military coup and a public uprising has a shot. What you're living under is the most insidious, self-perpetuating, genius totalitarianism that has ever existed. For all intents and purposes...you don't live in a capitalist system as described by Adam Smith in

the wealth of nations, I mean it loosely resembles it. You don't live in the same kind of society that Marx offered criticisms of in the 1800s. Capitalism in the west has turned into what may as well be a completely different economic system...one where any voice of opposition to the way that things currently are becomes coopted by the system and used as a money making endeavor that keeps things going. Where even the books that directly criticize Capitalism with the faces of Marx and Engels on the cover become just mere products that are vetted and endorsed by the Capitalist system in the eyes of the consumer. Where even the most revolutionary person among us who hates the way that things are...buys all those books on Marxism, memorizes the arguments, forced to continue going to their job everyday in a constant state of self-loathing, looking around them at the naive people that just buy products like cars and trucks to make themselves feel just good enough to go back to work again the next day...that even to that person...those books are the products that they buy that pacify them. Buying those books allows them to FEEL as though they're counter-culture and revolutionary...appeasing them just enough to go back to their job the next day feeling intellectually superior, not ever doing anything about it. We're not living in the age of Capitalism anymore...we're living in the age of Monopoly Capitalism. Marcuse thinks there's a way out. We'll talk about it next time on the show.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School pt. 5 - Civilization

Episode #112

This is a transcript of episode #112 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So let's assume for a second that Marcuse's right. That in a country where many of the citizens see freedom as the fundamental thing the United States embodies... in reality, the population's actually living under an advanced version of monopoly capitalism, that has sort of metastasized and taken control of everything from art, to politics, to government, all of this amounting to what's probably the most clever, insidious totalitarian system in history. Let's say you're living in that...how would you know that you were living in it? What sort of clues would you see around you if you did...would you even notice them? Or would you frame who you are so much in relation to that totalitarian system, that nothing would ever seem out of the ordinary to you? Herbert Marcuse would probably say that if you want to figure out the answers to these questions...maybe it would be useful to put yourself in the shoes of a member of an overtly totalitarian society to see what's similar. Let's say 1930's Nazi Germany for the sake of the example...what would it be like to be a citizen living under the Third Reich? Well one thing for sure if you're the government...for any of this Third Reich business to be going on for any length of time...one thing you're going to need is approval from the population to continue doing the things you're doing. Now in totalitarian societies...this is typically done by having some sort of propaganda machine in place that gets people thinking about their lives and their country's place in the world in a distorted way...often times it gives them a piece of reality, a version of it...but it obscures other things so that they never get the full picture. See that's the thing about propaganda...there's layers of nuance to it. Like, no one in 1930's Germany was tied to a chair with a belt and forced to watch 1000 episodes of Sponge Bob Squarepants and then they came out the other side worshipping Hitler. No propaganda wouldn't work if it was that obvious it was being administered. Part of the art, of propaganda... is getting people to believe that they

arrived at this set of conclusions all by themselves. When you look at different examples of the great propaganda campaigns throughout history...you start to see certain tactics being used over and over again because they're just so effective at shaping the way that people see the world. Fear...is an effective tactic. Appealing to people's tribal tendencies is effective...us vs. them thinking...Manufacturing false news stories or events that fit a particular narrative. Manipulating the way that a story is delivered, blowing certain details out of proportion that tells the story you want it to tell. These have been used time and time again, and in 1930's Germany there was a handful of people whose job it was to use these tactics to ensure that the average German citizen remained a good foot soldier...had a view of Germany and the rest of the world that made them behave the way a GOOD German behaves. That was the goal of propaganda. Marcuse would ask: when you take a look at the culture industry... and the role it plays in shaping the way that people see themselves and the world...by the way, the delivery system for most people on the American way of life...life imitates art...where selfless hard work is one of the most admired qualities, where every day is a transaction between work time and consumption time, where people chase the American dream which is defined by your relationship to materialistic stuff, two cars a house and a white picket fence...a fence that in a really aesthetically pleasing way keeps out other human beings, so that you can sit in your box being entertained in isolation...do you think it's possible, Marcuse would ask, that the culture industry keeps people thinking in a narrow American capitalistic sort of way that keeps things moving forward, the same way Nazi Propaganda kept German citizens thinking in a narrow way that kept THEIR interests moving forward? See because again, and I'm talking to you America, let's say that we're all these citizens immersed in a totalitarian society...what is the propaganda that gets fed to us every day? Where do most people get their views on what's going on in the world and their place within it? Maybe you watch the news. Maybe you read a news paper...maybe it's the radio or podcasts or a blog...regardless, the point is to Marcuse: they're all products...products that are created to correspond with existing consumer demand. The news is not broadcasted by some diety or some philosopher king that just wants to deliver an objective view of what's

going on out there...no, the news is delivered the way it is...because it most effectively gets the eyeballs of the average American to come back the next day and watch commercials...which is not necessarily in ANY way connected to what's actually going on. Let's brainstorm and design a product that delivers people the news...what kind of product is going to be profitable? What's gonna make the average American worker tune in the next day? Well like we talked about on the culture industry episode...when your life from the cradle to the grave is to go to a job eight hours a day that sucks the life out of you...and then go home and consume products to feel better...understandably...the average American is not going to want to go home and do a grueling study of quantum mechanics in their free time...no, they're going to want something easy to consume that entertains them. Well, so too...with where they get their news! That if you were creating a product that delivers the average person the news...one of the worst things you could do is to make a show that gets people to constantly challenge their beliefs...gets them to think about the assumptions they may have been making for decades, that's a lot of thinking...that's hard work. You wouldn't want to make a show that goes into a really deep nuanced, for most people boring, investigation of any of these highly complex topics the news passes off as simple... no, that would be exhausting to listen to for most people. What most Americans want after an exhausting day at work is not to put in even more work in improving themselves. They want something easy. They want a product that tells them, you're right. No more work to do here, you've got the world ALL figured out...and just like many propaganda campaigns throughout history this product then delivers to them a simplified, distorted view of reality that reinforces this world picture. Marcuse would say: that it's not a coincidence these products created to deliver the news often times use the same sort of tactics to get people to tune in that have been used in propaganda campaigns throughout history! We can go right down the line of the examples we gave: Fear. This just in! There have been 16 mountain lion attacks in your area in the last two weeks. Now, in the mind of the consumer: OMG, THANK YOU! Where would I be if I didn't watch this news segment that told me of this imminent danger in my life? I'll tell you where I'd be I'd be passing through the small intestine of a

mountain lion right about now! I need to tune in tomorrow to learn about the NEXT thing I need to be scared of! Appealing to tribal tendencies: back in the 1930's it was...here's this group of people that's responsible for most of the ills of society! If only we could find a way to get rid of them things would be great! Turn on your news station today and they'll give you a tribe and talk about how the other party is responsible for all the bad in the world. Manufacturing false news stories...do I even need to expand on that one? Manipulating headlines and phrasing using words that they know will trigger a certain negative or positive response from people...this is being done, right out in the open. To Marcuse, these are products being sold to people that are designed to validate a limited world view...that scratch the itch of feeling politically involved, but never require people to do the actual work of challenging their beliefs on things and understanding the world at a deeper level. In other words, the culture industry serves the same purpose as a propaganda machine in a totalitarian society...but there's no evil cabal of fascists at the top that are pulling the puppet strings of this one. No, the people that produce the products in the culture industry aren't evil...in reality...they're just trying to keep the lights on like everybody else. They're just trying to create a product...that turns a profit and keeps them in business...what can you do if this is just the type of programming that the average person wants? So, what's another example of a clue we might see around us if we were really living in a covert totalitarian society? You know, a common misconception of the Frankfurt School and many Neo-Marxists for that matter is that they are all big government types...that they want to bring about a world where the government has an inordinate amount of control over the life of the average person. On the contrary...there are sections of the Frankfurt School's work that almost sound like a neo-conservative critique of FDR's new deal. You want to talk about clues that are all around you...they would say it is not a coincidence that there has been such a massive increase in the size and scope of the Federal Government over the years. That people in capitalist societies are often educated to think about the public and private sectors as two things that are divorced, separate and regulating each other. That may be somewhat true in a traditional capitalist society, but in a monopoly capitalist society they're just two arms on the giant

leviathan of capitalism that controls everything. Giant bailouts and government programs that artificially prop up the weaknesses of a capitalist system that should have failed long ago. So what happens is: instead of having a national discussion about the boom and crash nature of capitalism and the suffering it causes...we just accept it as the norm...it's unfortunate we're in a down period...then use massive government encroachment into people's lives to save ourselves...in the case of FDR, hey everybody's got a job now! You're all working for the government...forget your own personal freedom and individuality...we're in an economic depression right now...times are tough! You need to fall in line, be THANKFUL for the job we give you and become a cog in a machine. Does that sound at all familiar to other forms of totalitarianism? But there's a lot of ways the Frankfurt School thinks the government props up capitalism from failing: Not that they think welfare checks are something to be abolished, but they would say that an unintended consequence of having them available to people is that it sort of sweeps under the rug another failure of capitalism. That Capitalism produces sick, alienated people. People get depressed. People get addicted to substances to cope with feeling bad. People develop mental illness. That if Capitalism just naturally ran its course...people would be dying and starving to death...we'd have bodies in the streets...and maybe if we had bodies in the streets people would be outraged and we'd have to contend with just how many of the problems we have are direct results of our economic system. Instead, we give people a check, keep them alive just dead inside...give them some pills and say you're gonna start feeling better soon, the important thing now is let's get you off the dole and get you back to working and buying stuff! That's the important thing! Marcuse would want us to consider: if you could go back in time and talk to a citizen of Germany under the government of the Third Reich...these people weren't just mindless robots blabbering on...if you asked them why Adolf Hitler was the best thing for them and the future of the world, they would have arguments primed and ready that they believe they arrived at on their own...talking points marinated into them over years of propaganda. Many of which designed to undercut a more nuanced conversation before it even begins. Marcuse would ask: is it possible that a lot of Americans are not too different from this just with different

talking points that justify capitalism and undercut a deeper conversation? Now in this next section I don't want this to seem like I'm offering up a strawman argument on the Capitalist side and am making that the response to the Frankfurt School. There are many more great Capitalist responses to come on this show. But that said, in keeping with the thought experiment today that Americans are citizens of a totalitarian society...if the problem in America is one of class consciousness as the Frankfurt School says...then in that world, the argument the average person is going to give for why Capitalism is good and Marxism is bad...is not going to be some deep, complex argument that's come from years of thoroughly educating themselves...it's going to be a weak argument they've picked up over the years from these products they consume every day that give them the illusion of having a deep understanding of the world. And just like in 1930's Germany...where many of the talking points aimed to end a more nuanced conversation before it even began...Marcuse would say there's a type of person in America who just dismisses all of Marxism and parrots some variation of, Marx...Neo-Marxists...post-Marxists...all of those Marxists types...their problem is that they just don't understand THIS thing about the way that the world works...or THAT thing about how human beings are...if they just understood this thing like I do...then they'd realize that their entire lives were wasted trying to rescue Marx from faulty premises. Have I read any of these people...no. There's no point in me reading and arriving at a deep understanding of their work...Marxism ruins any chance they have of being legitimate before I even open the book. Marcuse would ask this person: what do you think is more likely? That 100's of Marxist thinkers that have come since Marx did his work, many of them critical of Marx, some savagely critical, that spent their entire lives reading and interpreting these ideas...Do you think it's more likely Marcuse would ask that they have all missed out on this nugget of wisdom that you have that instantly destroys Marxism, or that maybe it's more complex than that. That maybe your unwillingness to do the work of doing a deep reading and truly understanding is the reason you haven't heard the argument against that talking point...and that the reality is much more exciting than that...there's actually a deeper, more interesting discourse being had between Capitalists and Marxists that you could

potentially enjoy? Let's look at a common example of one of these and how Marcuse would respond in *Eros and Civilization*. The problem with Marxism...and any society structured around Marxism...is that it just doesn't understand human nature. That we, just by our nature as human beings, take the path of least resistance. We're as lazy as we're allowed to be. This goes down to the very roots of our instinct to survive. For example, if you needed water to stay alive...and there's a stream five feet away from you and another one 500 miles away from you...which stream are you going to get your water from? Of course the one five feet away. Sure, it would be great if we could have a society where everyone's basic needs are taken care of and people just did what interested them...but it doesn't matter how much window dressing you put on Marxism: ultimately we're dealing with human beings here...and when people are given the choice to work or not to work. It's just a matter of time until people stop working, don't do anything and just take advantage of the people around them that ARE working. Marcuse would want to call into question the premise that human nature is as simple as just "taking the path of least resistance." He'd probably start by giving an example of how people often DON'T take the path of least resistance. Maybe he'd bring up someone like a Steve Jobs or an Elon Musk. These are people that very clearly aren't doing just the bare minimum required to survive and then sitting around all day. These are people that are very clearly not putting in all the hours they're putting in for the sake of money. These aren't people that are extrinsically motivated by money, they're people intrinsically motivated by a creative vision they have for changing the world for the better. So if it really is just human nature to take the path of least resistance, why do people like this exist? And the person may respond to Marcuse..well those guys are the exceptions to the rule. These guys are the outliers on the Bell Curve...but let's not forget about the rest of the Bell Curve. For every one Steve Jobs you have you're going to get 10,000 people that want to laze about all day doing nothing taking advantage of the work Steve Jobs is putting in. Marcuse might respond by saying: well why does this psychology exist in larger numbers just not by people as powerful as Steve Jobs or Elon Musk? What I mean is: what about everyone smiling and awkwardly high fiving on Shark Tank every week? I mean, there are a lot of

people out there right now hustling and grinding trying to bring a new product to market, or make it as a musician, or start their own landscaping business or whatever it is and they're doing these things not because they want to make tons of money but because they have a creative vision that they're passionate about? I mean, some people DO create only for the money...and even if you're not the money certainly needs to come in and Marcuse's not calling into question the ability of money to motivate people...what he's countering is the extreme claim that it is part of the nature of human beings to take the path of least resistance. Why do we have so many people resembling Steve Jobs and Elon Musk expending so much energy to create something they're passionate about...why do we have so many people beyond that...where even if they aren't actively hustling to create something right now...can relate to this part of their psychology...have at some point in their life tried something like this and just failed? What Marcuse's going to reference in *Eros and Civilization* is a concept from Freudian Psychology commonly referred to as the Dual Instinct Theory. For a lot of Freud's work, he heavily emphasizes the impact that libido has on what drives our behavior, even if it's just at an unconscious level. But in the beginning of his 1920 book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* he recounts working with soldiers from WW1 that seem to be suffering from what we would call today Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. They have recurring dreams and thoughts reenacting how close they came to death. He works with children who lost a parent and continuously, almost impulsively throw a toy and then retrieve it over and over again simulating the loss of their parent. What Freud theorizes is that human behavior is not as simple as just a drive towards life and a removal of tension, that we all exist in our psychology in a constant, irreconcilable conflict between two drives: Eros, which you may recognize as the Greek god of sexual desire or attraction...and Thanatos, the figure in Greek mythology that represented death. Now Eros may be the god of sexual desire and attraction, but to Marcuse it goes much deeper than that...that the desire to sexually reproduce with someone is at its core an act of creation...and this drive of Eros extends to, and is the part of our psychology that's responsible for, why we have a drive to produce all other forms of creation. In other words, the same drive that is responsible for

the frequent desire you feel to have a baby with someone you're attracted to...is the same part of your psychology that makes you want to create OTHER close bonds with people...to put in the work to create deep friendships, to put in the work to create a family life in your home that is close and loving, to put in the work of creating a close community...that's not all though...it's also the part of your psychology that makes you want to create, a great symphony that lives on after your death, or create a company that you pass down over generations, or start a blog that's impact lives on long after you die. This drive of Eros is a fixation we all have on life, survival and creation both on an individual level AND a societal level...Thanatos is a fixation we all have on death, at an individual and societal level. To Freud, the two of these are in constant conflict and are irreconcilable. Marcuse doesn't agree...he thinks one thing Freud failed to consider is that Eros and Thanatos are always developed in the mind of the individual within a particular social framework...a social framework that has a huge effect on how we see ourselves and what we desire to do as people...and that the battle between these two drives is actually something that has been created historically by us for the benefit of society. Let's explain that further...building on what we talked about last episode: throughout history...the repression of certain human instincts has been necessary for civilization to function well. Throughout history, we've always needed people 8, 9, 10 hours a day working just to be able to produce the bare minimum required for most people to have food, water, shelter and other basic needs. Another way of putting that...is that throughout history...all of the creative drives that people had in the realm of Eros, needed to be repressed for the sake of the world continuing. Look, when we need people working 10 hours a day just to be able to persist as a species, we don't have time for people to spend all day being some kind of sexual explorer like they're Vasco Da Gama. We don't have time for you to spend hours and hours every day connecting with people, creating tons of super close friends, spending 14 hours a day with your family just because you enjoy it. We don't have time for you to sit around and write a symphony or create some blog that interests you...we got work to do...and it doesn't matter how often you have that desire towards creation and life...you need to push it down...repress it...and

fall into your role within the economic system of your time. This benefitted us tremendously throughout history. Well in today's world...we're still doing it. For our society to keep moving at the rate it's moving we need the majority of people to go to work 8 hours a day...all the while from birth told to be reasonable, get a real job and push down and repress that drive of Eros that's gonna take up too much of your time. Marcuse would ask: why are we doing this? The argument we talked about last time was that we need to repress certain human instincts and freedom for the sake of the benefit it provides to society. Well in the past the benefit has been clear: we are repressing the Eros of people so that we can provide the bare necessities of living. What benefit are we getting from repressing that today? A hedonic treadmill of products that satisfy false needs? The ability to get the next plasma TV? To get the next car in a more efficient manner than it would otherwise get created? Marcuse would ask about the United States in particular: What? The ability to buy stuff...throw it away two months later where it ends up in the ocean...and then continue to suck the earth dry of resources? Colonize the globe with hundreds of military bases so we can make sure we have control over those resources when we need them to continue this process? To the person that makes the claim that it is just human nature to take the path of least resistance... and that when given the choice to work or to sit around and just consume all the time, people are often going to sit around, do nothing and consume... Marcuse would ask: how much do you think that's affected by the fact that people are conditioned from birth to think of themselves in terms of work mode vs consumption mode? How much do you think people are affected by the fact, that before they even enter the workforce...whenever that Eros voice in their head starts speaking they're told to silence it and repress it because we just NEED workers...we NEED workers to continue this capitalist vision? In other words, how much are we programming into people's heads this forced work vs consumption dichotomy that you call a part of human nature? Like if you gave the average worker in the United States \$100 million dollars and said you no longer need to work anymore. Do whatever you want. You're free! Let's say they won the lottery. Marcuse wouldn't be surprised that the average person probably wouldn't take that \$100 million dollars and

do things with it like they're Elon Musk...no, every day of their life up until that point has been framed in terms of I work when I have to work...and when I'm not working...I'm consuming as much as I can to recharge my batteries because I know in the back of my mind have to go back to work the next day. These are my two modes: work and consume. Marcuse wouldn't be shocked that if they're given \$100 million and don't need to work anymore...they would go into consumption mode...buy a bunch of cars they don't need, clothes they don't need, give their brother 80 grand to open his vape store...in other words, they're gonna do what they did any other time they didn't have to work in a capitalist society...sit around, do nothing productive and consume stuff until the money's gone and they have to work again. But is this human nature? Or historical conditioning to keep Capitalism going? Marcuse would say maybe the reason there's such a difference between what Elon Musk feels like doing with \$100 million dollars and what the average person feels like doing with it comes down to the level of repression society has required for them to place on that desire to create in their Eros. What would the average person be like if instead of repressing Eros from birth...we nurtured it and tried to develop it? Not that everyone would be Elon Musk, far from it, but you'd have to acknowledge that this repression has a real effect on how often this muscle of creativity is used in the average person. We all know the people that if they were given \$100 million dollars and someone asked them what sort of creative desires do you have? What's your Eros? What needs to be said that isn't being said, what do you want to bring into existence with this money? And they respond with...nothing. Nothing really interests me...don't really care about creating anything. How much of that can be explained by them silencing that voice inside of them every time its spoken up throughout their life? It's a muscle that's atrophied for the sake of an economic role they play, not a lazy consumption mode that is imbued into human nature. What would happen if we didn't ground our society in this repression of these creative drives just so that we can keep making plasma TVs? What if it wasn't about efficiency at all costs anymore? What if we had a simulation... picture a simulated world where we could change certain elements about society and watch it play out...instead of 40 hours a week, we slowly dial back the work week to a point where machines did the

majority of the work, people only had to work two hours a week and spent the rest of the time doing what they want and exploring this Eros part of their psychology. What would that society look like? What would the average person BE like? Now, there's a reason we're doing this in a simulation and not in the real world. Like if you're rolling your eyes at this...Really Marcuse? oh boy! the whole world's gonna go home early from work on Friday and write symphonies together! Do some finger painting. That's what you think people are going to do with their free time? Marcuse fully realized that the solution is not as simple as us just dialing back the number of hours people work and saying, "You're free!" "Check out that Eros thing I was talking about if you get a chance!" Like we talked about in another episode...Marcuse says that you never just implement by force some sort of sweeping change like this...that everything about the way an average worker views themselves is in terms of being a worker and consumer. The absolute worst thing you could ever do is throw out Capitalism today and implement Marxism tomorrow. He's actually highly critical of people that try to force a Marxist revolution... in a country that's not currently in a state of revolution or pre-revolution. To him, that's one of the big mistakes Marxist revolutions have made in the past. You can't just take people that have repressed this Eros their entire life... and expect them to be able to do some sort of psychological about-face just because you've given them a new economic role to play. Marcuse's not saying that we should all work as little as possible and spend more time doing arts and crafts with friends and the world's going to fix itself. No, it's more that, here's an interesting point: Here's an entire part of our psychology as human beings that all throughout history we've had to repress for the sake of survival that we no longer NECESSARILY need to repress. What would the world look like if we didn't? How much suffering is being caused world wide every second that we don't? Are there particular genders and races that have been historically repressed for the sake of society more than others? Marcuse asks us to consider a lot of questions. Should we ignore the negative effects Capitalism has on the mental health of people through its tendency to alienate? Should we ignore the negative effects it has on the planet with its over production and waste that just ends up at a landfill? Should we ignore how the culture industry naturally

serves up products that keep people ignorant and complacent about their views on things? Here's the most important question to Marcuse: Do we have a moral imperative to stand against the systems that dominate and repress people to keep Capitalism going on the backs of billions of people suffering? This is why Marcuse titles another one of his books *One Dimensional Man*: this advanced, totalitarian capitalist structure is maintaining a one-dimensional society...one that "conforms to existing thought and behavior and lacks a critical dimension and a dimension of potentialities that transcend the existing society." See because if we were all in a totalitarian society right now and everybody wanted to get out...Marcuse would say the way out of it is never going to be a revolution by way of force...it's most likely gonna come slowly over the course of generations through a shifting of class consciousness. This shift, to Marcuse, is only going to happen if the citizens, as individuals, look in the mirror, become self aware of their participation in the way that things are and makes a resolution towards an extreme type of radical subjectivity against the current system that represses people. He calls this resolution that he thinks we all have to make, "The Great Refusal". or as he puts it briefly: "the protest against that which is." Doug Kellner describes it like this: "Marcuse, on the other hand, constantly advocated the "Great Refusal" as the proper political response to any form of irrational repression, and indeed this seems to be at least the starting point for political activism in the contemporary era: refusal of all forms of oppression and domination, relentless criticism of all policies that impact negatively on working people and progressive social programs, and militant opposition to any and all acts of aggression against Third World countries. Indeed, in an era of "positive thinking," conformity, and Yuppies who "go for it," it seems that Marcuse's emphasis on negative thinking, refusal, and opposition provides at least a starting point and part of a renewal of radical politics in the contemporary era." Now this leaves the individual with a bit of a problem, and it's not a trivial problem. Lets say I want to do what I can to ensure that people aren't being needlessly repressed in today's world because of thinking from another time in history. This leaves you in a bit of a weird spot. Because any change you want to make to the current system and way that things are...has to be brought about

using the tools from within the current system and the way that things are. For example, say you wanted to do something about money being connected to political power. The problem is that the people who would have to pass legislation to fix the problem of money in politics, are the very people who benefit from there being money in politics. Or lets say you wanted to change the mind of the average worker and show them the propaganda that the culture industry feeds them every day...you would have to use the tools of the culture industry to subvert the culture industry. This goes down to even the most fundamental level...even the language and the syntax and examples you use have to come from this existing one-dimensional society that doesn't see itself that way. Marcuse acknowledges that the change can be gradual at times, but that certain catalysts for change emerge historically and the goal should be to take advantage of them as much as possible...the student revolts of the 1960's and the women's liberation movement were two during his lifetime that he really tried to help realize the potential of. The personal commitment to The Great Refusal and the use of Art as a weapon of revolution to show people an alternative way that the world can be are two of the main tools Marcuse suggests people use to slowly make a shift in the way that Americans and others view themselves. And this leaves me at a bit of an impasse with the Frankfurt School. Do you want to hear more about them? Do you want to move on? I'm leaving it up to you people. So if you have a few seconds in the next couple days send me an email, facebook, on twitter I'm @iamstephenwest let me know how you're feeling. Just want to make sure I'm doing shows most of the audience is excited to hear. But given the fact that this may be the last episode we do on the Frankfurt School, I want to end today with a quote that has stuck with me over the years from Marcuse and it has nothing to do with the political point its making...for me I think about this quote whenever I catch myself having any sort of strong aversion to a particular set of ideas. Gets me thinking: maybe the ideas that I'm most hostile towards can tell me something really important about myself. It is the most advanced industrial society which feels most directly threatened by the rebellion, because it is here that the social necessity of repression and alienation, of servitude and heteronomy is most transparently unnecessary, and unproductive in terms of human

progress. Therefore the cruelty and violence mobilized in the struggle against the threat, therefore the monotonous regularity with which the people are made familiar with, and accustomed to inhuman attitudes and behavior-to wholesale killing as patriotic act. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School pt. 6 - Art As A Tool For Liberation

Episode #113

This is a transcript of episode #113 on The Frankfurt School. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So hypothetical situation: let's say you listened to these last five episodes on the Frankfurt school...let's say you took it upon yourself to do a little more research on your own... and let's say you pulled up an overview of all the works Herbert Marcuse ever produced. What you would see...and this applies to many of the key players in the Frankfurt School at the time as well..what you'd see is a very clear, repeated presence of books and essays concerned with the subject of art and aesthetics. Now seeing that...this can be kind of confusing at first...like, why would that be the case? I mean if the task of the Frankfurt School was to find out what went wrong during the thinking of the Enlightenment, to examine the effects of advanced capitalism in the west, to try to figure out why the revolution Marx prophesied never came...if that's your goal, why are you wasting even a second of your time talking about something like...you know, the form of a piece of artwork...or how people and works of art interface with each other in the world...why are we talking about any of this stuff? Now the extension to that...and it's a very common, understandable, natural human reaction to what we've talked about so far...ok, say Marcuse's right. I now realize I'm living in a totalitarian society...I mean, is that something we should be taking lightly here? Like really if what the Frankfurt School's saying is true, why should we be concerned with art right now? Why make a movie about how bad things are? Why are we gonna write a catchy little jingle about how we're needlessly repressed? No, how about we DO something about it. Let's go. Let's get out into the streets and take back the country that apparently was never ours to begin with! Let's string politicians up with chicken wire if we have to! It's time to CHANGE things! Right now. Marcuse would look at this person and he would understand their anger...he would understand their passion for wanting to change the world for the better...but he'd probably say to them... that when it comes to the process of liberation,

from forces of domination that are AS entrenched as these one are...don't mistake movement, for progress. That being angry and screaming at people and taking to the streets may make you FEEL like you're doing something that's changing the world for the better...but you have to examine and re-examine your tactics...are you really changing anything there? Because again, Marxist revolutions throughout history have shown time and time again that you can't implement these ideas into a capitalist society by force. And again, if something is ever gonna happen that even remotely resembles this kind of revolution that's being suggested...it's not gonna come by people taking to the streets...it's going to come by way of a slow shifting of class consciousness. It's going to come by educating people. It's going to come by getting people to see themselves and their place in the world in a different way. It's going to come by explaining to people how it's even possible, that every day up until the point they heard this stuff they lived immersed in a system like this without ever realizing it. In other words, in the language of Marcuse, it's going to come by changing the way that people view their subjectivity. Now let's explain that a bit...subjectivity's one of those words that's easy for people to bring their own definitions to it...and it may cause some confusion. A bit of foreshadowing here, but when we eventually get to covering the second half of the 20th century on this show, what we're going to see is a lot of philosophers focusing on this concept in philosophy called subjectivity. Or in other words, where do we get all the ideas we have up in our heads about ourselves, our place in the world and what is going on all around us in our version of reality? That's a key distinction to make there...our version of reality...because as we're all aware what a particular human being believes is going on all around them is not necessarily connected to what's actually going on around them...we can see countless examples of this throughout history: If you lived two-thousand years ago as a Platonist you might have had an Essentialist perception of your world. The essence of what you are is that you are a rational animal...navigating the universe of Plato's Timaeus the world made up of these tetrahedrons and octohedrons that are too small for you to see. Say you lived a little later in history you might have a subjectivity that was much more informed by religion...a little later than that maybe

you'd be informed by idealism and some version of Kant. Flash forward in history from there and you could have a structuralist version of subjectivity...that in the same way...you know if you wanted to explain to someone what a free-throw was in a basketball game...for you to be able to explain to them what a free throw was, they would first have to have an understanding of tons of other things that are related to it, right?...what basketball is...of what a game is...of what sports are at all...but it goes the other way too...they'd also have to have an understanding of what a basketball is....what a hoop is...what the lines on the floor denote...but even then they'd have to have FURTHER more FUNDAMENTAL knowledge of measurement and distance to be able to understand the concept of 15 feet away from the backboard...this goes on indefinitely in both directions...to explain the concept of a free throw is really to just explain the relationships between a free throw and all of the concepts around it in a given system...the meaning of a free throw...IS the set of relationships it has to other things within a larger system. Well, what if our subjectivity is the same way? That everything about who you are and where you fit into the world is dictated by some system that you're a part of? Now that's not where this discussion of subjectivity ends...even beyond that there are post-structuralists that would say...that the very concept of subjectivity is something that we've imposed upon discourse...mostly just because it corresponds with language and the subject/object way that we speak about things...but also because of the practical benefits it provides, when we impose this illusion of subjectivity onto ourselves... now we can do all kinds of cool stuff...we can make truth claims based on a subjective position...now we can construct philosophical systems, tons of stuff...the point is: there are a lot of theories about subjectivity out there, and it's crucial for us to understand how important this question is to the philosophers doing their work at this time. So in the case of Marcuse...the shifting of class consciousness is the shifting of people's subjectivity. Where does the average american worker get their subjectivity? Where do they get their ideas about who they are...how they fit into the world...how America fits into the world and everything else? Well, after they graduate school, from the culture industry. Many people get their version of reality from distorted,

oversimplified pictures of the world, that are really just products served up to workers to appease them after a long day at a job they don't feel connected to. See that's the thing...the culture industry is kind of like the world's worst psycho-therapist. Like imagine you go in to therapy, you sit down, the person asks you how your week was and you say, gah it was horrible. Horrible. My boss still has it out for me. She's jealous, she scared I'm gonna take her job and she persecutes me every day. It's misery. Then I go home and my domestic life partner is just constantly annoying me...and what's worse: they're doing it on purpose, doctor! They're slowly trying to make me slip into madness so that they can lock me away in an institution and get the life insurance money! What if when you said that to the therapist they replied back and said, wow. What a perfectly accurate depiction of what's going on in your world! I mean, your life is horrible! No...that would be the worst therapist in the world. The therapists job among many other things is to help get you to see the black and white ways you are looking at the world and present you with alternative version of reality that may be more accurate. Well what does the culture industry do? REINFORCE the black and white ways you're looking at the world and NOT present you with alternative versions of reality. The culture industry produces masses of people with this type of subjectivity. Masses of people that when they hear a more nuanced, deep discussion... an alternative view of the world they live in... they run in the other direction, exhausted and intimidated. Oh, I hear a lot of big words and smart people stuff...I don't like that...I'm gonna go watch that storage TV show where they find the lost sarcophagus of Ramses the second in Cleveland somewhere. This is the reason why people like Marcuse are so concerned with art and aesthetics. Because the reality of the world we live in... is that Marcuse and one of his colleagues can sit around and have discussions all day long about this alternative picture of the average american's subjectivity...but if the average american worker would rather jump off a building than have to do the work of challenging the way they see things...those words and ideas are effectively doing nothing when it comes to shifting class consciousness. What tools do we have that can get through to people? Well to Marcuse, one of the answers is art. Great works of art have the ability to deliver people a

message that normal speech just can't deliver on its own. Great works of art have the ability... to make people feel...and feel intensely...masses of people...not just people that happen to be a graduate student under Marcuse. Works of art have the ability to show the average person an alternative view of themselves, the way the world is, their subjectivity...and because of this...to Marcuse...works of art have the potential to be a tool for liberation. Liberation from the narrow subjectivity given to Americans by the culture industry. Marcuse says: "The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to define what is real." The truth of art. See, in a way Marcuse's looking at great works of art the same way WE might look at a great science experiment. What's a great science experiment? Well they're all equally great, I'm not playing favorites...but how about the ones that lead us to what seems like a more accurate picture of the universe? What happens? Formerly, before we did this science experiment, knowledge about a piece of the universe was obscured from us. Now it should be said, the result of this experiment has ALWAYS been the way that things are...I lived every day of my life up until that point ignorant of this little piece of the universe...and now here I am. A little more enlightened...my view of things around me a little more accurate thanks to this great science experiment. Well to Marcuse, works of art have the ability to do this very same thing at a cultural level. They can show people pieces of reality that were going on all around them that they never noticed before because they were immersed in it. Works of art have the ability to actually SHIFT a person's subjectivity, and broaden it. Now if you think Marcuse's gonna follow up with hey, everyone! Make a bunch of art that shows people how horrible Capitalism is! No, actually his scope is much larger than that...economics is not the only area art has the potential for liberation. See, Marcuse notices a problem in Marx...when Marx looks back at history and sees the exploited class of people in the varying economic systems, he mistakenly spends the majority of his work thinking about the domination and oppression of people, solely in terms of what economic role they play. Marcuse would want to point out, well we obviously know people have been oppressed based on other factors outside of what economic role they play. In the case of the United States specifically... on racial grounds, predominantly

African Americans. Gender grounds, predominantly women. Grounds of sexual orientation, predominantly anything that isn't heterosexual. Great works of art not only have the ability to show people a different perspective of the world they live in in terms of economics...they also have the ability to show people the struggle and reality of other groups that are repressed for different reasons. The potential for liberation, still there. For example, when NWA comes out with the song F the Police in 1988. That song is an opportunity for the average american immersed in their everyday life of work and consumption to see a piece of reality that they don't necessarily have to see every day in 1988. To hear the pain and anger of a historically repressed group of people. Human beings living in these cordoned off neighborhoods looked at as the other, largely ignored by the governments that serve them, left to fend for themselves, and among all the other problems they have, they're left to contend with the fact that if they ever have a reason to call the police, they can't even trust them to enforce the law in a way that doesn't discriminate against them. This song is an opportunity for the average American worker in 1988... to see a reality of the world around them that existed the whole time, but they were blocked from seeing it because of the narrow subjectivity the culture industry had given them. Just like with a great science experiment, this song has the potential to deliver to people a slightly more accurate picture of the world they live in, in other words: to change their subjectivity. Now you may hear that and think, well what happened? I mean everyone's heard that song...and it doesn't seem like it sparked some sort of national discussion and a shifting of class consciousness. Marcuse would probably say, don't get me wrong. Art is not a panacea. Art may be a tool for liberation but it's not a tool that's as effective as a hammer at hammering in a nail. It's kind of like using a screwdriver to hammer in a nail. It's janky...and part of the reason why is because Capitalism is just SO resilient, and capable of absorbing any sort of potential liberation and turning it into a money making product for the masses to consume. Sure, that song has the potential to change the way people think about the relationship between police and minorities, but it also has the potential to become co-opted by Capitalism, turned into a hit song, played at the Super Bowl and then eventually the genre being filled with

artists worshipping Capitalism constantly talking about what Lamborghini they're going to buy next. How many people that hear that song hear the cries of historical oppression and how many say, oh man that's a sick beat. Yeah, I have that song on my phone...anytime the cops pull me over and give me a ticket I blast that song...I get what Ice Cube's talking about there! No liberation...it just becomes...a product in the consumers infinite landscape of products. See because as Marcuse would say, liberation always occurs dialectically. What he means by that is, that if art, in any way, ever, leads to the liberation of people...one of the problems you run in to is that it always needs to liberate people while being created and distributed within the current system of domination and the tools that are available. For example if you wanted to try to liberate people from Capitalism, you would need to operate within the system of Capitalism to do that. Same as if you wanted to liberate women, you would have to do so from within a world where women are oppressed and need to be liberated. But don't take these two examples as a prescription from Marcuse, he's making a larger point here about liberation in general. That the forces of domination always give rise to the forces of liberation. But one thing we should ALL understand and take EXTREMELY seriously...is that it goes the other way too...the forces of liberation always give rise to the new forces of domination in what appears to be a constant historical cycle that we're locked in. Marcuse thinks it's possible to bring about a world where the people being liberated don't feel the need to dominate and oppress another group of people once they're liberated. The goal shouldn't be just taking turns repressing each other for the rest of time. That strategy is EQUALLY ignorant, outdated and from a bygone era of history. Marcuse would say, sure, art is far from perfect. But what better tool do we have within Capitalism to peacefully bring about this world and end this constant dialectic of oppressing each other? What other tools do we have for liberation? What the political system? Marcuse would say, uh, yeah...maybe at ONE point in this country's history...maybe if this wasn't AS advanced a version of monopoly capitalism. Good luck unless you have 8 trillion dollars and enough money to outspend all the companies that currently fund the campaigns of politicians in exchange for influence on legislation; no

the revolutionary potential of politics has been corroded and disintegrated by Capitalism. Again, this is why art and aesthetics are so important to many members of the Frankfurt School, not just Marcuse. Because we're living in an advanced version of monopoly capitalism that has defused and co-opted all of the liberating potential we USED to have...art is one of the only things we have left. Marcuse has a quote: "Art doesn't change the world, but it may change the consciousness of people who CAN change the world." Now at first that may seem like an applause break point...art doesn't change the world WE CHANGE IT! But it's actually referencing something that isn't immediately on the surface...something that goes hand in hand with his idea of The Great Refusal. So art all by itself, no matter how revolutionary and liberating it may be...doesn't really do anything. I mean I'm serious if you look at it, it really doesn't do anything...it's this inert thing that just kind of hangs there on the museum wall until it decomposes and the sun explodes in 4 billion years. In other words, how revolutionary a piece of artwork is comes down not to the intentions of the artist, not how great of a person they are...but to the answer to the question: how many minds has this piece of artwork changed? To how many people has this piece of art delivered an alternative way of viewing the world that they're receptive to and hadn't thought of before? Marcuse would say that if the goal is a shifting of class consciousness....You can have the most revolutionary piece of art ever in terms of intent by the artist...but if it just hangs there and never inspires any change in people...what has that work of art really done to change things for the better? What Marcuse's getting at here is a distinction he makes repeatedly in his middle to late work...the difference between theory and praxis. The dictionary definition being actual practice, as distinguished from theory. So you can understand what he's getting at. You know, theory...you can listen to these theories from the Frankfurt school all day long...replay this series over and over again. You can buy a bunch more books on these theories...you can dedicate you entire life to these theories about the Capitalist Totalitarian society Marcuse thinks we're living in, but if you never change anything about the way that you live, if you never actually change anything about society for the better...what good were any of these theories just sitting up in your head?

Just like the piece of art that just hangs on the wall...if nobody ever hears these ideas and takes action on them, what was the point? Marcuse says that the point of theory SHOULD be to inform and direct praxis. Not to sit around in academic institutions theorizing about things until the end of time. Not just to understand the ideas we've talked about in this series, but to actually make The Great Refusal and live in opposition to affluent society. There's a reason he refers to The Great Refusal as a form of radical subjectivity. There's a reason he thinks of true art as a physical embodiment of radical subjectivity. Because you can have the best intentions in the world with your art, you can take to the streets and scream at people all you want, but if you're not getting through to people, changing their minds, broadening their subjectivity...you might be mistaking movement with progress. Like we talked about, if any of this stuff the Frankfurt School says has any validity, it's a natural human reaction to want to be angry and scream at people in the street... but if progress is defined by a shifting of class consciousness, and you can count on one hand the number of people whose subjectivity has been broadened by your screaming, Marcuse would say maybe it's best to reexamine your strategy. No Marcuse's not a fan of getting angry, screaming, being condescending towards these "dumb" people that just don't realize the truth. To Marcuse, this isn't the fault of the working class for going along with it. These are not evil people...these are people that should be treated with compassion...people who were born against their will...into a culture they had no control over...educated by teachers and programs that they had no ultimate say in...spat out into a alienated workforce that they didn't sign off on. These aren't people you should be mad at and blame, to Marcuse, they're byproducts of historical forces that were out of their control. Why be pompous and condescending and call them dumb? The path forward to Marcuse is not anger and blame...it is theory and praxis. Praxis would be misguided, out of control screaming in the streets if it didn't have a good strategy and theory behind it, and theory without praxis would just be a bunch of people talking about things and never actually doing anything. The real trick to Marcuse is finding a balance between the two and being honest enough with yourself to take a true assessment of how much good you're really doing. But that said... he and other members

of the Frankfurt School... would want to point out that is much easier said than done. I mean, you're not fighting against a sweet little, fluffy kitten here...you're fighting against, monopoly Capitalism. This enemy is resilient. This enemy sees you coming and has dozens, hundreds of traps for you to fall into that silence radical subjectivity and transform you into somebody that just perpetuates the system. Living the Great Refusal, saying no to affluent society and that which is...Capitalism looks at you as a human being the same way it looks at a piece of artwork. What I mean is, again, a great piece of artwork is a physical embodiment of radical subjectivity... where sometimes the forces of Capitalism step in, take control over it, remove it's potential for liberation and turn it into just a product. Well so too, if you're living as an embodiment of radical subjectivity, Capitalism has ways of removing your potential for liberation... and turning YOU into someone who just keeps the status-quo going. See, truly living the great refusal... can sometimes take an enormous amount of sacrifice. The people who have made the choice to fight against the way that things are...many of them have uprooted their entire existence, these aren't just ideas to them...they suffer and grind on a daily basis for the cause of liberation, many of them have even given their own life. We can do an episode on the Great Refusal once again I'm going to leave it up to the demand I receive, but the point I want to make is that there is a big difference between people that hear the ideas of the Frankfurt School, think they're making good points and complain about how messed up the system is, and these people that are actually making The Great Refusal. It's not the Good Refusal. Not the fair to midland refusal. These traps that Capitalism sets for you to fall into...they're so alluring. When you've structured your life around and lived so long in work mode and consumption mode...such an easy trap to fall into is to hear these theories, get angry, feel indignant and self-righteous, and then spend the rest of your life screaming and chanting and pepper spraying your way to never changing a single person's subjectivity. Such an easy trap...to have all the theories right, but the wrong kind of praxis. What's ironic to Marcuse, because of the power of Capitalism...is how easy it is to know the theories of the Frankfurt School and become as complicit in the way that things are as the people you're screaming at. When average american goes to their job,

feel alienated, never question anything, and consume products by the culture industry that reinforce their idea that nothing is wrong with the United States, they will go on to change the subjectivity of a grand total of zero people. Doesn't matter how right your theories are...if your method of praxis is not actually changing people's minds...if it's not finding a way to relate to your fellow people as human beings and convey a message...if it's only serving to scratch some personal itch you have of feeling like something drastic needs to change about the world...you're not changing people's subjectivity...you're being selfish...all the while perpetuating the vice grip Capitalism has on the country, where in your own small way you ensure that people will continue to be polarized in this country, dogmatic about their beliefs, talking towards each other, talking past each other...but never talking with each other. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School pt. 7 - The Great Refusal

Episode #114

This is a transcript of episode #114 on The Great Refusal. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). Hello Everyone. I'm Stephen West. This is Philosophize This! Now as usual...if you want to contribute to the cause of making these ideas accessible to anyone that wants access to them, you can support the podcast on Patreon. And if you don't want to contribute, you can always go through the Amazon Banner...cause that's the LAST thing you'd be doing if you clicked through it. Find both on the front page of [philosophizethis.org](#). Today's episode is part six on the Frankfurt School. I hope you love the show today. So hypothetical situation: let's say you listened to these last five episodes on the Frankfurt school...let's say you took it upon yourself to do a little more research on your own... and let's say you pulled up an overview of all the works Herbert Marcuse ever produced. What you would see...and this applies to many of the key players in the Frankfurt School at the time as well..what you'd see is a very clear, repeated presence of books and essays concerned with the subject of art and aesthetics. Now seeing that...this can be kind of confusing at first...like, why would that be the case? I mean if the task of the Frankfurt School was to find out what went wrong during the thinking of the Enlightenment, to examine the effects of advanced capitalism in the west, to try to figure out why the revolution Marx prophesied never came...if that's your goal, why are you wasting even a second of your time talking about something like...you know, the form of a piece of artwork...or how people and works of art interface with each other in the world...why are we talking about any of this stuff? Now the extension to that...and it's a very common, understandable, natural human reaction to what we've talked about so far...ok, say Marcuse's right. I now realize I'm living in a totalitarian society...I mean, is that something we should be taking lightly here? Like really if what the Frankfurt School's saying is true, why should we be concerned with art right now? Why make a movie about how bad things are? Why are we gonna write a catchy little jingle about how

we're needlessly repressed? No, how about we DO something about it. Let's go. Let's get out into the streets and take back the country that apparently was never ours to begin with! Let's string politicians up with chicken wire if we have to! It's time to CHANGE things! Right now. Marcuse would look at this person and he would understand their anger...he would understand their passion for wanting to change the world for the better...but he'd probably say to them... that when it comes to the process of liberation, from forces of domination that are AS entrenched as these one are...don't mistake movement, for progress. That being angry and screaming at people and taking to the streets may make you FEEL like you're doing something that's changing the world for the better...but you have to examine and re-examine your tactics...are you really changing anything there? Because again, Marxist revolutions throughout history have shown time and time again that you can't implement these ideas into a capitalist society by force. And again, if something is ever gonna happen that even remotely resembles this kind of revolution that's being suggested...it's not gonna come by people taking to the streets...it's going to come by way of a slow shifting of class consciousness. It's going to come by educating people. It's going to come by getting people to see themselves and their place in the world in a different way. It's going to come by explaining to people how it's even possible, that every day up until the point they heard this stuff they lived immersed in a system like this without ever realizing it. In other words, in the language of Marcuse, it's going to come by changing the way that people view their subjectivity. Now let's explain that a bit...subjectivity's one of those words that's easy for people to bring their own definitions to it...and it may cause some confusion. A bit of foreshadowing here, but when we eventually get to covering the second half of the 20th century on this show, what we're going to see is a lot of philosophers focusing on this concept in philosophy called subjectivity. Or in other words, where do we get all the ideas we have up in our heads about ourselves, our place in the world and what is going on all around us in our version of reality? That's a key distinction to make there...our version of reality...because as we're all aware what a particular human being believes is going on all around them is not necessarily connected to what's actually going on around them...we

can see countless examples of this throughout history: If you lived two-thousand years ago as a Platonist you might have had an Essentialist perception of your world. The essence of what you are is that you are a rational animal...navigating the universe of Plato's Timaeus the world made up of these tetrahedrons and octohedrons that are too small for you to see. Say you lived a little later in history you might have a subjectivity that was much more informed by religion...a little later than that maybe you'd be informed by idealism and some version of Kant. Flash forward in history from there and you could have a structuralist version of subjectivity...that in the same way...you know if you wanted to explain to someone what a free-throw was in a basketball game...for you to be able to explain to them what a free throw was, they would first have to have an understanding of tons of other things that are related to it, right?...what basketball is...of what a game is...of what sports are at all...but it goes the other way too...they'd also have to have an understanding of what a basketball is....what a hoop is...what the lines on the floor denote...but even then they'd have to have FURTHER more FUNDAMENTAL knowledge of measurement and distance to be able to understand the concept of 15 feet away from the backboard...this goes on indefinitely in both directions...to explain the concept of a free throw is really to just explain the relationships between a free throw and all of the concepts around it in a given system...the meaning of a free throw...IS the set of relationships it has to other things within a larger system. Well, what if our subjectivity is the same way? That everything about who you are and where you fit into the world is dictated by some system that you're a part of? Now that's not where this discussion of subjectivity ends...even beyond that there are post-structuralists that would say...that the very concept of subjectivity is something that we've imposed upon discourse...mostly just because it corresponds with language and the subject/object way that we speak about things...but also because of the practical benefits it provides, when we impose this illusion of subjectivity onto ourselves... now we can do all kinds of cool stuff...we can make truth claims based on a subjective position...now we can construct philosophical systems, tons of stuff...the point is: there are a lot of theories about subjectivity out there, and it's crucial for us to understand how important this question is to the philosophers

doing their work at this time. So in the case of Marcuse...the shifting of class consciousness is the shifting of people's subjectivity. Where does the average American worker get their subjectivity? Where do they get their ideas about who they are...how they fit into the world...how America fits into the world and everything else? Well, after they graduate school, from the culture industry. Many people get their version of reality from distorted, oversimplified pictures of the world, that are really just products served up to workers to appease them after a long day at a job they don't feel connected to. See that's the thing...the culture industry is kind of like the world's worst psycho-therapist. Like imagine you go in to therapy, you sit down, the person asks you how your week was and you say, gah it was horrible. Horrible. My boss still has it out for me. She's jealous, she scared I'm gonna take her job and she persecutes me every day. It's misery. Then I go home and my domestic life partner is just constantly annoying me...and what's worse: they're doing it on purpose, doctor! They're slowly trying to make me slip into madness so that they can lock me away in an institution and get the life insurance money! What if when you said that to the therapist they replied back and said, wow. What a perfectly accurate depiction of what's going on in your world! I mean, your life is horrible! No...that would be the worst therapist in the world. The therapist's job among many other things is to help get you to see the black and white ways you are looking at the world and present you with alternative version of reality that may be more accurate. Well what does the culture industry do? REINFORCE the black and white ways you're looking at the world and NOT present you with alternative versions of reality. The culture industry produces masses of people with this type of subjectivity. Masses of people that when they hear a more nuanced, deep discussion... an alternative view of the world they live in... they run in the other direction, exhausted and intimidated. Oh, I hear a lot of big words and smart people stuff...I don't like that...I'm gonna go watch that storage TV show where they find the lost sarcophagus of Ramses the second in Cleveland somewhere. This is the reason why people like Marcuse are so concerned with art and aesthetics. Because the reality of the world we live in... is that Marcuse and one of his colleagues can sit around and have discussions all day long about this alternative picture of the average American's

subjectivity...but if the average american worker would rather jump off a building than have to do the work of challenging the way they see things...those words and ideas are effectively doing nothing when it comes to shifting class consciousness. What tools do we have that can get through to people? Well to Marcuse, one of the answers is art. Great works of art have the ability to deliver people a message that normal speech just can't deliver on it's own. Great works of art have the ability... to make people feel...and feel intensely...masses of people...not just people that happen to be a graduate student under Marcuse. Works of art have the ability to show the average person an alternative view of themselves, the way the world is, their subjectivity...and because of this...to Marcuse...works of art have the potential to be a tool for liberation. Liberation from the narrow subjectivity given to Americans by the culture industry. Marcuse says: The truth of art. See, in a way Marcuse's looking at great works of art the same way WE might look at a great science experiment. What's a great science experiment? Well they're all equally great, I'm not playing favorites...but how about the ones that lead us to what seems like a more accurate picture of the universe? What happens? Formerly, before we did this science experiment, knowledge about a piece of the universe was obscured from us. Now it should be said, the result of this experiment has ALWAYS been the way that things are...I lived every day of my life up until that point ignorant of this little piece of the universe...and now here I am. A little more enlightened...my view of things around me a little more accurate thanks to this great science experiment. Well to Marcuse, works of art have the ability to do this very same thing at a cultural level. They can show people pieces of reality that were going on all around them that they never noticed before because they were immersed in it. Works of art have the ability to actually SHIFT a person's subjectivity, and broaden it. Now if you think Marcuse's gonna follow up with hey, everyone! Make a bunch of art that shows people how horrible Capitalism is! No, actually his scope is much larger than that...economics is not the only area art has the potential for liberation. See, Marcuse notices a problem in Marx...when Marx looks back at history and sees the exploited class of people in the varying economic systems, he mistakenly spends the majority of his work thinking about the domination and

oppression of people, solely in terms of what economic role they play. Marcuse would want to point out, well we obviously know people have been oppressed based on other factors outside of what economic role they play. In the case of the United States specifically... on racial grounds, predominantly African Americans. Gender grounds, predominantly women. Grounds of sexual orientation, predominantly anything that isn't heterosexual. Great works of art not only have the ability to show people a different perspective of the world they live in in terms of economics...they also have the ability to show people the struggle and reality of other groups that are repressed for different reasons. The potential for liberation, still there. For example, when NWA comes out with the song F the Police in 1988. That song is an opportunity for the average American immersed in their everyday life of work and consumption to see a piece of reality that they don't necessarily have to see every day in 1988. To hear the pain and anger of a historically repressed group of people. Human beings living in these cordoned off neighborhoods looked at as the other, largely ignored by the governments that serve them, left to fend for themselves, and among all the other problems they have, they're left to contend with the fact that if they ever have a reason to call the police, they can't even trust them to enforce the law in a way that doesn't discriminate against them. This song is an opportunity for the average American worker in 1988... to see a reality of the world around them that existed the whole time, but they were blocked from seeing it because of the narrow subjectivity the culture industry had given them. Just like with a great science experiment, this song has the potential to deliver to people a slightly more accurate picture of the world they live in, in other words: to change their subjectivity. Now you may hear that and think, well what happened? I mean everyone's heard that song...and it doesn't seem like it sparked some sort of national discussion and a shifting of class consciousness. Marcuse would probably say, don't get me wrong. Art is not a panacea. Art may be a tool for liberation but it's not a tool that's as effective as a hammer at hammering in a nail. It's kind of like using a screwdriver to hammer in a nail. It's janky...and part of the reason why is because Capitalism is just SO resilient, and capable of absorbing any sort of potential liberation and turning it into a money making product

for the masses to consume. Sure, that song has the potential to change the way people think about the relationship between police and minorities, but it also has the potential to become co-opted by Capitalism, turned into a hit song, played at the Super Bowl and then eventually the genre being filled with artists worshipping Capitalism constantly talking about what Lamborghini they're going to buy next. How many people that hear that song hear the cries of historical oppression and how many say, oh man that's a sick beat. Yeah, I have that song on my phone...anytime the cops pull me over and give me a ticket I blast that song...I get what Ice Cube's talking about there! No liberation...it just becomes...a product in the consumers infinite landscape of products. See because as Marcuse would say, liberation always occurs dialectically. What he means by that is, that if art, in any way, ever, leads to the liberation of people...one of the problems you run in to is that it always needs to liberate people while being created and distributed within the current system of domination and the tools that are available. For example if you wanted to try to liberate people from Capitalism, you would need to operate within the system of Capitalism to do that. Same as if you wanted to liberate women, you would have to do so from within a world where women are oppressed and need to be liberated. But don't take these two examples as a prescription from Marcuse, he's making a larger point here about liberation in general. That the forces of domination always give rise to the forces of liberation. But one thing we should ALL understand and take EXTREMELY seriously...is that it goes the other way too...the forces of liberation always give rise to the new forces of domination in what appears to be a constant historical cycle that we're locked in. Marcuse thinks it's possible to bring about a world where the people being liberated don't feel the need to dominate and oppress another group of people once they're liberated. The goal shouldn't be just taking turns repressing each other for the rest of time. That strategy is EQUALLY ignorant, outdated and from a bygone era of history. Marcuse would say, sure, art is far from perfect. But what better tool do we have within Capitalism to peacefully bring about this world and end this constant dialectic of oppressing each other? What other tools do we have for liberation? What the political system? Marcuse would say, uh, yeah...maybe at ONE point in this country's

history...maybe if this wasn't AS advanced a version of monopoly capitalism. Good luck unless you have 8 trillion dollars and enough money to outspend all the companies that currently fund the campaigns of politicians in exchange for influence on legislation; no the revolutionary potential of politics has been corroded and disintegrated by Capitalism. Again, this is why art and aesthetics are so important to many members of the Frankfurt School, not just Marcuse. Because we're living in an advanced version of monopoly capitalism that has defused and co-opted all of the liberating potential we USED to have...art is one of the only things we have left. Marcuse has a quote: "Art doesn't change the world, but it may change the consciousness of people who CAN change the world." Now at first that may seem like an applause break point...art doesn't change the world WE CHANGE IT! But it's actually referencing something that isn't immediately on the surface...something that goes hand in hand with his idea of The Great Refusal. So art all by itself, no matter how revolutionary and liberating it may be...doesn't really do anything. I mean I'm serious if you look at it, it really doesn't do anything...it's this inert thing that just kind of hangs there on the museum wall until it decomposes and the sun explodes in 4 billion years. In other words, how revolutionary a piece of artwork is comes down not to the intentions of the artist, not how great of a person they are...but to the answer to the question: how many minds has this piece of artwork changed? To how many people has this piece of art delivered an alternative way of viewing the world that they're receptive to and hadn't thought of before? Marcuse would say that if the goal is a shifting of class consciousness....The real trick to Marcuse is finding a balance between the two and being honest enough with yourself to take a true assessment of how much good you're really doing. But that said... he and other members of the Frankfurt School... would want to point out that is much easier said than done. again, a great piece of artwork is a physical embodiment of radical subjectivity... where sometimes the forces of Capitalism step in, take control over it, remove it's potential for liberation and turn it into just a product. Well so too, if you're living as an embodiment of radical subjectivity, Capitalism has ways of removing your potential for liberation... and turning YOU into someone who just keeps the status-quo going. See, truly living the great refusal... can

sometimes take an enormous amount of sacrifice. The people who have made the choice to fight against the way that things are...many of them have uprooted their entire existence, these aren't just ideas to them...they suffer and grind on a daily basis for the cause of liberation, many of them have even given their own life. We can do an episode on the Great Refusal once again I'm going to leave it up to the demand I receive, but the point I want to make is that there is a big difference between people that hear the ideas of the Frankfurt School, think they're making good points and complain about how messed up the system is, and these people that are actually making The Great Refusal. It's not the Good Refusal. Not the fair to midland refusal. These traps that Capitalism sets for you to fall into...they're so alluring. When you've structured your life around and lived so long in work mode and consumption mode...such an easy trap to fall into is to hear these theories, get angry, feel indignant and self-righteous, and then spend the rest of your life screaming and chanting and pepper spraying your way to never changing a single person's subjectivity. Such an easy trap...to have all the theories right, but the wrong kind of praxis. What's ironic to Marcuse, because of the power of Capitalism...is how easy it is to know the theories of the Frankfurt School and become as complicit in the way that things are as the people you're screaming at. When average american goes to their job, feel alienated, never question anything, and consume products by the culture industry that reinforce their idea that nothing is wrong with the United States, they will go on to change the subjectivity of a grand total of zero people. Doesn't matter how right your theories are...if your method of praxis is not actually changing people's minds...if it's not finding a way to relate to your fellow people as a human beings and convey a message...if it's only serving to scratch some personal itch you have of feeling like something drastic needs to change about the world...you're not changing people's subjectivity...you're being selfish...all the while perpetuating the vice grip Capitalism has on the country, where in your own small way you ensure that people will continue to be polarized in this country, dogmatic about their beliefs, talking towards each other, talking past each other...but never talking with each other. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Structuralism and Context

Episode #115

This is a transcript of episode #115 on the origins of Structuralism. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So when we first began this massive, most recent arc of the show on the philosophical conversations of the 20th century I said that the first thing we're going to need is a much deeper understanding of Sartre. Well by the end of today's episode we're going to understand why that was the case. What I also said back then is that every several episodes or so we need to take a step back and give some context about the state of philosophy and what these thinkers are responding to when doing their work. See because it's so easy to skip ahead, not understand the questions these thinkers thought were worth answering and miss out on a lot of big changes that are occurring in human history at this time that shaped the world we live in today. You know, I was thinking the other day: since we began this recent arc of the show, every thinker we've covered so far has been a continental philosopher. But then I started thinking: wait a second...this show masquerades around as a beginner friendly conversation about the progression of human thought in the 20th century and we've never once talked about the distinction between continental and analytic philosophy. What do we mean when we say continental vs analytic philosophy? To better understand this story to come that needs to be told, I think it's crucial information to have...so I want to touch on it briefly right now...and whether you have no idea what I'm talking about, whether you've heard those terms used and kind of know what they mean, whether you're the world's foremost expert on continental and analytic philosophy...one very important thing to consider right off the bat is to not fall into the trap of overgeneralizing thinkers and rigidly placing them into these two neat categories in your mind. You know, they're either a continental philosopher or an analytic philosopher. Really these two words... they're not titles to be branded into the side of thinkers...they're more just, practical terms that are used when people are broadly discussing the history of philosophy in the 20th century...thinkers

crossover all the time...but nevertheless it's important to understand why people usually talk about philosophy as having these two distinct approaches during this time period. There are several different theories but one of the most common ones is that these are two different areas of philosophy that can ultimately be traced back to assertions made in the work of Immanuel Kant. Real quick if you remember...Kant is doing his philosophy right after people like Hume and Leibniz. Right when philosophers are re-examining the more classical idea of what truth is and how we can arrive at knowledge. Right after ideas like what's often called Hume's fork or Leibniz's claim that there are only two ways we can ever arrive at the truth about things...there are truths of reason...and truths of fact. When he says truths of fact, he's talking about something we can know is true because it can be immediately verified empirically in our experience of the world, for example, someone can say the faucet is on in the downstairs bathroom... and Leibniz would say that we can know whether this statement is true or false because we can walk into the bathroom and immediately experience that the faucet is, in fact, on. What Leibniz means by truths of reason are things that we can know are true simply by virtue of the definitions that we've prescribed to the terms in the proposition. For example, all triangles have three sides. All bachelors are unmarried. $1+1=2$. In other words, the definitions of the terms in these statements are what make them true. These are examples of truths of reason. Another name these two types of statements often get in philosophy around this time is a priori (truths of reason) and a posteriori (truths of fact). Well facing this argument during his own time, Kant finds himself in a tricky situation. The problem is if these really are the only two kinds of truth that we can arrive at...where does that leave philosophy? Truths of fact where we are empirically verifying things...that's the realm of science. That's what science does so well. Should philosophers just start becoming scientists now in Kant's time? On the other hand, with truths of reason...is the life of a philosopher to just sit around talking about triangles and bachelors all day? And here's his point: might there be another type of true statement that can be made that we're all forgetting about here? This is where Kant introduces his idea of a synthetic a priori proposition or simply put, there are some things out there that

we are capable of reasoning to an understanding of, that don't just have to do with the definitions of things like statements about triangles and bachelors, but that aren't the kind of things we can experience empirically or measure with a science experiment. Well here's where the split between continental and analytic philosophy emerges...we have on one hand, through the work of G.E. Moore, quickly on to Bertrand Russell, Ernst Mach and then to a group of thinkers that would eventually be called The Vienna Circle, which we'll talk about soon...on one hand thinkers like these started taking issue with this concept that Kant's lays out of synthetic a priori propositions. This has come to be known as the analytic tradition of philosophy, while on the other hand, an entirely different group of thinkers took issue with what they saw as problems in Kant's concept of there being two distinct worlds that exist: a world of things in themselves and a world of human experience, this has come to be known as the continental tradition within philosophy. Put another way...we have one major approach to philosophy at this time that primarily takes issue with Kant's epistemology (the analytic tradition)...and another major approach that takes issue with Kant's metaphysics. (the continental tradition) Now as you can imagine, as thinkers start giving their responses and then the responses to the responses, and so on... what's actually being talked about starts to resemble Kant less and less, but many historians of philosophy still trace the origins of these conversations back to the work of Kant. Now as you can ALSO imagine, as these two different approaches to what philosophy should be spending its time on continued to develop, both camps come up with their own individual methods of conducting philosophy. For example, if you're a member of the analytic tradition... and you think that what philosophy should be spending its time on is getting philosophy out of the business of making sweeping metaphysical claims as it has in the past, and in the business of following up philosophy's history of questioning what we can know, how we can know it, in other words, linguistic analysis, formal logic, how our thoughts work, what's wrong with Kant's synthetic a priori, what exactly are we engaging in when we SAY something like all triangles have three sides? Now, if these are the kinds of things you think philosophy should be focusing on, well these are very clearly defined problems

to deal with and your solution is probably going to involve being very analytic...breaking propositions down into their component parts and understanding the relationship between the parts. Why is this an important thing to focus on for human beings as a species? Well, language and the way we make propositions about things in the world is, again, not some method that was handed down by a deity or some philosopher king in the form of Webster's dictionary. No, language is a massively flawed, imprecise, messed up collection of agreements made by a bunch of people in the past. That in the past whenever we've used reason to arrive at ideas that hopefully are going to make the world a better place, sometimes have made the world a horrible place...we're ultimately communicating those rational thoughts through the filter of language. So if you're an analytic philosopher like say Wittgenstein for example...the thinking is: we have to figure out this language thing and this formal logic thing a lot better than we do right now...because what if most of the problems we've run into in the ideas that we're coming up with... come down to people using language imprecisely, or even worse...trying to use language to talk about subject matters that language is completely incapable of describing? Now if you're a continental philosopher...it's often said that analytic philosophy focuses on analysis...continental philosophy focuses on synthesis. We've already seen examples of this in the ideas of Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir and Marcuse and many others...what this is, is any set of ideas that attempts to look at a wide array of things that have to do with existence...for example, history, and people, and art and literature, and economics, they look at all these things...and try to find some way that all of these can be synthesized together and understood by relating to some grand philosophical narrative. Consciousness is freedom. The Ambiguity of existence. The historical forces of domination and liberation. The study of Ontology if you're Heidegger. Questions in the continental tradition sound more like, what does it mean to be me? How do I fit into the world? How did the world get the way that it is? What is the nature of subjectivity? Now, why should these questions matter to us as a species? Well, as we've already touched on in the Heidegger series, there just seems to be more to philosophy than studying language and thoughts and the propositions we make...to

Heidegger...language and formal logic are a prison that he's trying to break philosophy out of. This is why he's so interested in using phenomenology to study being at its very foundations...in other words, before we ever add on these abstractions and human inventions like language and logic that just narrow and distort the way that we look at what it is to be. He'd say that if you go every day of your life with people describing what the world is in a language that requires that for something to be a complete sentence there needs to be a subject acting upon an object. A world where you're required to frame every thought that you have in the same way...how much of an effect does that have on the way we see ourselves? How much of an effect is that going to have on the philosophy you're going to produce...or the way you're going to treat other people? Now understanding, these two distinct approaches to what people felt philosophy should be focusing on at this time in the early 20th century is crucial context to have...because it's right around this time...there's about to be a breakthrough in human thought... it's a breakthrough that is going to instantly get people to rethink the way human beings have been looking at practically every field of study in the past. It's a breakthrough where once people started talking about this insight...the major works of it explicitly calling out the work of Jean-Paul Sartre...Sartre being someone who was a public intellectual, who wrote every single day of his life, ALWAYS had thoughts and responses to give, and even HE never replied to the criticisms of his work, the feeling of the philosophical community at the time was that this was an admission of defeat. This was a breakthrough that made several of the major foundational claims of existentialism start to seem...pretty naive. Started to make the history of how we've been approaching everything seem pretty naive. What's really interesting to consider is that this breakthrough didn't come in the field of philosophy...or science...or mathematics or any of these fields where it may seem more likely for a major breakthrough to occur...it actually came in the field of linguistics. Through the work of a man named Ferdinand de Saussure. So I want to talk for a little about this insight that Saussure has that is most easily seen when we look at language...and then for the next couple episodes talk about the massive implications this has on practically every other field of study when thinkers apply it. Ferdinand de

Saussure is credited with being the founder of something called Semiotics. Semiotics, put in a very simple way, is the study of signs. Signs, put in a very simple way, are things that people use, for practical reasons, that stand in for something else. The basic concept that we're talking about here is not complex at all...it's something all of us do thousands of times a day and don't even think about it. One example of a sign that we're all familiar with would be a word. Let's say I wanted to convey to you the concept of a cow. Well without words...how do I do that? Well, we could just walk around until we find a cow on the side of the road and I could frantically point at it and jump up and down...but quite frankly nobody really has the time to do that and then once you show me the cow...now what? You just wanted to show me...cow? No there's something about the cow you want to tell me and now we have to walk around until you can point at the next thing. Nobody wants to live like this...so what do we do...we come up with a sign that stands in for that cow when there's not one immediately next to you...the word cow. The word C-O-W, cow acts as a stand in...I can write it on a piece of paper...I can say the word cow and it instantly delivers to you a message that has a very specific meaning that is transmitted into your head. Now for our discussion here today the terms sign and word can pretty much be used interchangeably, but it should be said that Semiotics and the study of signs goes far beyond just the study of words. For example, if I wanted to convey to you the concept of a cow, I don't always have to use words. I could draw you a picture of a cow...and that picture could vary from just a doodle of a cow on a post-it note...to the most photo realistic painting of a cow you've ever seen. I could mime to you what it looks like to be a cow, and moo and frolic through the grass on all fours, that's a sign too. You know how two people that don't speak the same language will try to communicate by acting out what it is they're talking about? That's an example of them using signs to try to deliver a message with a specific meaning. Signs even extend to things beyond some person trying to convey a message. You could look at a field and see the lines in the grass and the smell of fresh cut grass and that could be a sign that delivers the message that the grass was just cut. Now when you study all of these examples of what signs are, Ferdinand De Saussure says that all signs can be broken down into two primary parts. What he calls

the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the actual word cow, or the drawing of the cow or more generally the thing that is standing in for the thing that's being referenced that isn't right in front of us. The signified, as you can probably guess, is the concept of cow that is being referenced...it's the concept of the thing that the signifier is standing in for. Now all of this may seem really obvious to you, and like we're needlessly complicating things that are really simple...yeah, ok there's a word and then there's the thing it's referencing...I got it. But what Ferdinand De Saussure does next...changes the world. He makes the claim that there is zero necessary connection between the signifier and the signified. In other words, there's nothing about three squiggly lines on a piece of paper...the letters c-o-w that necessarily corresponds with the four legged creature frolicking around in pastures all over the world. What he's responding to here is a long tradition of thinkers wondering how exactly languages emerge. We assume that at one point, there wasn't language, and now there is language. People want to find out: how did that process go? Well a common theory throughout history has been that it must have started with a lot of pointing and grunting and miming things until language became more sophisticated. And that process of sophistication was guided by people creating words that directly correspond with the world they're trying to describe. The obvious example of this is onomatopoeia. We say the word meow, because it sounds like the actual sound the cat is making. We have the word boom because boom kind of sounds like the sound of something exploding. In other words, there is a direct relationship between signifier and signified. That something about the words themselves directly correspond with something about the way the world is. And there are of course very real problems with this theory, not the least of which are the extreme differences even just between different languages that are describing the same thing in the world with words that sound and look very different from each other...but again what Ferdinand De Saussure is going to finally say is that there's nothing about the sound cow or the squiggly lines c-o-w on a piece of paper that depicts something necessarily connected to the four legged grass eating animal that it's referencing. The word cow is a cultural construction. We constructed it...because we wanted to be able to communicate more

efficiently...not because it objectively corresponds with something in the actual world. Now here's the thing: if what Saussure is saying here is true, this raises an extremely important question for the field of linguistics. The question is at what point does the sound cow and the letters c-o-w written on a piece of paper become injected with meaning? Where exactly does that meaning come from? And what Saussure is going to say is that the meaning of a word lies in the relationships between that word and all of the other words within a larger system. Put another way, the word "cow" means something to us, only in the sense that it is not the word, cat or cob or conduit or any of the thousands of other words we have within a larger system that we call the English language, it's the larger structure that gives the word its meaning. What he's also going to say is that what Semiotics shows us on a more macro level...pick any sentence you want that conveys a meaningful message...actually, for the sake of the example pick a sentence that is eight words long. There are 40,320 ways that you can re-arrange all the words in that sentence...and practically every combination creates a sentence that is utterly meaningless to us. They're just random words next to each other with no meaning to them at all. That is until we arrange them in a very specific STRUCTURE...a grammatical structure a syntax...that is when things change from a random jumble of words into a meaningful statement. Well what linguists realize at this time is that this structure...that underlies any meaningful statement... seems to be observable. We seem to be able to study it. We seem to be able to actually understand it and predict it. This premise is the starting point for what would eventually come to be known as structural linguistics. Now the thinkers that come immediately after Ferdinand De Saussure start to notice something. They start to notice that these structures...appear to be everywhere...not just in language. See, it makes perfect sense to us to look at a sentence and realize that there is an underlying structure to language that makes it meaningful. Little bit more abstract of a concept to consider that there is an underlying structure to music...or to a painting...or to a work of literature. Little more abstract than that and these thinkers that take up Saussure's ideas start to notice that there seems to be a structure to economics, a structure to psychology, a structure to history, a structure to practically every field of

inquiry there is. These structures seem to them to be almost like fingerprints left behind whenever you have any humanistic endeavor...whenever any human being in history has tried to make sense of the infinite complexity of this universe that we live in, they do so by imposing these narrow structures that we humans can understand. And just like the structure that underlies language...these structures are observable. These structures can be studied, understood and even predicted. This is a moment in history when a lot of fields of study that used to be considered part of the humanities turned into the social sciences. A science. There is a scientific, almost mathematical way that we can look at these structures that underly and ultimately determine the world we live in. Now ALL of this...gets these thinkers to start looking at subjectivity in a very different way. Because think about the implications of this new approach that becomes known as structuralism. And I don't want to spoil any of the really exciting ideas that are to come on the next couple episodes of the show, so I'll keep this very general. Thinkers around this time are starting to consider things like: well if what gives the letters c-o-w meaning is just their relationship to thousands of other words within a larger structure...if what makes the word cow meaningful is just the fact that it is not cat or horse or platypus. Maybe the meaning of what it is to be YOU...is just the relationships between you and what it means to be the thousands of other people that surround you every day. Maybe the only thing that gives you your own sense of self-identity...is just the fact that you're NOT Jared in the marketing department down the hall and everything that makes him what he is...or Mariana the construction worker and what she is...the subtle differences between the words c-o-w and c-a-t are comparable to the subtle differences between you and any of the others that surround you. But these thinkers go further than that. When it comes to the metaphor of the eight word sentence that we talked about. There are practically an infinite number of potential sentences that you can construct. The individual words in those sentences can be scrambled an enormous number of ways, but it's not until they are in a very specific structure that they can work for us...thinkers around this time are starting to ask: well there are practically an infinite number of possible cultures that can potentially exist...a near infinite number of ways for human beings to chop up the

universe and organize their societies in a meaningful way...what if it's not until our cultures conform to a very specific structure that they allow society to function properly? That even though on the surface there seem to be massive differences between cultures, ultimately they all conform to the same narrow structure humans have used when desperately trying to make a society that not only functions, but one that we can comprehend. See that's the other side to this that the structuralists are going to point out...there are no guarantees in nation building...that it's possible to reject these structures that allow for society to function so much... that you create a world and a culture that human beings are incapable of navigating. When people started thinking about subjectivity and what it is to be you in these new structuralist terms...the idea of subjectivity as we've traditionally looked at it...starts to dissolve away. What it starts to look like is that what it is to be you... is to be a single, instantiation of a culture, a culture with an extremely narrow structure that human beings imposed on the infinite complexity of the universe so that they could create a society that functions. Every thought you've ever had...every thought you WILL have in the future...every bias, every preference, every moral intuition that you identify as a huge aspect of what it is to be you...all of these are just stories that have been given to you by a culture that was structured in such ridiculously narrow terms that any claim that your view of the world is harnessing some level of objectivity about the way things are...is just downright delusional. Where ELSE would you have gotten the contents of this thing you call your "self", that in a very deterministic way this thing we think of as our "self" starts to dissolve, it starts to resemble just a fleeting revolving door of stories that we tell ourselves given to us by the time period and culture we happen to be in. The BEST way to illustrate what we're talking about here, I think, is to remove you and me from the equation altogether and let's just think about ALL the other human beings that have existed throughout history. People in thirteenth century Europe. People in 9th century Baghdad. Why did these people have the view they did...of who they were and where they fit into the world? Well these changes brought about by structuralism are happening right around the same time people are drastically rethinking the way that historians

record what has happened throughout history...and this change is relevant to this discussion. See it was really common around this time, and you still see it in today's world to a certain extent, but it was really common for people to tell the story of history by talking about it in terms of leaders or governments acting out their will on the world around them. We've all seen this before. You know...when the story of human history is being told by talking about things like...Hannibal invades Rome. Harun al-Rashid and Chinese government establish an alliance. Two world powers unite. Napoleon invades Russia...the winter forces him back and then THIS treaty is signed by the government or THIS embargo is passed...in other words: human history is often told solely in terms of what leaders and governments carried out over the years...but historians start to realize that this is actually an extremely narrow lens to be telling the history of the world through. I mean, if you're a historian over the years it makes perfect sense...you want an accurate account of what's happened in the past...governments, generally speaking, keep good records. So if you're a historian you can actually go into the archives and see the signed document for when, for example, a declaration of war was signed or a treaty was agreed upon. But are these events a comprehensive picture of the history of the human species? Why is the history of the human species any MORE Napoleon invading Russia than, for example, the evolution of what it is to be an average citizen of India from the 1100's to the 1400's...or anything ELSE for that matter...The point that's being made at this time in the early 20th century is: Aren't there countless other ways we could be telling the history of the world could be told, many of which having nothing to do with this small handful of powerful people changing the world to fit their image? Now this is not some sort of feel good point where they're trying to belittle the accomplishments of powerful people in the past...This is more trying to get the conversation going of what sort of thinking does looking at our history like this produce? And what structuralists are going to say is that what this has inadvertently done is caused people when they're looking back at history to have a bias in their thinking towards the idea it's the subject that dictates what happens in the world. Not the world that dictates the subject. When Napoleon invades Russia...there is a sense in which Napoleon is this autonomous subject

with free will and is freely using that subjectivity to change history for everyone and invade Russia. But what if it was the other way around? What if instead of it being that Napoleon changed the world, what if the world created Napoleon and everything that he ever chose to do? What if instead of this old idea of subjectivity that dates all the way back to the Pre-Socratics...that we're these autonomous subjects equipped with free will, tabula rasas...instead of all that...what if what it is to be a subject, what it is to be you, is to be a product produced by a particular narrow, practically microscopic, take on the universe given to you by your culture and time period. Let's talk about a specific example of this. There's a famous historian named Lucien Febvre who right around this time attempts to reconstruct what it would have been like to be a person living in France during the 16 century. He looks at everything from the social dynamics that existed at the time, the language that was being used, the nature of how people see their relationships with other people, even down to things like the way the average person would have perceived the concept of time... and one of the primary conclusions he arrives at after having done this...is that if you were living in this society during the 1500s...it would be absolutely impossible...for you to ever be an Atheist. Not because your brain is incapable of grasping the concept that there isn't a God...not that if we sent Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris back in a time machine they couldn't convince a few people. No, because of how deeply religious thinking pervades EVERYTHING to do with the way that you would have viewed your place in the world, because of how much you would frame EVERYTHING about your life in terms of its relationship to a deity...in a very deterministic way...you would just never arrive at the belief that there is no god. It would be completely impossible. The culture and time period that you are born into dictate the narrow parameters for what you can possibly think. Now you probably see where this is going for the structuralists. Do you think for one second that the culture you were born into is any different? That there aren't countless ideas that you will just never arrive at because of the narrow parameters of thought that your time period has set up for you that allow you to make sense of things? What ideas exist out there right now that no human has ever had access to because of these incredibly narrow ways that we make

sense of things? But even THAT question is filled with what structuralists would see as an old, delusional way of thinking about epistemology from the history of philosophy. There's this general idea that spans all throughout the Cartesian tradition all the way back to people like Plato...it's this idea that we are these subjects, we think really hard, we reason about things and arrive at ideas that are out there in the ether somewhere. That as long as we stand in the Athenian agora and have conversations with Socrates for long enough...there's no limit to the understanding we can have about the universe. This goes hand in hand with the enlightenment era notion that as long as we reason about things long enough and clearly enough...there's the famous quote: "one day, the sun will shine over a humanity who acknowledge no other master than their own reason." That reason is capable of being successfully applied to all aspects of human life. But seeing human beings through this traditional lens philosophy has viewed them through...as these sort of open minded reasoning machines almost disinterestedly interpreting the world around them, that was on the way out...this moment in the history of human thought seems like a changing of the guard to a lot of people...how much does the environment you're born into and the language that you use every day dictate not only what you DO think...but what you CAN think...that as we'll see...even when it comes to what seems reasonable to you at all...reason itself...is in many ways dictated by social forces and cultural mores that are almost impossible for the average person to see while they're immersed in it. This whole shift...not surprisingly comes on the heels of the initial work of the Frankfurt School. Remember the Frankfurt School was really into Freud and Marx as many thinkers are around this time. Well, Freud and Marx are often talked about as being sort of proto-structuralists. Freud for questioning the traditional idea that we're these totally free, autonomous subjects and accounting for the possibility that a lot of your behavior is based on unconscious drives that are out of your control...and Marx...Yet another example of one of Marx's ideas that later thinkers see as tremendously flawed, but overall, pretty much on the right track. Something called Marxist Superstructure Theory. Very briefly, Marx wants to challenge what he would see as a pretty naive picture of the world that when someone, for example, creates a work of

art... that it is a free, uninhibited act of creation...just total freedom painting itself onto the canvas. No, what he'd say is that the kind of artwork that you produce is going to be massively dictated by something that was entirely out of your control: the economic and material reality that you were born into. The idea is that any authentic piece of artwork created by a worker and consumer is going to reflect the narrow set of values given to a worker and consumer at birth. You're always thinking and creating from a particular perspective...you can't HELP but create from that perspective...and this goes beyond just artwork to Marx...we can't help but bring to bear the biases produced by our economic situation... when we produce our systems of government, or our political positions, or our religions and or any other byproduct of human thought. All of these byproducts of human thought are part of what he calls a superstructure... a superstructure that always, and necessarily has to emerge out of the economic reality of the world. Someone like Marcuse would agree with most of this, but he'd want to add that it's not just the economic reality...it's the socioeconomic reality that you're born into. A structuralist would look at BOTH of these and think that they're massively oversimplifying it. We'll talk about why next time. So this is why there were a lot of people around this time that saw structuralism as the successor of existentialism. The idea that consciousness is freedom...the idea that we have every option in the universe available to us and the dread that comes along with having to make a choice about that...the thinking at the time was like, ok yeah, that may seem like our experience of it...and you very well may get tons of practical insights from the existentialists and the value of those is not cheapened by this...but the reality of the situation is that we DON'T have every option available to us...we're NOT totally free...that every choice we make and every thought we have is ultimately dictated by an extremely narrow set of parameters that were given to us. Throughout our lives, we are always navigating those narrow parameters that make sense to us. Shouldn't we try to understand exactly what those parameters are? Now real quick in closing, I think it's important to have some context about the fact that: shouldn't be too much of a spoiler at this point: structuralism is going to have massive effects on many different fields of study, but the people structuralism is going to hit the hardest...is

anyone that is interested in objectivity or something resembling it...not the least of which are the scientists of this particular era. You can understand their concern...one of the goals of science is to be as openminded as possible in your hypotheses and when you're actually conducting the experiment to check your ego and your pre-formed biases at the door. Well what if somebody told you that this whole time what you've been checking at the door...are really just your most BLATANT biases...and that you can't HELP but bring tons of other prejudices to bear when you conduct science...it's the very structure of what makes things intelligible to you...what it starts to look like is what it even is to say you're conducting science is to look at the universe through such a severely limited window...that scientists start to question whether the entire task is doomed from the start. So as we head into this next big chunk of episodes, I hope we're all a little better off understanding the larger context of the conversations going on during this time, what challenges these thinkers are facing and why the specific questions they're asking mattered to them, in that moment. As far as all the moments that are yet to follow this massive breakthrough in the early 20th century? Trust me, this story is just beginning. And it's about to start to getting good. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Structuralism and Mythology pt. 1

Episode #116

This is a transcript of episode #116 on Structuralism and Mythology. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So like we talked about last time, when structuralism bursts onto the scene in the early 20th century, there is an immediate shift in the way many thinkers view the traditional assumptions we've made about subjectivity. The idea that what you are is a free acting, independent subject sort of disinterestedly taking in the universe exploring the infinite options at your disposal...all of that starts to seem like an outdated, delusional way of viewing what it is to be a self. What it starts to look like is what you are...every preference, every habit, every belief that you hold is merely an expression, of rituals and structures of a culture that you happen to be occupying during your time here. The self doesn't shape the world, the world shapes the self. Now this is usually easy for people to get on board with when it comes to the little things. For example, the gestures we use. Like you can point out to someone that they wave at people when they greet them...and you can ask them: where exactly does that ritual come from? Where did you get the idea to move your hand back and forth at someone when you see them? I mean you didn't come out of the womb waving at everyone in the hospital...and you're certainly not the person that came up with the idea of waving. No, what happened was you were born into a culture that has a particular set of rituals. There was a time in your life when you didn't know anything about waving, but after seeing people wave at you over and over again as a form of greeting, eventually you added waving to your bag of tricks and now it's just part of you...it's what you do. If you were born into a different culture where waving wasn't a thing, you wouldn't have the slightest inclination at all to wave your hand in someone's face when you greeted them. Now, practically no one sees that as a controversial statement to make. But people start to feel a little weird when a structuralist asks them, what if your taste in music is the same way? What if your favorite clothes and your favorite book and your favorite way to spend your evening are also just

expressions of a culture you happened to be born into. What about your political viewpoints...your moral code...your views on the nature of existence, what if they're all the same way? To most people, these things feel very different than the cultural custom of waving...and the idea that they've just sort of picked these things up along the way...these things feel like they make up the totality of what it is to be me...see I've always seen myself as sort of a blank slate that is an autonomous self...I came into this universe knowing nothing about it...and slowly but surely I'm figuring the universe out...and now you're telling me that every viewpoint and every preference that I have is really just me choosing from the rituals and structures of an incredibly narrow set of cultural parameters, set up not to be able to understand the universe but for the sake of monkeys being able to work together better? How did this happen? Well an early structuralist might respond by saying that it happened in many different ways. Still is happening, by the way...your particular expression of the culture has already been reinforced to you probably hundreds of times just today...and the interesting thing is: you would never see it happening if you weren't specifically looking for it... because, it lies underneath the world as you immediately perceive it at a surface level. But what happens when you look at things in the world around you through the lens of Semiotics? Let me slow down, real quick just to prime this discussion that we're about to have, one of the crucial things to remember from last time is that early structuralists are going to be following up on the work of Ferdinand De Saussure. De Saussure being the person credited with founding the field of Semiotics. Semiotics being the study of signs. Signs being things like words or pictures or many other things that act as a stand in for something else for the sake of us being able to communicate effectively. What we also talked about was how Ferdinand De Saussure saw each sign as being comprised of two primary parts: there's the signifier, which is the word or picture, the thing standing in for something else...and then there's the signified, which is the concept of the thing the signifier is referencing. Well building from there... when early structuralists... started applying this Semiotic approach towards deconstructing signs in their respective fields of study...what they start to realize is that communication is often not as simple as there being just a single signifier... attached to a

single signified. It's not always as simple as our example from last time, there's the word "cow" and the concept of the four legged bovine creature in the field. That often times when we actually look at how signs are used in these complex fields of human study...a single signifier...can be attached to multiple different signifieds...a single word or a single sentence...may have a surface level meaning that it is trying to denote...but, as it's often said...there is a big difference between denotation and connotation...that beneath a surface level reading of what a particular sign is seeming to communicate, there's often layers upon layers of different meanings... meanings that on one hand, allow the complexity of the universe to appear intelligible to us, but on the other hand drastically narrow and distort the way we see reality. Let's explain this further because it's THIS insight that early structuralists stumble upon... that makes many of them become interested in specifically using this new Semiotic approach towards understanding... Mythology at a deeper level...and here's where they're coming from: what is the extent of the meaning that we can get out of a Mythological work? What I mean is...you can look at mythology in a number of different ways: There's a sense in which somebody could read a story from mythology, and they could interpret that story entirely at a surface level. Take Orphism and the mythology of ancient Greece for example. Somebody can read those stories...and it is entirely possible for them to read them in a very surface level way...and they may interpret what they read as just a fun story about a dysfunctional pantheon of gods. Almost like this story is a sort of Wikipedia for these primitive people of Greece that NEEDED some mythology like this to explain things for them. Oh, this is a story about this guy Zeus up in the clouds, he has a bag full of lightning bolts, and here's another story about Poseidon...God of the sea...don't want to make him mad. In other words, there's a sense in which someone can read these stories and think that they're just stories... or some sort of outdated, fairy tale account of the way the universe is...but there's another sense in which if you were to read mythology in this way...you'd be entirely missing the point, of mythology. That the true value and meaning of mythology is not in that surface level story about Zeus and Poseidon...no, there's a secondary message that's being delivered beneath the surface of the text, non-explicitly, and the onus is on

the reader to interpret and understand that deeper message. Depending on the mythology you're reading, this message could be anything: it could be the origins of a particular group of people, the values of the culture in which the story is being written, take the story of Noah's Ark for example: somebody could read that story and interpret it entirely at a surface level: this is a story about some guy named Noah, God decides he's going to shake the earth a sketch and start over, so Noah needs to build an ark. But another way of looking at that story is that the primary meaning for someone to take away from it is not in the denotation...it's in the secondary story beneath the text, or in the language of Semiotics there's another layer of meaning that lies in an entirely different set of signifieds... that connect to the original signifiers... and that this isn't merely a story about a guy named Noah and an ark, there is a deeper meaning to this story that, for example, provides Christians with valuable insights about their relationship with God and how to be a good Christian...but it potentially goes even deeper than that though...maybe even deeper than the meaning it has for practicing Christians, there are messages written into this story that any human being alive can find value in. Some people might say...maybe this isn't a story about a deity drowning everything on the planet at all...that the mythological archetype of the "flood" is something that is not unique to this story...it spans across many different cultures and mythological works to symbolize, at a deeper level of this text, the cycle of death and rebirth that nature inevitably throws our way as human beings...that anyone listening to this can come up with countless different ways that, tomorrow, nature could send some cataclysmic event our way that humanity would ostensibly want to survive, as we have throughout history, and that this story is something that can inform that process. That maybe it's not literally about a guy named Noah that sacrifices animals to God to earn his favor, maybe that process of sacrifice, at a deeper level of this story, is depicting how personal sacrifice is the only thing that can temper you into the kind of person that isn't instantly ruined by events that test you and are out of your control. Maybe it's not about building a boat...maybe building the boat is a metaphor for building the means by which you're going to survive this cataclysmic event before it actually happens. Now even if this

is a horrible take on Noah's Ark, you can understand the point here. Often times within mythology there are multiple signifieds attached to the original signifiers. There are the actual words that tell a very surface level story, but to only read it at that level would be missing out on a lot of the intended meaning of the work that lies, in a sense, beneath the surface level text. Now this is an extremely obvious point to us when it comes to mythology and things that clearly are written with a deeper meaning in mind...but the really important thing many structuralists would say we should all remember here: consider the possibility that you can go every single day of your life... reading mythology just at that very surface level...never realizing all the other layers there are...the reason this is so important to US in particular is because, you know... there's this very modern idea that's pretty popular, that as a species, when it comes to mythology...we're pretty much past all that. Mythology's this thing people used to do a long time ago to be able to explain the way the world is...but in today's world we have much more advanced and sophisticated ways of talking about things and quite frankly we don't have to resort to these archaic methods used in mythology that are obviously distorted, obviously oversimplified, we're past that as a species. Well one of the early structuralists by the name of Roland Barthes is going to say that the idea that we are in some sort of post-mythological age is complete and utter nonsense. See, to Barthes, mythology...is an extremely human thing to create and be engaged in...we do it all the time whether we realize it or not...and it's not that mythology no longer exists in our modern world...it's that the average person is so immersed within the mythology, the culture and our daily lives so saturated with a hidden, secondary story telling us the way the world is...that much like an average citizen of ancient Greece that might see a lightning bolt and confidently attribute that to Zeus...we do the very same sort of thing with our world and our mythology. And just like it's possible to go your whole life reading the mythology of ancient Greece at a very basic, surface level...you can go your entire life in our modern world interpreting everything that you see around you at a surface level, never realizing the deeper, secondary level story that you're blindly accepting as "just the way the world is." See Roland Barthes would say, again...it's not that mythology doesn't exist in our

modern world...it's that the delivery method of it has changed. Most people aren't going to some giant book filled with epic poetry about a pantheon of gods to get their mythology in this day and age...no, to Roland Barthes, the mythology of OUR world... is typically delivered to people through mass media. Because really consider the similarities between the two mediums when you look at them through the lens of semiotics like these early structuralists did...a dusty, old tome that contains mythology... is really just a vast collection of signs...hundreds of pages of signifiers that denote a surface level meaning but that also have multiple layers of signifieds attached to them that it's the reader's job to interpret...well the same thing is the case with the media we consume. For example, take your average TV news broadcast in today's world...for the sake of the example, if it's possible within your own political beliefs, picture the news broadcast you most disagree with, whether it's CNN, Fox News, doesn't matter...well what is that news broadcast REALLY when you look at it using Semiotics? Well, it's just a vast collection of signs...signs that on one level deliver a surface message of reporting the news of the day...but as you can see when you really analyze the specific signs and the calculated ways that CNN or Fox News are using them...there's often layers of mythology not being explicitly stated...and this mythology spans from things that are seemingly innocent like messages that reinforce their credibility as a news source...to messages that make value judgments about whose opinions should be taken seriously, all the way to mythology that makes brazen assumptions about what it even is to exist...all of these messages... shaping, distorting and narrowing people's views on the way the world is. Picture the typical signs that are presented to people in a news broadcast. And now the five o'clock news. Sweeping camera shot, there's music playing with a lot of beeping or a sense of urgency about it...Roland Barthes would really want us to ask ourselves, why is it that music in particular? What deeper story is being delivered to people there through that music? More signs are delivered to us: the camera brings into view a big room with two people sitting behind a desk dressed up in respectable clothes...why the desk? Why those clothes in particular? Why do they have incredible posture? Why is that giant picture behind them, why are they looking directly into the camera lens as though they're

looking you in the eye when they give you the news, why do they talk in a very specific, articulation and diction that is the way that somebody talks when they deliver you the news? See everything about the five o'clock news that's being presented to you is a vast collection of signs, and just like classic mythology, this combination of signs can be taken at a surface level and just glossed over, but to look at the news that way would be missing out on a lot of deeper stories that are being told to the viewers non-explicitly. Roland Barthes would say that peppered throughout this entire broadcast...is a mythology that's being communicated to you that what these people on the television screen are telling you is total, unmediated reality. Barthes would want to break it down even further though, even down to details that may seem completely insignificant at a surface level...for example, what's with all the scrolling text? Really, why is it that scrolling text is so popular on programs that deliver the news? Is it just a really efficient way of delivering a message to people? Or does the scrolling of the text add a little something to the way we perceive the information? For example, does scrolling text look a little more like an official bulletin that people should take seriously? Does it add to the viewer a feeling that the information is hot off the press because look, it just came into existence on the left side of my screen a couple seconds ago and I better read it because it's not gonna be around for long! Roland Barthes would say that we often look at the font of a message as sort of just a disinterested vehicle for delivering that message...but in reality, he would say, the font that something is written in... adjusts and changes the meaning of what it's conveying. There's a very good reason the newspaper isn't written in comic sans. And understanding why that is...understanding the deeper mythology there that's brought to bear even when it comes to something as seemingly insignificant as the font that's being used, can help us understand the goal of Roland Barthes during this portion of his career when he's analyzing mass media. That is: to demystify culture for the average viewer. We have been collectively mystified by this mythology that exists in media, and it's mystified us by doing what Barthes says it's so effective at doing: mythology transforms history into nature. And what he means by that is, look Barthes is an anti-essentialist. To him there is no such thing as some essential "way the world is" that we're accessing through

media...or at least no validity when people say essentialist things like "that's just the way people are" or "that's just the way Americans are" or any number of countless examples you could bring up. What mythology does is turn history into nature, it takes these cultural constructions, like for example the idea of "how americans are"...a construction that is ultimately arbitrary and completely contingent upon history, or what happens to have transpired in the past...and mythology gets people to look at that construction as though it's a fixed, unchanging part of nature...as though the way that you look at the world and make sense of it is "just the way the world is". Because here's the thing...back to CNN and Fox News for a second... Barthes would say there are a lot of people out there that are really good at spotting the mythology of people they disagree with...but when you ask them about their OWN worldview...oh, well my views are just the way the world is. That just goes without saying. Barthes says it's right there that you're always going to find mythology. Whenever someone says something like "it goes without saying" or "it's just the way the world is"...that's always an area where someone is loaded up with mythological baggage that they don't realize they're carrying around with them. This is the crucial point to understand about this mythology. The goal is not to do away with mythology... or become a person that looks at the world in a way devoid of mythology...to many structuralists, you can't escape mythology...to have an understanding of this universe at all is to have a mythology that you subscribe to that gives you a yes, narrow, but at least comprehensible picture that if you never thought about it may seem to you like just "the way the world is". The goal isn't to get rid of the mythology but to demystify your own personal mythology so that you can see it for what it actually is. What he ALSO wants people to realize through this is that when you look at mass media through the lens of semiotics, what becomes immediately obvious to you is how quickly we move, as he says, from Semiology to Ideology. Semiology is the original name Ferdinand De Saussure wanted to use, but it's more popularly known as Semiotics. What Barthes is saying is that when you use Semiotics to uncover these second and third level meanings hidden in media, what you find is almost always mythology that promotes a particular political ideology, and by "political ideology" he's not just talking about liberal vs.

conservative, his scope is much broader, by political he means any message that aims to change something about the world in some way...so this is not just CNN or Fox News doing this stuff, but advertisements, books, YouTube channels, podcasts, practically every, input we receive from the media landscape. To Barthes, the entire world around you is a mythological work that needs to be interpreted...and when you can spot the mythology that underlies even the most seemingly innocent things in media you can start to see all of the assumptions we bring to the table that have massive effects on the way the average person thinks, behaves, votes, the way they structure their viewpoint of reality. Now I want to repeat this because I want to make sure this is entirely clear...what Barthes is NOT doing here is telling people...hey when you're watching TV...if you pay attention... you can spot people in media that say things that are politically biased! Be careful for all that mythology they might throw your way! No he's actually saying something much more fundamental and extraordinary than that. What he's saying is... when you use Semiotics to look at this mythology hidden within media, if you dig deep enough...this mythology... is an entry point towards exhuming the deep rooted, underlying structures, that make up our culture, the structures that allow our culture to function at all. Let me say that another way, what Barthes is uncovering is the very structure, of our culture and what makes it work. He's uncovering the oversimplified stories we tell ourselves every day...that act as the fabric that holds society together. Remember last episode when we were talking about how language and words only work when they're arranged in a very specific structure? Well many structuralists believed that culture worked the same way, that as human beings we formulate cultures using the exact same patterns we use to formulate languages. That like every language, every culture has a complex arrangement of social structures that allow society to function. Barthes, by using Semiotics to dissect the media we consume and get to the mythology that's being implied but not said, what he's actually uncovering there are the various structures of culture that most people never notice are there. Barthes would say, the same way you can easily talk to people all day long and make sentences and you don't necessarily need to understand Semiotics or the complexities of grammar to be able to do

that...you can be engaged in this mythology, with every viewpoint that you have, and you can be completely unaware of the narrow cultural structures that lie underneath the stuff that you're watching. This is what Barthes means when he says he wants to "demystify culture" for people. He wants to show people culture for what it truly is. So let's talk about several specific examples that Barthes gives. Now we could immediately dive into the obviously coercive mythology, but I think one of the best places to start, just because it's such a normal, everyday part of the way we navigate existence, is to talk about the mythology that pervades the way the average person looks at soap. Yes, that's right. Soaps and detergents. Bear with me for this example, I promise it will make sense...here's where he's coming from: when you look at the denotation of soap, what is it really? Well on a surface level it's just a bunch of clean smelling bubbles. But we don't see it as just a bunch of clean smelling bubbles, do we? Barthes says in a sort of tongue in cheek way, there's a spirituality that comes along with soap, a mythology that we've added on to those clean smelling bubbles that affect the way we think about how soap fits into our lives...and we can see all of this extra meaning we tack onto soap when we look at the way advertisers try to sell it to us. Think of the language that's often used when describing soap...we almost see it as this holy weapon that we're using to fight against the demon of uncleanness....and advertisers will talk about soap using language that makes it sound like a weapon...this weapon cuts through dirt like a sword...destroys grunge and grime at the source almost like some sort of cleaning artillery...tackles any mess with ease using our patented "foaming cleanser"...we actually talk about cleansing away filth the same way someone of a different culture and time may talk about cleansing a house of an evil spirit...think of the images on the TV screen of the dinner plate half dirty with food all over it, half glistening white, or on a deeper level, half tainted by this evil curse known as "filth" and dirtiness...and half restored to the rightful, natural state of purity that it belongs in, that this soap has delivered to you. The idea that we accept there being: look, there are going to be times in your life... when evil rears its ugly head...filth and dirtiness are going to corrupt the things you care about in your life...maybe it's your kitchen table, maybe it's your clothes, maybe it's your car, but eventually, the time will come that you

need to take this soap...this soap that kills 99.9% of bacteria... and you need to carry out a bacteria holocaust in your kitchen to cleanse your life and restore it to a state of purity. Soap will get you there. Forged in the crucible of the Pine Sol factory...your kitchen table's deliverance from the corruption of filth awaits you down at the grocery store. Now this sounds completely ridiculous when we use these words and talk about it as though it is some sort of religious cleansing, but that doesn't mean this isn't the way the utility of soap functions in our daily lives. Barthes would say the fact we always talk about soap in standard, everyday language is a big part of the reason we're capable of normalizing the way we use soap, never noticing all the mythology we attach to it, and just accepting it as, again, just "the way the world is". But here's the reality, he would say: the way we look at soap...is not as just a bunch of clean smelling bubbles...things in my life that matter to me get dirty, and soap is the catalyst by which I return those things to their rightful, clean place where they belong! In other words...there seems to be a way that we STRUCTURE our lives by looking at things in terms of whether they are clean or dirty, and most of us gladly accept, that that's just the way the world is. Remember that structure for next episode, but the point here is not to criticize soap, or the people who use soap...the point is to show people how even with something as simple as soap, there is this entirely different level of signifieds, a deeper level of meaning that we attach to clean smelling bubbles that certainly helps us navigate our lives, but that meaning doesn't say anything necessarily true about those bubbles objectively. Now some of you out there might be saying...ok, who cares?...it's soap....and I get it...it IS just soap...the stakes are not exactly life threatening here...but they're not supposed to be...that is the whole strategy! Talking about something as benign and politically uncharged as soap...is Barthes using an extremely obvious, uncontroversial example just to illustrate to anyone that this mythology exists. So now that we know it does exist, let's talk about examples of how this mythology can be enormously helpful or horribly damaging to people, sometimes simultaneously. Probably the most famous example is when Roland Barthes uses semiotics to give an analysis of professional wrestling. Now by professional wrestling, he's not talking about greco-roman or olympic wrestling...he's talking about stuff like the

WWE...big dudes in speedos beating each other with chairs...screaming at each other...pretending to writhe in pain on the ground...the outcome is planned before the start of the match...somebody could look at professional wrestling and ask the question unless if you're into this stuff, who outside of a seven year old kid could possibly get any value out of this? But Barthes would say if that's really the way you're looking at wrestling, you're entirely missing the point of wrestling. Once again, let's all notice the pattern here: the people that look at the media landscape, and for that matter the world around them at an entirely at a basic, surface level, are going to be missing out on a lot of deeper meaning that's not obvious...looking at wrestling this way is this is the equivalent of reading Greek Mythology and just thinking it's a story about Zeus and Poseidon. The true meaning that people are connecting with when they're watching professional wrestling has nothing to do with the surface level of guys beating each other with chairs...the mistake that someone's making if they see it that way is that they're looking at wrestling as though the point of it is for there to actually be a competition, when in reality wrestling is a spectacle, that's goal is to deliver very specific messages to people about morality. To show why this is the case, he compares boxing and wrestling. The purpose of a boxing match, is to figure out who the best boxer is. You'd never writhe in pain on the ground if someone punched you. You'd never be losing a boxing match and then decide you're going to leave the ring, get a chair, beat your opponent senseless with it, then get up on the high rope with their lifeless body and body slam them into a Buick parked next to the stage. You just wouldn't do that because a big part of a boxing match is that the rules dictate who wins the boxing match. When it comes to wrestling, Barthes says the only reason why the rules are there is to serve as guidelines to be broken by whoever the bad guy is. I mean really, the only reason the rules even exist is to inspire outrage in the crowd when they're broken. Wrestling is not a sport, it is a drama. The wrestlers are all characters, huge people, cartoonishly huge at times, characters thrown into playing moral roles that deliver a wide variety of messages to people, one of the major recurring ones being that justice is being delivered in the world. The bad guy may win. He may get away with what he's doing five times, ten times...but there's always

going to be that day when the bad guy gets his comeuppance. Barthes would say that a big part of what people are communicating with is the fact that bad people do exist out there...but here's proof, in some way, that law and order and justice are still being delivered in this crazy world. Now this function within culture has been served by many other things all throughout history. Public executions. Did the human beings of the past hang people and chop off their heads in the public square because people are sadistic and just really like watching people die? Or does the cultural ritual of justice being carried out in public on criminals help keep people voluntarily participating in this chaotic game that involves us banding together for mutual benefit? So in that sense, this mythology delivered to people by professional wrestling, is part of the very fabric that holds culture together, you could say if you were foreshadowing to next episode that it's a very small part of a much larger structure that holds society together. Barthes likes wrestling in particular because yes, it's fake, yes, it's delivering mythology to people, but at least it doesn't pretend like it's anything other than that... like so many other programs out there do. Now at first glance it seems great that something as simple as professional wrestling is delivering messages to people that help hold society together. That definitely seems like a good thing, but Barthes would strongly suggest that we take a second and think about the potential downsides of something like that. Hypothetically, you can use media to deliver to people a message that helps hold society together, much to the detriment of society. Barthes would say, picture someone in a place of enormous political power, a politician. Maybe they have a friend that owns a media company too. How easy would it be for that person... to create a show that delivers to people this message that law and order and justice are being carried out in the world around them, just as a cover so that the politician and their friends at the top levels of government can rake the citizenry over the coals, rob them blind, destroy the country and never have to face any sort of meaningful outrage from people, because most of the population have been sold this marketing campaign that they're living in a just country? What if in reality, the purpose of public executions was to terrify anyone into submission, who might otherwise dare to rebel against the status quo? When you're clever enough to deliver to people a

mythology... that gets people to confidently say something as reductionist as, "that's just the way the world is and it goes without saying." Imagine the conditions you could get them to live in. We'll continue this discussion next episode. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Structuralism and Mythology pt. 2

Episode #117

This is a transcript of episode #117 on Structuralism and Mythology. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So just to start I want to rephrase something we talked about a couple episodes ago because I think it's important to frame our discussion here today: there are practically an infinite number of possible combinations of words that you can cobble together and read, but it wouldn't be until those words adhered to a very specific, underlying structure that they would work or have any semblance of meaning to anyone at all. Language has a structure, and we can observe this structure, we can study this structure and if you're a structural linguist you may be able to predict how that structure is going to change in the future. Well to many of these thinkers that follow up with the methods proposed by Ferdinand De Saussure, what it seems like to them is that culture... has a specific, underlying structure as well...and when Barthes uses Semiotics to study mass media and get to the mythology that lies underneath the surface level, this is one of the first attempts to gain access to that underlying structure of culture, SO that we can observe it, so that we can study it and yes, looking at culture almost in a new, scientific way to try to be able to predict cultural changes that will occur in the future before they actually happen. By the way, if any of this mythology business seems a little bit conspiratorial to you...consider the fact that practically everyone listening to this knows how it feels to engage in this process...most people these days are media practitioners that are in the business of promoting their own personal mythology. We just do it on a slightly different form of media than Barthes is talking about...social media. Now even if you don't, you can at least relate to how the average person's Facebook or Instagram looks. Someone's Facebook page isn't a total and accurate representation of who they are...it becomes sort of like a museum dedicated to the person they want other people to think they are, of which they are the sole curator. Think about the mythology that's present there...they'll post a picture of themselves smiling on top of a mountain they just

hiked, right after posting a picture of them eating their avocado toast on a park bench, right before a picture of them boarding a plane, caption reads: hey guys just boarding the plane, won't be able to respond for a few hours! The point is, these pictures weren't chosen because they wanted to deliver a surface level denotation of what's actually going on in the pictures, they were chosen because it promotes a narrative...maybe it's that I'm the kind of person that lives an exciting life where I travel around to interesting places...or I'm the kind of person that eats avocado toast, I eat foods that are trendy, healthy yet surprisingly portable and as you can see I'm in the park so I'm not the kind of person that squanders that portability of my avocado toast...Who am I? Well you can tell by looking at my pictures...you know that person you'll sometimes see, the sun glistening off their perfectly clear skin and beautiful white smile as they sit on a park bench enjoying not only this moment, but their avocado toast as well? That's the kind of person I am...it's funny, someone just snapped a random picture they happened to catch me here. Of all places. Now while this is just one example of it...no matter what mythological tale you're weaving for people on social media, the reality is: your actual life is far more complex than the story you tell to people on social media. You're not always smiling, there are countless things going on in your life that you would never include on there, and here's the point: you can imagine if someone you didn't know.. just took the story you told about yourself on social media as a complete picture of what it is to be you, all they'd really have a very narrow picture of a mythology that you've produced, I mean you certainly wouldn't say this person has an understanding of who you are at your deepest level. Well, so too with mythology about the world that media produces, just imagine if the universe had a Facebook page. Your understanding of it would be tantamount to one of the stories people tell about themselves on their individual Facebook page. To an early structuralist, your own individual worldview is not a deep understanding of the universe...it's an expression of a cultural norm...it is as much an expression of a cultural norm as a handshake is. Now you may be wondering, if we can observe and study these cultural structures, when you're observing them...what exactly do they look like? Well that's what the last half of this episode is going to be about...what I think is crucial for us

to do before we get there is to talk about a few more examples of Barthes using Semiotics to break down specific examples of this mythology that's rooted in media. Each of these examples revealing a little bit more of these structures that underly culture, and each of them, when we look at the tactics used to deliver the mythology, these examples can help us understand how these messages are delivered to people in ways that you wouldn't realize it was being delivered to you unless if you were deliberately looking for it. We've talked about soap and how we organize the things in our life in terms of a constant fight between clean vs. dirty. We've talked about professional wrestling and how messages of justice can be part of the fabric that holds society together, sometimes to the detriment of society. One thing any good mythological work is going to have are people with some sort of exalted status in the eyes of the public... people that act as examples for the average person to look up to or examples of what people should avoid doing because look at what happened to this person in mythology that did that...these could take the form of demi-gods, epic warriors, fallen angels...but in our mythology we give this status to people that possess this strange thing we call celebrity. Barthes would say... that there's a mythology that's constantly being delivered to you in media...that these people we call celebrities, are not like you. They're better than you are. And this message often leads people when navigating their personal life... to exalt some celebrity onto a pedestal, and then look up to them as an example to emulate, often times leading the average person to have extreme reverence for their opinions on things that, most of the time, the celebrity's really completely unqualified to talk about in the first place. But nonetheless there's this undeniable FEELING that this person's just different from you...they're BETTER than you are, let's listen to them! Where does that come from? Barthes might point to something like when TMZ runs a photo spread of Leonardo Di Caprio walking down the street eating a hot dog...what do they always do? They probably do some headline referencing one of his movies...what's eating Gilbert Grape? I don't know but his brother Leo is eating a hotdog walking down the street enjoying a Sunday afternoon. The denotation of these pictures would be Leonardo De Caprio walking down the street eating a hotdog. The connotation somebody may take away from that might be that, "Hey

look! Leonardo De Caprio is just a regular guy like me! Look, he's wearing a Dodgers hat! I too wear an LA Dodgers hat. I too have found myself on occasion walking down the street eating a hotdog. That's so cool, he's just a regular guy!" But Barthes would say the mythology... the story that's being told at a deeper level there...is that it's a newsworthy event when Leonardo De Caprio walks down the street eating a hot dog. The very fact, that the news of the day for you is that Leo is eating a hotdog like a normal person, deifies him and draws attention to the fact that he's not just a normal person. This is an interesting type of this mythology and it's a good example of how flexible and hard to spot it can be if you aren't specifically looking for it...a collection of signs can seem to be delivering one message on the surface, when the mythology connected to those signs is actually implying the exact opposite of that message. Now this mythology affects things far more influential on people's lives than Leo and a hotdog. One example of when this TYPE of mythology is used is when people are running for president. Think of all the pageantry that surrounds a presidential election cycle with the sole purpose to simultaneously deliver to people the message that this person running for president is just like you...but they're also, nothing like you at all. The candidate makes sure they know which crowd they're speaking to so that they can dress like you except they roll up their sleeves because they're ready to get to work. They'll play up connections they have to your career or your geographic area so it's like you both come from the same place. They'll look you in the eye and tell you that your family matters to them and that you two are the same kind of people because you share a common vision for the direction the country should be headed in. But there's also a sense in which this whole display that is taking place, them standing at a podium speaking to a crowd in a very artificial voice, people waving signs with their name in big, bold letters, they say things in a way that slows down at the end and accentuates so that they can get applause. There's a sense in which they want you to feel like this person is nothing like you. That this is not just any ordinary person in front of you...this person is better than you. This person is presidential, whatever that means ...in other words this is someone to be exalted within our culture and looked up to. To many early structuralists, having figures within society

that we exalt in this way is part of the recipe for the way we structure culture that makes it work. Now, Barthes is doing his work in post WW2 France, so many of the specific collections of signs that he analyzes have to do with the political climate of that particular time in French history. One of the most famous examples of his analysis is when he takes a Semiotic approach towards understanding the cover of a magazine called Paris Match...the cover of this magazine in particular depicted a black soldier, dressed in a French military uniform standing at attention and saluting. The denotation there is of a black soldier saluting. The connotation someone might draw from that ranges considerably, but the deeper mythology that Barthes claims is being stated here... he works out when he sees the magazine for the first time in a barber shop: "I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young black soldier in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under the flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this black soldier in serving his so-called oppressors." What he's talking about is after WW2 ends the French Colonial Empire is still a thing. Mass protests by the colonized populations and the violence France used to keep them under control had a lot of people calling into question whether what they were doing was ethical. Barthes says what they're doing when they run a cover of a magazine like that is to present a mythology of: look! Here's a citizen of one of our African colonies dressed up in a French uniform proudly saluting the French flag. People complaining about the colonies...can't you see what we are? We are France! A sprawling, powerful empire made even more powerful by this multicultural military force that all proudly serve the cause of French imperialism, all of these other cultures we colonize happily saluting the ultimate symbol of Frenchness...the French flag. All of this, a mythology delivered to the viewer that takes French imperialism and the agony of the colonized people, sweeps it under the rug and turns it into just the way the world is. Barthes would say the cover of this magazine is a collection of signs. Signifiers that

denote a surface meaning, but signifieds that deliver second level messages like the concepts of Frenchness, the goodness of French imperialism, the presence of multiculturalism, there being a unified population with equal rights...and when the viewer of the magazine receives this mythology, when coming up with the way they view the world, they'll often times accept these things as nature...or just the way the world is. Barthes says: "For the myth-reader [i.e., the believer of myth] the outcome is quite different: everything happens as if the picture naturally conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a foundation to the signified: the myth exists from the precise moment when French imperialism achieves the natural state" To Barthes, this is the whole point of mythology. To turn history into nature. To turn things that are arbitrary and historical into "the Truth". To turn the politically motivated into "just the way that things are". Now, here's an extremely important point that is going to be crucial in understanding the problems post-structuralists are going to have with mythology. Any mythology that is politically motivated...in the sense that it is trying to change the world in some way...can't help but smuggle in with that mythology an entire set of values that people receiving the mythology often mistakenly interpret as fact...or again, just the way the world is....and remember, when he says politically motivated, Barthes is not just talking about a narrow conception of that in the form of liberal vs. conservative...but about ANY thing that seeks to change something about the way the world is. Barthes says: "Any semiological system is a system of values; now, the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system." Barthes says that often times when these values are smuggled in...it can get otherwise perfectly decent people... to participate in systems or behaviors that only a monster would participate in if they were self aware of how much mythological baggage they carry around with them. Building on the example of French Colonialism, Barthes might talk about the mythology connected to wine in French culture. Wine is seen as this ultimate, panacea of a drink. Wine is what he calls a social equalizer. No matter what economic class you come from we're all friends when we're drinking wine! Wine makes the person that's really shy come out of their shell and be

more talkative...while at the same time, with the person that talks too much...calms them down and lets them relax. When it's winter time, wine is seen as this thing that you drink and it warms you up. During the summer, wine is associated with sitting in the shade sipping a nice cold glass. There's not much talk about the negative effects of wine, how many people it kills every year, how many families it destroys, the normalization of purposefully putting a neurotoxin in your body...no all that death is overlooked and wine is seen as something you do when you want to feel more alive...when you want to "live a little". But these aren't the only negative effects of wine that the mythology allows people to overlook. Barthes says: "the mythology of wine can in fact help us to understand the usual ambiguity of our daily life. For it is true that wine is a good and fine substance, but it is no less true that its production is deeply involved in French capitalism, whether it is that of the private distillers or that of the big settlers in Algeria who impose on the Muslims, on the very land of which they have been dispossessed, a crop of which they have no need, while they lack even bread. There are thus very engaging myths which are however not innocent. And the characteristic of our current alienation is precisely that wine cannot be a blissful substance, except if we wrongfully forget that it is also the product of an expropriation." To Barthes, the mythology connected to wine that gets delivered to people through media creates their subjectivity, and with it the ideas they have about what it is to be a French person and what your relationship with alcohol looks like. And this mythology allows people to engage in a behavior that has what Barthes sees as horribly unethical practices associated with it...and they can use this mythology to transform what would otherwise be ethically wrong into an innocent expression of their "Frenchness". I'm French...we drink a lot of wine. This is just how we are. This is just what we do. This is just the way the world is. To bring this to modern day, Barthes at this point in his career, would see the exact same thing in many of the ways people look at what it is to be an American. For example, if drinking wine is an integral part of the mythology associated with what it is to be a person from France...to be an American is in some small way to be someone that every once in a while has a burger. Fourth of July comes around and what do you do? You get out the BBQ...invite the family over...grill up

some burgers and eat one with the family. No one would judge you for doing that...that's just the way the world is. That's just what it is to be an American. Barthes would say our subjectivity about what it is to be an American, being engaged in that mythology, makes it possible for otherwise perfectly decent people to not even consider where that meat came from, statistically speaking, from factory farming situations that most people participating in the activity of eating a burger wouldn't want to patronize or endorse. But nonetheless, the mythology of what it is to be an American kept them doing it without them even realizing they were hurting anyone. What other things about what it is to be an American historically are hurting people around you unbeknownst to you? Same question for whatever country you're listening to this from. This same dynamic applies to things that extend beyond nationality though. Say a big part of your subjectivity or how you view yourself requires you to dress in a specific style of clothes...maybe you're really into shoes...whatever it is. Say you're a surfer dude. Part of the mythology of being a surfer dude is wearing some totally bodacious surfer dude clothes bro. And dude, what if when you go down to the store to buy your surfer clothes. Bro, what if they were made by people that work in abject, miserable conditions in a third world country? What if it would absolutely horrify you to know that you were contributing to something like that, but the mythology you've received your whole life through media that makes up what it is to be you has had you thinking about wearing those clothes as just "what it is to be a surfer dude" "this is just the way the world is." So now that we've talked about several examples of it hopefully it's a little easier to see the similarities between the mythology of ancient Greece and the mythology we still use in today's world. Maybe a good visual to use when thinking about structuralism is to think of Plato's cave. There are the shadows on the cave wall. There are the puppets behind the people casting the shadows and there are the actual human beings that watch the shadows on the cave wall and mistake it for reality. Well let's use that visual to think of structuralism: think of the shadows on the cave wall as the distorted, narrow worldview given to someone by mass media and the culture they live in...this worldview that structures reality into something comprehensible, let's them navigate existence. They often mistakenly think of these

shadows as "just the way the world is." Think of the puppets casting the shadows as being the unmediated reality that we don't have access to. Well what lies in between those two things? What makes the worldview on the cave wall that people often mistake as unmediated reality possible? Well to a structuralist, the answer is: the structures that human beings use to derive meaning from that unmediated reality. The structure of language. The structure of economics. The structure of culture in all its parts. To a structural anthropologist by the name of Claude Levi-Strauss, he would say that it is absolutely fitting in this example that human beings are the only things in between unmediated reality and their worldviews on the cave wall. To Levi-Strauss, human culture, human behavior, your personal views on how you fit into all of this, all of this is really just a reflection of the underlying structures of the human mind and the way it interfaces with reality, and these structures of the human mind are ultimately what is dictating everything about the way that we arrive at these worldviews. And when Levi-Strauss starts to study these structures within culture, what he notices is that the way the human mind seems to make sense of everything, is by thinking of things in the world in terms of dichotomies. Some structuralists call these dichotomies nebular oppositions, but by far the most common term used to describe these is that the human mind makes sense of reality in terms of binary oppositions. Some very simple examples of these binary oppositions are things like up vs. down, left vs right, in vs. out, on vs. off. Thousands of binary oppositions that are the way the human mind makes sense of and structures the meaning of this reality that we're in. Remember when we talked about the structure of language...and how Saussure thought that words only have meaning in terms of their relationship to the other words within a given language? The example was that the word cow only has meaning insofar as it is not the word cat, or dog or horse. Well a similar sort of pattern starts to emerge for Claude Levi-Strauss when he looks at the structure of culture. When we look at one of these binary oppositions in particular, say up vs down...the only way the concept of up, has any meaning to us, is in the relationship between up and its binary opposite, down. That is where the meaning lies...it's in the relationship between the terms in these binary oppositions. Now as you can imagine, not

every binary opposition is as basic as up vs. down. Because as humans continue to create a given culture...and they set up more and more of these binary parameters that allow for societies to function well together, as we do that these binary oppositions start to get a little more abstract as they are used to make sense of more abstract things. For example, clean vs. dirty...like the mythology embedded into the way we look at soap. Just vs unjust...like the way we look at our society that things like professional wrestling and its mythology affect. Now these examples start to seem a little more complicated than something like up vs. down. There's a sense in which there's probably more conversation that needs to be had about whether things are clean vs dirty than by just looking at it strictly in binary terms. For example, when you just get done cleaning your kitchen table, and the first microscopic skin cell flakes off of your arm and hits the table...or the first speck of dust gets on it...is the table no longer clean? Where exactly do we make that distinction? What it seems like is that thinking about things in strictly a binary way ignores the existence of an entire spectrum of nuance that lies within those two binary poles. Yet, it is undeniably useful to us.. when navigating our lives and structuring our culture.. to think of things like our kitchen table, or the sidewalks of our city streets, or the operating room of a hospital in binary terms like clean vs dirty. This is why these structures that underly culture are often spoken about as narrow, distorted or merely humanistic. Because, while it's impossible to do entirely, try to remove yourself from this human scaffolding we've set up on planet earth for a sec and try to apply some of these binary oppositions to the universe as a whole. Leave planet earth, go 10 million galaxies in one direction, look around you...which way is up and which way is down? Well who am I to say what up and down is in relation to the entire universe? I can't just point up...what if I'm flipped around? Is there even such a thing as up or down on the level of the universe? Well how about clean and dirty...would you consider that galaxy in the distance a clean place or a dirty place? In other words, what it can start to seem like is that the terms clean and dirty are narrow parameters that we've created as a culture, that undeniably help us navigate our lives and allow society to function well, but there's a sense in which the terms clean and dirty, and many of these binary oppositions for that

matter...don't even exist...outside of this narrow human scaffolding that we've set up that allows us to make sense of things. Now when these binary oppositions start to get really tricky to maintain is when we use them to make meaningful structures that potentially have huge negative effects on people's lives. For example, sane vs insane. Who or what exactly determines at what point somebody becomes insane? You can think of this like the dust on the kitchen table, at what point does it become dirty? Well at what point do we confer all of the negative effects onto someone that come along with being someone who is insane within a society? Free vs caged? Well, anyone who's listened to the episodes of this show on existentialism knows that it's no where near as simple as thinking about freedom in strictly binary terms like that. Freedom is always freedom within a cage, it just comes down to how big your cage is and whether you're satisfied by it. You can imagine if someone used mythology to get people within a culture to ignore the nuances and think of their freedom strictly in binary terms, you could get them to live in a pretty small cage without them even realizing it. Claude Levi-Strauss moves to Brazil and teaches at the university of Sao Paulo from 1934 - 1939. While he's there, he becomes fascinated with premodern cultures and travels deep into Brazil to make contact with remote tribes that are completely disconnected from the modern world. What he finds... is that when you apply structural anthropology towards studying the culture of these remote tribes, cultures that most people of his time would look at and see as "primitive" or less advanced than the culture of modern France where he comes from, what he finds is that there is actually very little difference between the way those two cultures are structured. He gives the example of a pack of cards, all separated by suit, A-K, four columns. When you look at the cultures side by side they can appear to be massively different from each other, a spade doesn't look anything like a heart. But when you pay attention to the structures of the culture, you can see the fingerprints left behind by the way the human mind interfaces with reality no matter what part of the world you're from, you can see the ace of hearts align with the ace of clubs. You can see the seven of spades align with the seven of diamonds. What Levi-Strauss finds in these remote, uncontacted tribes... is the very same method of using binary oppositions to

structure the meaning of the things in their culture...and that no matter how superior the modern, advanced cultures would like to think that they are, cultures that think of themselves in terms of advanced vs primitive, modern vs. ancient good vs. bad, what it starts to look like is that cultures are not good or bad in the way we'd traditionally described them, they only differ when it comes to the specific rituals they engage in that they've connected to this underlying structure of culture....and here's the thing that'll really get you thinking: these rituals are arbitrary. One culture may shake your hand as a respectful greeting another may bow, but these two rituals serve the same function in both cultures. Think about that: these rituals interact with culture in what seems to be the exact same way signs interact with the structure of language. We're doing the same thing in both places. This discovery would have massive effects on the way people starting thinking about the way we structure modern, advanced cultures. Next episode, we're gonna start talking about it. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Michel Foucault pt. 1

Episode #121

This is a transcript of episode #121 on Michel Foucault. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So real quick just to clarify something: towards the end of last episode I talked about doing a couple episodes on the late work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger...uh, but based on the emails I received after releasing last episode, it seems clear that people don't really want to hear about it, they just want to move on to Postmodernism. Now, personally, I think to fully understand Postmodernism it's absolutely crucial to understand this transition from Logical Positivism to the mid 20th century where there is more of a focus on Behaviourism and Pragmatism, but look let's be honest here, at the end of the day I'm a dancing monkey making episodes about what the majority of people want to hear or else I go out of business...so with that in mind, today's episode is part one of a series on Michel Foucault...and if you're at all confused about any of the context of these ideas that are being brought up, send me an email, I'll respond to as many of them as I can. But that said, if someone were going to write a shortlist of the quintessential, Postmodernist philosophers...of what is meant when someone says Postmodernist philosopher: Foucault is definitely going to be on that list. But to some...relegating the work of Foucault and labeling it as merely being in the realm of philosophy...doesn't really do him justice...because his work often times moves into areas that have nothing to DO with philosophy...to some you could easily refer to Foucault as a historian, or a political theorist, or a social commentator...depending on what era of his life he wrote the book you're reading, you could have very different impressions about what subject matters were important to him. This makes it completely impossible for us to cover the entire scope of Foucault's work in a single episode, and it can make it kind of hard to find a clean entry point into covering his work... but I think a really good place to start is for us to talk about the details of his 1975 book titled Discipline and Punish. Now, to a total outsider to the work of Michel Foucault... to someone who just picked up and read

Discipline and Punish one day...the book may seem to be just a history of criminology...a historical catalogue of the ways we've treated and punished criminals over the centuries. But as we'll talk about later on today's episode, Foucault is actually making a much deeper point with this book...he's making a point about the structures of where power lies and the relationship between the people in power and the average citizen...and just so the first half of the podcast doesn't COMPLETELY come off as me doing a documentary about the history of how we've treated prisoners...I want to ask some questions throughout the episode the sort of foreshadow to why this may be much bigger than just Foucault going over the history of this stuff. By the way, Foucault himself would never describe this book as a "history" of anything. Foucault hated the word history and almost never used it in his writing. He used words to describe this book more like, a genealogy of the way we've treated criminals, or an archaeology of how criminals have been punished over the years. He hates the word history...because so often the word history brings with it a connotation... that we exist in our modern world at the end of this long historical timeline of events that have led to near constant progress. This idea that, hey, we used to be these barbaric savages that followed the playbook of Machievelli, the ends justify the means, we used to believe that it was morally acceptable for the king or the people in power to brutally torture and kill someone that was guilty of a heinous crime...but then HISTORY happened. Time went on...progress was made. Great political theorists came along...great leaders, great ethical philosophers did their work and we all realized the error of our ways and brought into existence a more modern world where everyone is much more free...the people in power inhibiting the lives of the average citizen far less than they used to . Foucault is going to call this assumption about history into question and really dig deeper into the idea of: how much has really changed when it comes to the fundamental relationship between those in power and the citizens? Foucault begins exploring this idea in chapter one of Discipline and Punish by laying the groundwork for the discussion, and describing what it was like to be a criminal in Western Europe in the 1750's. Specifically he gives an example of what the world was like at this time... by describing an actual punishment that was carried out on a criminal

in the year 1757. Listen to the punishment this person faced for the crimes they had committed...this punishment was to be implemented in public, on the steps of the church and the criminal was to be: "taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds"; then, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds" That was an actual punishment carried out on an actual person in the year 1757. Now, a few things Foucault would want us to initially consider about this situation: one would be to recognize the fact... that this sentence was handed down on what may as well be a distant alien planet to the planet that you live on. See, because it's so easy to hear about a punishment like this...weigh it up against the moral intuitions that happened to be given to you in modern times...feel morally superior to the people that lived in the 1750's and then write off their entire culture as just barbaric savagery from a bygone era that to even talk about is legitimizing a waste of time. What could we possibly learn from people that thought something like this was a good idea? But the problem with this approach to Foucault is that if you always end the conversation here, number 1. you never understand the historical context that explains why things were different back then...but number two, and more importantly to Foucault, that feeling of moral superiority often times gets us to never consider the similarities between the world back then and the world as it is now, more specifically the power structures of that time, their relationship to the citizens and how many aspects of them still persist to this day. Because think about it: this punishment was handed down in a world that was pre-American revolution, pre-French revolution. The nation-state that sentenced this prisoner to this punishment was not modeled after the Enlightenment, it was modeled more after a Renaissance era interpretation of Machievelli's *The Prince* and *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes. The stability of this

particular society would have been grounded in social contract theory...or if you remember from the podcast episodes we did about this period, the idea that upon birth, every citizen of the nation-state effectively signs a social contract...the citizens sacrifice a certain amount to the state by way of taxation or public service or by other means, and in return they receive protection...protection from what Hobbes calls the State of Nature, protection by a King or a Magistrate or whatever sovereign body is in charge that guarantees certain natural rights for people. Put another way: the citizen's job is to sacrifice for the sovereign, so that the sovereign can do their job of guaranteeing the natural rights of the population, INCLUDING punishing criminals that disobey the law. This is a contract where BOTH parties have very important roles if society is going to function. Now another thing you may remember from the episodes we did on Hobbes...is that when somebody commits a crime in one of these societies, the act is seen as a direct attack on the body politic. Not only that, but the crime is seen as a direct affront to every single citizen that has signed a social contract, each one of them making up a small piece of that Leviathan that Hobbes describes...but more importantly than either of those two things, when a crime is committed in one of these societies it is seen as a direct affront... to the authority, of the king...and it's RIGHT here, Foucault thinks, that you can start to see the true, primary function of the penal system in one of these societies in the 1750's. The goal of the criminal justice system back then was not justice...there was no real focus on a balancing of the scales in any sort of way. The goal of implementing the punishment wasn't fairness...people didn't get the same punishment for the same crime generally speaking. The true function of the criminal justice system, the REASON these punishments were often dramatic and ALWAYS carried out in front of everyone in public as a spectacle, the primary function was its ability to maintain social order, and it achieved this goal in a couple of key ways: first of all... this type of system was a fantastic deterrent of criminal behavior...because if you were someone who had plans that day of committing some sort of heinous criminal act...look no further than the guy getting his arms ripped off by red hot pincers as a persuasive essay as to why you shouldn't be doing that stuff. But the other reason this type of system was so good...

beCAUSE in one of these societies, when a crime is committed it directly calls into question the authority of the sovereign...these punishments being carried out in front of everybody on the church steps...ended up being an extremely useful public spectacle...because these punishments served as reinforcement of the fact...direct evidence OF the fact...that the sovereign was still upholding their end of the social contract. The primary goal of this entire display was not justice, it was not fairness...it was the maintaining of order within the society... and Foucault would want to point out that if you're the sovereign... if you're the person or group that's been commissioned by one of these societies to maintain order... an absolutely crucial part of doing your job is to make sure that you're still in power, able to maintain order tomorrow, or next week, or a month from now. In other words, Foucault is saying: an intrinsic, necessary part of that task of maintaining order, if you're the sovereign, is preserving the existing power structure. But to ask a foreshadowing question here: what happens when the power structure no longer serves the needs of the people? Now, Foucault would want to point out that not only did having a sovereign whose job it was to maintain order in this way... work for us...but it worked well. In fact, it worked EXTREMELY well for hundreds of years...but... eventually, as is the case with ANY imperfect system, the sovereign and other people in positions of power started to notice some patterns with societies that were structured this way and how they rise and fall...they started to run into some unintended consequences... flaws in the system that seemed to be repeating themselves over and over again. See, because when you're in the business of publicly executing people for the sake of sending a message about where the power lies in a society...things don't always play out seamlessly. For example, sometimes... when you try to publicly execute someone...they don't die. SOMETHING's eventually gonna go wrong...the equipment malfunctions...the horses aren't cooperating that day...you try to hang someone but they have like a six pack on their neck and they just kinda hang there for a few hours laughing at you. Point is: these sorts of things happened sometimes...and when they did it wasn't a far leap for the population to start considering whether this was some sort of bad omen...was this a sign that the authority of the sovereign was

wavering...that they were no longer capable of carrying out their end of the social contract? But this isn't the only unintended consequence that started to crop up in these societies. For example, at the beginning of the episode we talked about a pretty extreme punishment in 1757 that Foucault cites in chapter one of Discipline and Punish. Well it wasn't entirely uncommon when one of THESE sorts of punishments were carried out on someone... that the population might think that the punishment greatly exceeded the severity of the crime that was committed. When this sort of thing happened, it wasn't entirely uncommon for the population to side with the criminal...or at the very least call into question the authority of the sovereign and whether they're still running things properly. But probably the biggest unintended negative consequence for the sovereign that NOBODY saw coming...was that when you have these brutal executions and punishments taking place in the public square every day in front of every one...when society's functioning well and the sovereign is doing their job...there is zero doubt in ANYONE'S mind when it comes to who is in charge. There is zero question as to who you'll have to answer to and how you'll have to answer to them should you decide to go against the rules enforced by the existing power structure. But the flip side to that...is that when things are NOT going well...say there's a famine...or Natural Rights aren't being guaranteed, or even if there's just a public sentiment that the sovereign is inept and some change needs to take place...the flip side is that there is zero confusion in anyone's mind when looking for the people in power that need to be overthrown and killed for this change to occur. What the sovereign and the people in power started to realize... is that in this type of society that we're talking about, brutal as it was, the will of the people often had influence over which people were in positions of power...and this could be EXTREMELY inconvenient for the sovereign at times...it made staying in a position of power for any extended period of time a pretty vulnerable enterprise. The people in positions of power knew that something drastic had to change if they wanted to make power more sustainable...and Foucault documents a fundamental shift that occurs in the way societies treat criminals that takes place between the years 1757 and 1837. Now, real quick, I'm just anticipating a place that someone's brain might go here: oh, so what

you're saying is that a bunch of evil people in positions of power realized that in this older type of society the will of the people ACTUALLY had some influence could throw them OUT of positions of power...so they all got together, met in back rooms, formed a secret society, called it something like the council of the drifting phoenix where they had some creepy secret handshake and they all sat around coming up with ways to control the population so they'd never have to relinquish power. But what Foucault would probably want to point out is that there doesn't need to be some evil secret society for people in government to want power to be more deeply embedded. Remember, the people in positions of power signed a social contract as well. Part of that social contract is maintaining the order of society so that they can continue to guarantee the natural rights of the citizens, and part of maintaining order historically, to Foucault, has been to preserve the existing power structure. There doesn't need to be a single, evil person in any of these positions of power for them to be motivated to come up with new, better tactics to stay in power....and Foucault would say these new tactics that are being implemented between the years 1757 and 1837...is a broader evolution of the way people in power keep prisoners under control. These changes occur gradually...over the course of decades...sometimes just with subtle changes to the ceremony of the public execution itself. Whereas before prisoners used to just be paraded around in an open top cart before their execution...slowly over the years that evolved into a closed top cart with wooden planks that you could hardly see the person through...that eventually evolved into a bag being over the person's head and their identity completely concealed. By the 1790's, most societies had moved away from these dramatic or creative public executions and favored the more standardized punishment of a guillotine in front of the courthouse...few years later the guillotine was moved behind the courthouse...until eventually it was moved inside the prison and all the executions were done in private. Punishment...and the reality of the way we treat criminals...has slowly moved from before when it was something that was at the forefront of public consciousness that it was impossible not to be aware of...to now, when it is something abstract, silent, cordoned off and even locked away in these distant far away buildings that we never have

to see. To ask a couple more foreshadowing questions: what sort of effects might that have on a society...and more importantly why might people who want to maintain their positions of power prefer a situation like this? By the year 1837, two fundamental changes had occurred in the way we punish criminals that Foucault says are extremely deliberate. Number one: putting somebody to death as a public spectacle that everybody gets to witness had all but disappeared. And number two: we had changed tactics from punishing criminals by inflicting harm on their bodies...to the emergence of a new era in our methods of punishing criminals where now we focused primarily on the disciplining and control of their minds. There is a fundamental shift from physical punishment of the person's body...to the disciplining and reformation of the person's mind. This is why Foucault titles the book *Discipline and Punish*...this is the emergence and infancy of what will eventually become the modern prison...this is the beginning of an evolution where people in positions of power develop a much more efficient and effective way of wielding and sustaining power over people. Foucault cites an actual strict schedule that criminals in the 1830's serving time had to follow during their time in prison. You can imagine what something like this might look like: 7am wake up. 7:05 you are to be on your mark for roll call. 7:15 you are to be at the mess hall for breakfast. 7:25 you are to be at your assigned job post for the day. 9:15 water break, 9:20 back to work...in other words: when your ENTIRE day is scheduled and accounted for down to the second...there's not much time for illicit criminal activity. There's not much time for ANY thought outside of disciplining yourself and adhering to this schedule of stuff you're required to do. Well couple this new, strict focus on the disciplining of the mind and reformation of behavior with MORE new tactics that were emerging over the years...more specifically a new, improved, three pronged approach towards controlling prisoners that Foucault thinks is one of the most effective methods that has ever been devised. The three...prongs...of this three pronged method that is used to keep prisoners in line...are what Foucault calls: Surveillance, Normalization, and Examination. That is...Constant surveillance of the prisoners...which combines nicely with normalization...or a normalized standard of how a good prisoner should be thinking and

behaving that has been given to you by the people in power...and both of these work nicely with a constant process of examination and re-examination where people in positions of power give you a score or a grade determining how well you're corresponding with that way of behaving that we've decided a good prisoner should be a reflection of. Foucault thinks this new, highly effective way of controlling prisoners may have sprung out of the work of a philosopher named Jeremy Bentham. The same way Plato in *The Republic* spends a considerable amount of time trying to come up with the ideal structure of government...Jeremy Bentham spends a bunch of time in HIS work trying to come up with the ideal structure of a prison. The model that he arrives at after thinking about it for so long is what he calls *The Panopticon*. Simply put, the *Panopticon* is a building designed and laid out in a clever way, where a single guard, or a warden or anyone in a position of power can stand in a specific spot in the center...and THEY can see inside of the cell of any prisoner they want... but the prisoners can't see them, they can't know WHEN they're being watched, they can't know the criteria that determines WHY they're being watched...in a sense, Bentham says, the reason this is an ideal design for a prison...is because the only reasonable thing the prisoners can do in a prison that's designed this way...is to behave every second of every day as though they're being watched...because they can never know when or when it's not happening. Their lives become, once again, constant surveillance through cameras or armed guards, strict adherence to a normalized "way a good prisoner behaves" given to them by the people in power, and rigorous examination by experts, or the court system or the parole board or whoever it is THIS WEEK for the prisoner to answer to. Now some of you out there might be thinking: why are we going on so much about the history of criminals? What does this have to do with philosophy? What relevance does this have to me whatsoever? Well, if you're someone that's thought that all we've been talking about so far on this episode are methods we've developed over the years for controlling... only prisoners...Foucault would probably say I hope you've been paying attention to the details of what's been said so far...because when Jeremy Bentham sits down and creates the design of this *Panopticon* of his...he's not just talking about the ideal structure of a

prison...and what follows from that is that Foucault is NOT JUST talking about the evolution of methods that we've developed to control prisoners. Jeremy Bentham describes the Panopticon very generally in his work as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example"...and knowing that...it makes sense that he quickly goes on to say that although this is the ideal structure of a prison if you wanted to control prisoners...there's no reason why this same design couldn't be applied if you wanted to create, you know, a mental institution that promotes a standard to the inmates of what a good patient is...or in a military setting promoting what it is to be a good soldier...or in a university setting promoting how you should think and behave if you want to be a good student...if Bentham lived in a modern economic society he no doubt would see the utility of the Panopticon if it was applied to a factory and producing good factory workers...or even more generally how it could be used at a multi-national corporation trying to produce good employees. See, that's the thing. Let's say you're in a position of power in a corporation...to be able to use the fundamentals of these highly effective tactics that have been developed over the years to control your employees, you don't need to treat them like they're a prisoner that's part of a chain gang forced to crush rocks all day...no, as long as you make sure that their chain is long enough that they don't FEEL like a prisoner...you can set up some pretty narrow parameters for what it is to be a "good employee" that not only will they fall into...but they will actually police themselves to stay that way...they'll feel intense pressure to adhere to that normalized standard of behavior at all times, because their life at work is one of surveillance, normalization and examination. Surveillance by way of cameras, time clocks, supervisors, deadlines, monitoring activity on your computer, even sometimes just the surveillance of other employees around that feel like they benefit from having dirt on someone in a highly competitive environment. The normalized standard of being a good employee...speaking, acting and dressing in a professional way, however that's defined by whoever in the company. Putting on your work persona...always being politically correct...doing all the things to make sure you're a good team player. Then it's on to the examination phase with your monthly, quarterly, yearly evaluations where they give you a score out of ten in

different areas to determine how well your doing...or in other words how well you correspond with exactly who I say you should be. Your productivity is about the same level as last evaluation...you're doing good in some areas...but there's room for improvement in a couple other areas and don't worry...I made an action plan so that we can see if we can get you back on track. This three pronged method... has become the dominant way of controlling human behavior...and if you doubt that in any way...consider the similarities it has to the structure of some religions with the constant surveillance, normative behavior and rigorous process of examination. This method is so effective... and so capable of being applied to any circumstance imaginable...that in our modern world it has so pervaded the way power is exercised that it extends beyond institutions like prisons or corporations and it has embedded itself into the very fabric of society. The very same process of surveillance, normalization and examination could be said to exist in the way you present yourself online...the media you consume...it most likely is even being played out in various social circles that you're a part of right now. Foucault would say one of the truly insidious things about the way power is wielded and people are controlled in modern times with these new methods, is that simultaneously you are both a subject that is being controlled while also being an active participant in the system...an active participant that in some way, most times unknowingly, supports the existing power structure. Let's slow down for a second and really talk about what is being implied here for Foucault. Remember the criminal justice system back in the 1750's? So as we talked about the goal of the whole situation back then was clearly not primarily justice or fairness...but instead the benefits the system provided to society when it came to maintaining order and keeping things moving forward. Well Foucault is going to ask: is the penal system of the 1970's really so different when you take a closer look at it? Do we exist in a modern, enlightened era where we've grown throughout history and learned the error of our ways and constructed a penal system that first and foremost has the aim of distributing justice and fairness? To Foucault, the goal of the modern penal system is not justice or fairness...□the goal is through surveillance, normalization and examination to produce harmless, non-rebellious, working,

tax-paying productive citizens who follow the rules and are satisfied with a life of conforming to the normalized standard of what it is to be a person handed down to them from above...in other words, docile, useful subjects that carry out the vision for what the future should hold given to them by the people in power. This is why there is such a difference when it comes to sentencing between white collar and blue collar crimes. Between an executive that robs the IRS of \$20,000 by evading taxes...and some dude that robs a Taco Bell of \$85 bucks and a burrito supreme. Short of the executive absolutely refusing to pay back the money...9 times out of 10 they are not going to see the inside of a prison cell because their behavior...doesn't really need much reformation in the eyes of the people in power. Keep doing almost everything you're doing...keep working, keep creating jobs, keep starting new companies and going to badminton on Sundays...just pay your taxes. Whereas the guy that robbed the Taco Bell...it doesn't matter if he marches back into the store...hands over the 85 bucks directly to the manager...baby birds the burrito supreme back into his mouth...9 times out of 10 that guy is going to jail because the goal of the penal system is reforming criminals to fit a pre-existing mold of what a normal person is. Also consider the fact...that once you're sentenced...it isn't about justice or fairness or some sort of direct punishment and retribution for the crimes you committed at that point either...in today's day and age there's the modern advent of getting out on good behavior. In other words, as long as you're willing to reform yourself into the type of person that we've told you to be...it doesn't really matter what your initial sentence was...we may knock a couple decades off your sentence if you're willing to play by our rules. Now some people...no matter how many times they go to prison...are just the type of people that are never going to play by the rules. They're never going to become this person the people in power want them to become...they're never going to change... and those people are the people that will either be lifelong repeat offenders in and out of jail...or they will eventually get life in prison. And Foucault would say that it's these kinds of people that refuse to play by the rules that are absolutely fascinating to us as "normal" people. That's another modern invention for Foucault...thinking of ourselves as normal and the labeling of criminals as

"abnormal" or people that need to be reformed to a state of normalcy. But it's the fact that they're not like normal people that makes us so fascinated by criminals! Look at the thousands of True Crime podcasts that have exploded onto the podcast scene in the past couple years. Massively popular. Look on Netflix at all the crime related shows there are. If you still have a TV subscription, look at all the shows on the air documenting some crime that was committed. This fascination is not a modern phenomena to Foucault...this has existed all throughout our history. In the American West, there was Billy the Kid. In the Great Depression, Bonnie and Clyde. Criminals can even become folk heroes like DB Cooper, but this doesn't just happen in the United States...this has happened all over the world. Part of the reason these older societies moved away from the direction of executing criminals as a public spectacle...is because of the very real effects of what happens when you put a criminal beloved by the public at center stage. Foucault thinks we love criminals so much because when they vehemently refuse to play by the rules of society...they have an ability to show us exactly what we are. The law-abiding, occupants and active participants in what is effectively a massive social prison. We live our lives trapped in a cell inside of a Panopticon. Or a Panopticon inside of ANOTHER Panopticon. In fact, the Panopticon is a great metaphor for the entire project of modernity, to Foucault. See just like in the actual prison...where the goal of the operation is not some higher virtue like justice, but instead to reform prisoners into subjects that are useful for keeping society going...we, as occupants of our social prison, are constantly being disciplined and reformed into good employees, good consumers, good voters, good students, good friends..all internalized expectations of ourselves given to us by someone in a position of power. We're given standards by TV shows, movies, books, all media...standards we internalize that tell us how our bodies should look, what beauty is, what you should care about, what you can say and can't say, what some people can do that you can't do, there is no prison or method of torture that has ever been devised that can do to people what they willingly do to themselves in our modern social prison. We live in a Panopticon, because we live our lives as though we are constantly being watched and held to these standards about how we should be that are given to us

by media. But the truly sick part about it is that we have constructed a world where we are simultaneously... the prisoner being reformed in the cell, AND the warden at the center of the Panopticon that's constantly watching us. We've created a world where we are under constant surveillance by ourselves. Surveillance by looking in the mirror...wondering if you should starve yourself tonight to lose that two pounds that will make you beautiful. Surveillance of your own irrational, toxic thoughts, but you suffer in silence rather than have to face the shame of asking for help and appearing weak to the people around you who NEED you to keep it together. There is no prison that can compare to a life of forcing yourself to adhere to a normalized standard of behavior that tells you the person you should be while constantly being surveyed and examined by yourself and others to make sure you stay that way. This is what Foucault refers to as the geneology of the modern soul. Consider the fact that the media you consume even gives you the very vocabulary you have at your disposal, and with it the only categories you have to think about who you even are as a person. THINK ABOUT THAT. Think about the power you could have if you were the person that came up with the only terms people had to think about who they even are. See all throughout history people have asked the questions: where does power ultimately lie? Who has the power and how is it exercised on people? And there's this classic idea that people have brought up that power lies in the hands of people that are in privileged political positions. The thinking is that if you are the president...you can pass executive orders, you can go across the aisle and find bi-partisan consensus, you can appoint judges that ultimately dictate the law...that is where power lies. But then a Marxist tradition came along and said, no...that's actually a naive understanding of power...because in advanced economic societies...if you can buy the interests of the president...if you can lobby politicians and get legislation influenced in your favor because of financial contributions...then it's not people in privileged political positions that have the power, but people in privileged economic positions. Well, many postmodernists would say, Foucault among them, that the Marxists are just as naive as the people that came before them, and just as hellbent on trying to find some grand narrative to explain everything like they try to do with economics. To Foucault,

power doesn't lie in either of these places. See it would be great if power actually did lie in the hands of a relative few like that...to Foucault, it'd be great if something like the illuminati really existed because then, just like in the societies in the 1750's, we could point directly at the people in power and do away with them if things were going bad. But in our modern world, power is much more difficult to identify, and part of the reason is because it has become much more widespread and diffuse. Power, in our modern world to Foucault, is always connected to knowledge. And having recently talked about structuralists and post-structuralists and their views on knowledge claims, we know that knowledge to them is not some objective, codified set of facts about the way the universe is...knowledge to these thinkers is nothing more than the findings of the current, dominant set of cultural discourses and the method that it uses to chop up and make sense of the world. So if power lies in the hands of people with knowledge...and knowledge is given to us by people that use narrow, cultural biases to chop up reality...then where do we get our knowledge? And who are these people that arrive at knowledge for us? Well, Science is where we get our knowledge in modern times...and thought leaders within the sciences in their respective fields of study are the people that arrive at knowledge for us to use. THIS is where power ultimately lies. You know, Foucault has a famous idea: that man is a recent invention that's reaching its expiration date...that the concept of "man" is something that wasn't even talked about until around the 1600's...and part of what he means when he says that is that it wasn't until the 1600's that people really focused on the human sciences as a prescriptive endeavor...it wasn't until the 1600's that fields like psychology, biology, medicine, sociology were being used to try to arrive at a scientific rational idea of "what it is to be a human being". Foucault would ask: well who have conducted these experiments that are determining "what it is to be a human being"? Have we maybe limited ourselves by only looking at what it is to be a human being from the extremely narrow cultural perspective of almost entirely...men, from a western european cultural background, from a similar educational background, from a similar socio-economic situation where they were able to go to school, get funding for their experiments and were able to think about stuff like this for

their entire lives...Foucault would ask: when it comes to our understanding of what it is to be a human being, has the data we've gathered over the years come from such a limited point of view...that much of our understanding of what it is to be a human being is approaching some sort of expiration date? Regardless of your answer to this question: Foucault's point about power is that it doesn't matter how much money you have or how high of a political office you hold...those people may SEEM to be powerful...but if you can dictate the parameters that those people use to understand the most foundational things about their existence...if you can dictate their views on what a human being is...how they fit into the world, the vocabulary they use to think about who they are, how about being able to dictate what things even matter to them that they should then use their economic or political resources to pursue in this world...THAT'S where true power lies, to Foucault. So real quick just to clarify something: towards the end of last episode I talked about doing a couple episodes on the late work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger...uh, but based on the emails I received after releasing last episode, it seems clear that people don't really want to hear about it, they just want to move on to Postmodernism. Now, personally, I think to fully understand Postmodernism it's absolutely crucial to understand this transition from Logical Positivism to the mid 20th century where there is more of a focus on Behaviourism and Pragmatism, but look let's be honest here, at the end of the day I'm a dancing monkey making episodes about what the majority of people want to hear or else I go out of business...so with that in mind, today's episode is part one of a series on Michel Foucault...and if you're at all confused about any of the context of these ideas that are being brought up, send me an email, I'll respond to as many of them as I can.

But that said, if someone were going to write a shortlist of the quintessential, Postmodernist philosophers...of what is meant when someone says Postmodernist philosopher: Foucault is definitely going to be on that list. But to some...relegating the work of Foucault and labeling it as merely being in the realm of philosophy...doesn't really do him justice...because his work often times moves into areas that have nothing to

DO with philosophy...to some you could easily refer to Foucault as a historian, or a political theorist, or a social commentator...depending on what era of his life he wrote the book you're reading, you could have very different impressions about what subject matters were important to him. This makes it completely impossible for us to cover the entire scope of Foucault's work in a single episode, and it can make it kind of hard to find a clean entry point into covering his work... but I think a really good place to start is for us to talk about the details of his 1975 book titled Discipline and Punish.

Now, to a total outsider to the work of Michel Foucault... to someone who just picked up and read Discipline and Punish one day...the book may seem to be just a history of criminology...a historical catalogue of the ways we've treated and punished criminals over the centuries. But as we'll talk about later on today's episode, Foucault is actually making a much deeper point with this book...he's making a point about the structures of where power lies and the relationship between the people in power and the average citizen...and just so the first half of the podcast doesn't COMPLETELY come off as me doing a documentary about the history of how we've treated prisoners...I want to ask some questions throughout the episode the sort of foreshadow to why this may be much bigger than just Foucault going over the history of this stuff.

By the way, Foucault himself would never describe this book as a "history" of anything. Foucault hated the word history and almost never used it in his writing. He used words to describe this book more like, a genealogy of the way we've treated criminals, or an archaeology of how criminals have been punished over the years. He hates the word history...because so often the word history brings with it a connotation... that we exist in our modern world at the end of this long historical timeline of events that have led to near constant progress. This idea that, hey, we used to be these barbaric savages that followed the playbook of Machievelli, the ends justify the means, we used to believe that it was morally acceptable for the king or the people in power to brutally torture and kill someone that was guilty of a heinous crime...but then HISTORY happened. Time went

on...progress was made. Great political theorists came along...great leaders, great ethical philosophers did their work and we all realized the error of our ways and brought into existence a more modern world where everyone is much more free...the people in power inhibiting the lives of the average citizen far less than they used to . Foucault is going to call this assumption about history into question and really dig deeper into the idea of: how much has really changed when it comes to the fundamental relationship between those in power and the citizens?

Foucault begins exploring this idea in chapter one of Discipline and Punish by laying the groundwork for the discussion, and describing what it was like to be a criminal in Western Europe in the 1750's. Specifically he gives an example of what the world was like at this time... by describing an actual punishment that was carried out on a criminal in the year 1757. Listen to the punishment this person faced for the crimes they had committed...this punishment was to be implemented in public, on the steps of the church and the criminal was to be:

"taken and conveyed in a cart, wearing nothing but a shirt, holding a torch of burning wax weighing two pounds"; then, on a scaffold that will be erected there, the flesh will be torn from his breasts, arms, thighs and calves with red-hot pincers, his right hand, holding the knife with which he committed the said parricide, burnt with sulphur, and, on those places where the flesh will be torn away, poured molten lead, boiling oil, burning resin, wax and sulphur melted together and then his body drawn and quartered by four horses and his limbs and body consumed by fire, reduced to ashes and his ashes thrown to the winds"

That was an actual punishment carried out on an actual person in the year 1757. Now, a few things Foucault would want us to initially consider about this situation: one would be to recognize the fact... that this sentence was handed down on what may as well be a distant alien planet to the planet that you live on. See, because it's so easy to hear about a

punishment like this...weigh it up against the moral intuitions that happened to be given to you in modern times...feel morally superior to the people that lived in the 1750's and then write off their entire culture as just barbaric savagery from a bygone era that to even talk about is legitimizing a waste of time. What could we possibly learn from people that thought something like this was a good idea? But the problem with this approach to Foucault is that if you always end the conversation here, number 1. you never understand the historical context that explains why things were different back then...but number two, and more importantly to Foucault, that feeling of moral superiority often times gets us to never consider the similarities between the world back then and the world as it is now, more specifically the power structures of that time, their relationship to the citizens and how many aspects of them still persist to this day.

Because think about it: this punishment was handed down in a world that was pre-American revolution, pre-French revolution. The nation-state that sentenced this prisoner to this punishment was not modeled after the Enlightenment, it was modeled more after a Renaissance era interpretation of Machievelli's *The Prince* and *Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes. The stability of this particular society would have been grounded in social contract theory...or if you remember from the podcast episodes we did about this period, the idea that upon birth, every citizen of the nation-state effectively signs a social contract...the citizens sacrifice a certain amount to the state by way of taxation or public service or by other means, and in return they receive protection...protection from what Hobbes calls the State of Nature, protection by a King or a Magistrate or whatever sovereign body is in charge that guarantees certain natural rights for people. Put another way: the citizen's job is to sacrifice for the sovereign, so that the sovereign can do their job of guaranteeing the natural rights of the population, INCLUDING punishing criminals that disobey the law. This is a contract where BOTH parties have very important roles if society is going to function.

Now another thing you may remember from the episodes we did on Hobbes...is that when somebody commits a crime in one of these societies, the act is seen as a direct attack on the body politic. Not only that, but the crime is seen as a direct affront to every single citizen that has signed a social contract, each one of them making up a small piece of that Leviathan that Hobbes describes...but more importantly than either of those two things, when a crime is committed in one of these societies it is seen as a direct affront... to the authority, of the king...and it's RIGHT here, Foucault thinks, that you can start to see the true, primary function of the penal system in one of these societies in the 1750's.

The goal of the criminal justice system back then was not justice...there was no real focus on a balancing of the scales in any sort of way. The goal of implementing the punishment wasn't fairness...people didn't get the same punishment for the same crime generally speaking. The true function of the criminal justice system, the REASON these punishments were often dramatic and ALWAYS carried out in front of everyone in public as a spectacle, the primary function was its ability to maintain social order, and it achieved this goal in a couple of key ways: first of all... this type of system was a fantastic deterrent of criminal behavior...because if you were someone who had plans that day of committing some sort of heinous criminal act...look no further than the guy getting his arms ripped off by red hot pincers as a persuasive essay as to why you shouldn't be doing that stuff. But the other reason this type of system was so good... beCAUSE in one of these societies, when a crime is committed it directly calls into question the authority of the sovereign...these punishments being carried out in front of everybody on the church steps...ended up being an extremely useful public spectacle...because these punishments served as reinforcement of the fact...direct evidence OF the fact...that the sovereign was still upholding their end of the social contract.

The primary goal of this entire display was not justice, it was not fairness...it was the maintaining of order within the society... and Foucault would want to point out that if

you're the sovereign... if you're the person or group that's been commissioned by one of these societies to maintain order... an absolutely crucial part of doing your job is to make sure that you're still in power, able to maintain order tomorrow, or next week, or a month from now. In other words, Foucault is saying: an intrinsic, necessary part of that task of maintaining order, if you're the sovereign, is preserving the existing power structure. But to ask a foreshadowing question here: what happens when the power structure no longer serves the needs of the people?

Now, Foucault would want to point out that not only did having a sovereign whose job it was to maintain order in this way... work for us...but it worked well. In fact, it worked EXTREMELY well for hundreds of years...but... eventually, as is the case with ANY imperfect system, the sovereign and other people in positions of power started to notice some patterns with societies that were structured this way and how they rise and fall...they started to run into some unintended consequences... flaws in the system that seemed to be repeating themselves over and over again. See, because when you're in the business of publicly executing people for the sake of sending a message about where the power lies in a society...things don't always play out seamlessly.

For example, sometimes... when you try to publicly execute someone...they don't die. SOMETHING's eventually gonna go wrong...the equipment malfunctions...the horses aren't cooperating that day...you try to hang someone but they have like a six pack on their neck and they just kinda hang there for a few hours laughing at you. Point is: these sorts of things happened sometimes...and when they did it wasn't a far leap for the population to start considering whether this was some sort of bad omen...was this a sign that the authority of the sovereign was wavering...that they were no longer capable of carrying out their end of the social contract?

But this isn't the only unintended consequence that started to crop up in these societies. For example, at the beginning of the episode we talked about a pretty extreme

punishment in 1757 that Foucault cites in chapter one of Discipline and Punish. Well it wasn't entirely uncommon when one of THESE sorts of punishments were carried out on someone... that the population might think that the punishment greatly exceeded the severity of the crime that was committed. When this sort of thing happened, it wasn't entirely uncommon for the population to side with the criminal...or at the very least call into question the authority of the sovereign and whether they're still running things properly.

But probably the biggest unintended negative consequence for the sovereign that NOBODY saw coming...was that when you have these brutal executions and punishments taking place in the public square every day in front of every one...when society's functioning well and the sovereign is doing their job...there is zero doubt in ANYONE'S mind when it comes to who is in charge. There is zero question as to who you'll have to answer to and how you'll have to answer to them should you decide to go against the rules enforced by the existing power structure. But the flip side to that...is that when things are NOT going well...say there's a famine...or Natural Rights aren't being guaranteed, or even if there's just a public sentiment that the sovereign is inept and some change needs to take place...the flip side is that there is zero confusion in anyone's mind when looking for the people in power that need to be overthrown and killed for this change to occur.

What the sovereign and the people in power started to realize... is that in this type of society that we're talking about, brutal as it was, the will of the people often had influence over which people were in positions of power...and this could be EXTREMELY inconvenient for the sovereign at times...it made staying in a position of power for any extended period of time a pretty vulnerable enterprise. The people in positions of power knew that something drastic had to change if they wanted to make power more sustainable...and Foucault documents a fundamental shift that occurs in the way societies treat criminals that takes place between the years 1757 and 1837.

Now, real quick, I'm just anticipating a place that someone's brain might go here: oh, so what you're saying is that a bunch of evil people in positions of power realized that in this older type of society the will of the people ACTUALLY had some influence could throw them OUT of positions of power...so they all got together, met in back rooms, formed a secret society, called it something like the council of the drifting phoenix where they had some creepy secret handshake and they all sat around coming up with ways to control the population so they'd never have to relinquish power. But what Foucault would probably want to point out is that there doesn't need to be some evil secret society for people in government to want power to be more deeply embedded. Remember, the people in positions of power signed a social contract as well. Part of that social contract is maintaining the order of society so that they can continue to guarantee the natural rights of the citizens, and part of maintaining order historically, to Foucault, has been to preserve the existing power structure. There doesn't need to be a single, evil person in any of these positions of power for them to be motivated to come up with new, better tactics to stay in power....and Foucault would say these new tactics that are being implemented between the years 1757 and 1837...is a broader evolution of the way people in power keep prisoners under control.

These changes occur gradually...over the course of decades...sometimes just with subtle changes to the ceremony of the public execution itself. Whereas before prisoners used to just be paraded around in an open top cart before their execution...slowly over the years that evolved into a closed top cart with wooden planks that you could hardly see the person through...that eventually evolved into a bag being over the person's head and their identity completely concealed. By the 1790's, most societies had moved away from these dramatic or creative public executions and favored the more standardized punishment of a guillotine in front of the courthouse...few years later the guillotine was moved behind the courthouse...until eventually it was moved inside the prison and all

the executions were done in private. Punishment...and the reality of the way we treat criminals...has slowly moved from before when it was something that was at the forefront of public consciousness that it was impossible not to be aware of...to now, when it is something abstract, silent, cordoned off and even locked away in these distant far away buildings that we never have to see. To ask a couple more foreshadowing questions: what sort of effects might that have on a society...and more importantly why might people who want to maintain their positions of power prefer a situation like this?

By the year 1837, two fundamental changes had occurred in the way we punish criminals that Foucault says are extremely deliberate. Number one: putting somebody to death as a public spectacle that everybody gets to witness had all but disappeared. And number two: we had changed tactics from punishing criminals by inflicting harm on their bodies...to the emergence of a new era in our methods of punishing criminals where now we focused primarily on the disciplining and control of their minds. There is a fundamental shift from physical punishment of the person's body...to the disciplining and reformation of the person's mind. This is why Foucault titles the book *Discipline and Punish*...this is the emergence and infancy of what will eventually become the modern prison...this is the beginning of an evolution where people in positions of power develop a much more efficient and effective way of wielding and sustaining power over people.

Foucault cites an actual strict schedule that criminals in the 1830's serving time had to follow during their time in prison. You can imagine what something like this might look like: 7am wake up. 7:05 you are to be on your mark for roll call. 7:15 you are to be at the mess hall for breakfast. 7:25 you are to be at your assigned job post for the day. 9:15 water break, 9:20 back to work...in other words: when your ENTIRE day is scheduled and accounted for down to the second...there's not much time for illicit criminal activity. There's not much time for ANY thought outside of disciplining yourself and adhering to this schedule of stuff you're required to do. Well couple this new, strict focus on the disciplining of the mind and reformation of behavior with MORE new tactics that were

emerging over the years...more specifically a new, improved, three pronged approach towards controlling prisoners that Foucault thinks is one of the most effective methods that has ever been devised.

The three...prongs...of this three pronged method that is used to keep prisoners in line...are what Foucault calls: Surveillance, Normalization, and Examination. That is...Constant surveillance of the prisoners...which combines nicely with normalization...or a normalized standard of how a good prisoner should be thinking and behaving that has been given to you by the people in power...and both of these work nicely with a constant process of examination and re-examination where people in positions of power give you a score or a grade determining how well you're corresponding with that way of behaving that we've decided a good prisoner should be a reflection of.

Foucault thinks this new, highly effective way of controlling prisoners may have sprung out of the work of a philosopher named Jeremy Bentham. The same way Plato in The Republic spends a considerable amount of time trying to come up with the ideal structure of government...Jeremy Bentham spends a bunch of time in HIS work trying to come up with the ideal structure of a prison. The model that he arrives at after thinking about it for so long is what he calls The Panopticon. Simply put, the Panopticon is a building designed and laid out in a clever way, where a single guard, or a warden or anyone in a position of power can stand in a specific spot in the center...and THEY can see inside of the cell of any prisoner they want... but the prisoners can't see them, they can't know WHEN they're being watched, they can't know the criteria that determines WHY they're being watched...in a sense, Bentham says, the reason this is an ideal design for a prison...is because the only reasonable thing the prisoners can do in a prison that's designed this way...is to behave every second of every day as though they're being watched...because they can never know when or when its not happening. Their lives become, once again, constant surveillance through cameras or armed guards, strict

adherence to a normalized "way a good prisoner behaves" given to them by the people in power, and rigorous examination by experts, or the court system or the parole board or whoever it is THIS WEEK for the prisoner to answer to.

Now some of you out there might be thinking: why are we going on so much about the history of criminals? What does this have to do with philosophy? What relevance does this have to me whatsoever? Well, if you're someone that's thought that all we've been talking about so far on this episode are methods we've developed over the years for controlling... only prisoners...Foucault would probably say I hope you've been paying attention to the details of what's been said so far...because when Jeremy Bentham sits down and creates the design of this Panopticon of his...hes not just talking about the ideal structure of a prison...and what follows from that is that Foucault is NOT JUST talking about the evolution of methods that we've developed to control prisoners.

Jeremy Bentham describes the Panopticon very generally in his work as "a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example"...and knowing that...it makes sense that he quickly goes on to say that although this is the ideal structure of a prison if you wanted to control prisoners...there's no reason why this same design couldn't be applied if you wanted to create, you know, a mental institution that promotes a standard to the inmates of what a good patient is...or in a military setting promoting what it is to be a good soldier...or in a university setting promoting how you should think and behave if you want to be a good student...if Bentham lived in a modern economic society he no doubt would see the utility of the Panopticon if it was applied to a factory and producing good factory workers...or even more generally how it could be used at a multi-national corporation trying to produce good employees.

See, that's the thing. Let's say you're in a position of power in a corporation...to be able to use the fundamentals of these highly effective tactics that have been developed over the years to control your employees, you don't need to treat them like they're a prisoner

that's part of a chain gang forced to crush rocks all day...no, as long as you make sure that their chain is long enough that they don't FEEL like a prisoner...you can set up some pretty narrow parameters for what it is to be a "good employee" that not only will they fall into...but they will actually police themselves to stay that way...they'll feel intense pressure to adhere to that normalized standard of behavior at all times, because their life at work is one of surveillance, normalization and examination. Surveillance by way of cameras, time clocks, supervisors, deadlines, monitoring activity on your computer, even sometimes just the surveillance of other employees around that feel like they benefit from having dirt on someone in a highly competitive environment. The normalized standard of being a good employee...speaking, acting and dressing in a professional way, however that's defined by whoever in the company. Putting on your work persona...always being politically correct...doing all the things to make sure you're a good team player. Then it's on to the examination phase with your monthly, quarterly, yearly evaluations where they give you a score out of ten in different areas to determine how well your doing...or in other words how well you correspond with exactly who I say you should be. Your productivity is about the same level as last evaluation...you're doing good in some areas...but there's room for improvement in a couple other areas and don't worry...I made an action plan so that we can see if we can get you back on track. This three pronged method... has become the dominant way of controlling human behavior...and if you doubt that in any way...consider the similarities it has to the structure of some religions with the constant surveillance, normative behavior and rigorous process of examination. This method is so effective... and so capable of being applied to any circumstance imaginable...that in our modern world it has so pervaded the way power is exercised that it extends beyond institutions like prisons or corporations and it has embedded itself into the very fabric of society. The very same process of surveillance, normalization and examination could be said to exist in the way you present yourself online...the media you consume...it most likely is even being played out in various social circles that you're a part of right now. Foucault would say one of the truly insidious things about the way power is wielded and people are controlled in

modern times with these new methods, is that simultaneously you are both a subject that is being controlled while also being an active participant in the system...an active participant that in some way, most times unknowingly, supports the existing power structure.

Let's slow down for a second and really talk about what is being implied here for Foucault. Remember the criminal justice system back in the 1750's? So as we talked about the goal of the whole situation back then was clearly not primarily justice or fairness...but instead the benefits the system provided to society when it came to maintaining order and keeping things moving forward. Well Foucault is going to ask: is the penal system of the 1970's really so different when you take a closer look at it? Do we exist in a modern, enlightened era where we've grown throughout history and learned the error of our ways and constructed a penal system that first and foremost has the aim of distributing justice and fairness? To Foucault, the goal of the modern penal system is not justice or fairness...□the goal is through surveillance, normalization and examination to produce harmless, non-rebellious, working, tax-paying productive citizens who follow the rules and are satisfied with a life of conforming to the normalized standard of what it is to be a person handed down to them from above...in other words, docile, useful subjects that carry out the vision for what the future should hold given to them by the people in power.

This is why there is such a difference when it comes to sentencing between white collar and blue collar crimes. Between an executive that robs the IRS of \$20,000 by evading taxes...and some dude that robs a Taco Bell of \$85 bucks and a burrito supreme. Short of the executive absolutely refusing to pay back the money...9 times out of 10 they are not going to see the inside of a prison cell because their behavior...doesn't really need much reformation in the eyes of the people in power. Keep doing almost everything you're doing...keep working, keep creating jobs, keep starting new companies and going to badminton on Sundays...just pay your taxes. Whereas the guy that robbed the Taco

Bell...it doesn't matter if he marches back into the store...hands over the 85 bucks directly to the manager...baby birds the burrito supreme back into his mouth...9 times out of 10 that guy is going to jail because the goal of the penal system is reforming criminals to fit a pre-existing mold of what a normal person is.

Also consider the fact...that once you're sentenced...it isn't about justice or fairness or some sort of direct punishment and retribution for the crimes you committed at that point either...in today's day and age there's the modern advent of getting out on good behavior. In other words, as long as you're willing to reform yourself into the type of person that we've told you to be...it doesn't really matter what your initial sentence was...we may knock a couple decades off your sentence if you're willing to play by our rules.

Now some people...no matter how many times they go to prison...are just the type of people that are never going to play by the rules. They're never going to become this person the people in power want them to become...they're never going to change... and those people are the people that will either be lifelong repeat offenders in and out of jail...or they will eventually get life in prison.

And Foucault would say that it's these kinds of people that refuse to play by the rules that are absolutely fascinating to us as "normal" people. That's another modern invention for Foucault...thinking of ourselves as normal and the labeling of criminals as "abnormal" or people that need to be reformed to a state of normalcy. But it's the fact that they're not like normal people that makes us so fascinated by criminals! Look at the thousands of True Crime podcasts that have exploded onto the podcast scene in the past couple years. Massively popular. Look on Netflix at all the crime related shows there are. If you still have a TV subscription, look at all the shows on the air documenting some crime that was committed. This fascination is not a modern phenomena to Foucault...this has existed all throughout our history. In the American West, there was Billy the Kid. In the Great

Depression, Bonnie and Clyde. Criminals can even become folk heroes like DB Cooper, but this doesn't just happen in the United States...this has happened all over the world. Part of the reason these older societies moved away from the direction of executing criminals as a public spectacle...is because of the very real effects of what happens when you put a criminal beloved by the public at center stage. Foucault thinks we love criminals so much because when they vehemently refuse to play by the rules of society...they have an ability to show us exactly what we are.

The law-abiding, occupants and active participants in what is effectively a massive social prison. We live our lives trapped in a cell inside of a Panopticon. Or a Panopticon inside of ANOTHER Panopticon. In fact, the Panopticon is a great metaphor for the entire project of modernity, to Foucault. See just like in the actual prison...where the goal of the operation is not some higher virtue like justice, but instead to reform prisoners into subjects that are useful for keeping society going...we, as occupants of our social prison, are constantly being disciplined and reformed into good employees, good consumers, good voters, good students, good friends..all internalized expectations of ourselves given to us by someone in a position of power. We're given standards by TV shows, movies, books, all media...standards we internalize that tell us how our bodies should look, what beauty is, what you should care about, what you can say and can't say, what some people can do that you can't do, there is no prison or method of torture that has ever been devised that can do to people what they willingly do to themselves in our modern social prison.

We live in a Panopticon, because we live our lives as though we are constantly being watched and held to these standards about how we should be that are given to us by media. But the truly sick part about it is that we have constructed a world where we are simultaneously... the prisoner being reformed in the cell, AND the warden at the center of the Panopticon that's constantly watching us. We've created a world where we are under constant surveillance by ourselves. Surveillance by looking in the

mirror...wondering if you should starve yourself tonight to lose that two pounds that will make you beautiful. Surveillance of your own irrational, toxic thoughts, but you suffer in silence rather than have to face the shame of asking for help and appearing weak to the people around you who NEED you to keep it together. There is no prison that can compare to a life of forcing yourself to adhere to a normalized standard of behavior that tells you the person you should be while constantly being surveyed and examined by yourself and others to make sure you stay that way. This is what Foucault refers to as the geneology of the modern soul.

Consider the fact that the media you consume even gives you the very vocabulary you have at your disposal, and with it the only categories you have to think about who you even are as a person. THINK ABOUT THAT. Think about the power you could have if you were the person that came up with the only terms people had to think about who they even are.

See all throughout history people have asked the questions: where does power ultimately lie? Who has the power and how is it exercised on people? And there's this classic idea that people have brought up that power lies in the hands of people that are in privileged political positions. The thinking is that if you are the president...you can pass executive orders, you can go across the aisle and find bi-partisan consensus, you can appoint judges that ultimately dictate the law...that is where power lies. But then a Marxist tradition came along and said, no...that's actually a naive understanding of power...because in advanced economic societies...if you can buy the interests of the president...if you can lobby politicians and get legislation influenced in your favor because of financial contributions...then it's not people in privileged political positions that have the power, but people in privileged economic positions. Well, many postmodernists would say, Foucault among them, that the Marxists are just as naive as the people that came before them, and just as hellbent on trying to find some grand narrative to explain everything like they try to do with economics. To Foucault, power

doesn't lie in either of these places. See it would be great if power actually did lie in the hands of a relative few like that...to Foucault, it'd be great if something like the illuminati really existed because then, just like in the societies in the 1750's, we could point directly at the people in power and do away with them if things were going bad. But in our modern world, power is much more difficult to identify, and part of the reason is because it has become much more widespread and diffuse. Power, in our modern world to Foucault, is always connected to knowledge. And having recently talked about structuralists and post-structuralists and their views on knowledge claims, we know that knowledge to them is not some objective, codified set of facts about the way the universe is...knowledge to these thinkers is nothing more than the findings of the current, dominant set of cultural discourses and the method that it uses to chop up and make sense of the world.

So if power lies in the hands of people with knowledge...and knowledge is given to us by people that use narrow, cultural biases to chop up reality...then where do we get our knowledge? And who are these people that arrive at knowledge for us? Well, Science is where we get our knowledge in modern times...and thought leaders within the sciences in their respective fields of study are the people that arrive at knowledge for us to use.

THIS is where power ultimately lies. You know, Foucault has a famous idea: that man is a recent invention that's reaching its expiration date...that the concept of "man" is something that wasn't even talked about until around the 1600's...and part of what he means when he says that is that it wasn't until the 1600's that people really focused on the human sciences as a prescriptive endeavor...it wasn't until the 1600's that fields like psychology, biology, medicine, sociology were being used to try to arrive at a scientific rational idea of "what it is to be a human being". Foucault would ask: well who have conducted these experiments that are determining "what it is to be a human being"? Have we maybe limited ourselves by only looking at what it is to be a human being from the extremely narrow cultural perspective of almost entirely...men, from a western

European cultural background, from a similar educational background, from a similar socio-economic situation where they were able to go to school, get funding for their experiments and were able to think about stuff like this for their entire lives...Foucault would ask: when it comes to our understanding of what it is to be a human being, has the data we've gathered over the years come from such a limited point of view...that much of our understanding of what it is to be a human being is approaching some sort of expiration date?

Michel Foucault pt. 2 - The Order of Things

Episode #122

This is a transcript of episode #122 on Michel Foucault. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So once upon a time Michel Foucault found himself living in an age of almost unparalleled optimism about science. He was living in a world in the early to mid 20th century, not far removed from those huge leaps forward that we talked about in quantum mechanics, general relativity, many other things...and there were a lot of thinkers around this time that were EXTREMELY enthusiastic about science being the way that we were finally going to figure things out for good. In fact, things looked so promising back then...there were even some scientists that were saying that it may be totally possible...that every phenomena that we observe, every cause and effect across the ENTIRE landscape of science...may be reduceable...to physics. This attitude is also known as Physical Reductionism. Now, at first this can seem like kind of a weird claim for a scientist to make, but when you consider the size and scope of the breakthroughs that had happened during their lifetimes and when you look at science the way they did it makes total sense...after all: for example, we often wonder about the psychology of an individual...and what led them to think some thought or make some choice. Well, it's not crazy to think that someone's psychology and the decisions they make is massively influenced by their biology and the way that biology interfaces with the world around them. Psychology, in a way, depends on Biology. Well, it's not crazy to think that biology is massive influenced by a complex ecosystem of chemical reactions that are going on. Biology depends on Chemistry. It's not crazy to think that chemistry is nothing more than the interactions between atoms and molecules that ultimately adhere to the laws of physics. What some scientists were saying during this time is that while we obviously are no where near this point yet...it's not CRAZY to say that at some point in the future we may have such a deep understanding of all of these fields... that complex things like thoughts and behaviors may be able to be predicted by science at the level of physics.

There's a feeling at the time that things like physics, mathematics and cosmology are more pure in terms of being a science than something like psychology. Not that psychology is not important; the point is that these three fields are the simplest forms of science, they seem to be the most foundational forms of science and they require the least amount of conjecture or theory to justify the conclusions they arrive at, than any other science. This is why, once upon a time, Foucault finds himself in a world where practically every person that came before him that sat down and wrote a history of science... looked at that history primarily in terms of the advancements in those three fields: physics, mathematics and cosmology. Well Foucault sees this...and immediately realizes that this may be creating a huge blind spot when it comes to our understanding of the history of science...what FOUCAULT wants to do, is take a look at that very same history, but instead look at it through the lens of three different fields, three neglected fields in the history of science: Biology, Linguistics and Economics. See, because Foucault is much less concerned with the history of mathematics or physics or even the specifics of what particular scientists have said in the past. He's more concerned with the underlying rules that exist in the background of ALL scientific inquiry, that make conducting science even possible...and the relationship between scientific knowledge and power structures in the world around us. Let me explain over the course of the next two episodes. The fancy way of putting it is that Foucault would say that in our world there is a dichotomy between discursive formations and non-discursive formations. A dichotomy between what others would later call the articulatable and the visible. The non-fancy way of putting this is that since the 1700's...we've had on one hand the institutions that make up our societies, hospitals, schools, prisons...social circles of many varieties, also known as non-discursive formations...but then on the other hand we've always had the systems of language that we use to TALK about these institutions...language that drastically changes the way we view the FUNCTION of those institutions, or discursive formations. For example, in our modern world when we think of a school...the primary function of a school is educating the youth. When we think of a hospital: primary function of a hospital is to provide care to the patients...we think of a prison, primary function as we

talked about last episode, is the reformation of the minds of the criminals. In other words...and this is a massive thru-line in Foucault's fifth book in 1966 titled *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Sciences*...in other words we live in a world where Foucault says there is a clear dichotomy between seeing and saying. A dichotomy between SEEING systems of representation, the visible, things like hospitals and schools, and then SAYING things ABOUT those systems, the articulatable, or the language we use that drastically effects the way we see them. If there was a primary concern of this book, that Foucault would want to make sure was clear so that it sets up all the OTHER primary concerns of this book, this would be it. Discursive is just a fancy word for talking about discourse. Discourse is also just a fancy word, but it's complicated because it's a fancy word that Foucault uses in many different ways all throughout his work. The meaning of the word seems to evolve over time...depending on where you're reading it could mean anything from just the language that surrounds a topic, to the assumptions in the way that people think and talk about a subject, all the way to a set of concepts that relate in some way to another set of concepts that allow us to make sense of things in a particular period of time. The reason this is so weird right here, is because Foucault almost always uses the word discourse with the word "scientific" preceding it...and whenever he references scientific discourse... he's usually talking about a large and complex network of meaning and baggage that gets smuggled in whenever scientists claim to have knowledge about the way that things are. See, living in a world where so many people around him are worshiping at the altar of science, Foucault wants to shine a light on the limitations of science and show how the conclusions of science often times have unintended consequences that hurt people. Foucault and his views on science are a perfect example of a structuralist and post-structuralist butting heads with those outdated, Enlightenment era assumptions about science and philosophy that we've talked about on previous episodes. The short version is that people may have become a little TOO enamored with science and logic BECAUSE of all the breakthroughs that occurred and BECAUSE they were trying to get away from the long tradition of philosophy being unverifiable speculation. See, because another thing we missed by going

over the Logical Positivists so quickly is that it wasn't just the Logical Positivists that were skeptical of the last couple hundred years of philosophy...there were MANY thinkers around the early 20th century that thought of this entire period since the 17th century as what they would call The Metaphysical Age...or the age when all kinds of thinkers decided to apply themselves to creating these massive, complicated, metaphysical systems that tried to explain everything...a delusion that ran deep. With a lot of key players involved in the process...we had Descartes whose system was critiqued by Spinoza and Hume, who then were eclipsed by the work of Kant, who then had to concede to the system of Hegel; the problem with looking at the history of philosophy this way is that it COMPLETELY ignores the fact, that it's a direct mirror of all the mistakes people were making when looking at ALL of history during this time. What I'm trying to say is: Foucault's problem with lumping everything in the last couple hundred years into something called The Metaphysical Age is a culmination of several problems we've already talked about on this show when it comes to assumptions made in the thinking of the early 20th century. Remember? The outdated way of looking at history where we hyper-focus on subjectivity and the actions of a few key players? What is history? Oh, well history is when Napoleon invades Russia...Harun Al Rashid captures THIS territory...Bismarck signs THIS treaty...but is this the totality of what history is? There are thousands of other angles you could view the history of the world from, and what happens when you do that? What new insights start to present themselves? Remember Thomas Kuhn, and his history of science...and how he wants to move away from focusing on individuals like Copernicus and Newton and Einstein and THEIR subjectivity, THEIR individual achievements...and instead wants to focus on larger, structural shifts that occur...to instead look at history through the lens of large scale paradigm shifts as he calls them...moments, when paradoxes and contradictions pile up and create fractures in the existing way of doing science...fractures that eventually cause the whole scientific paradigm to break, at which point an entirely NEW method of doing science takes over. Doesn't viewing science from this slightly different angle give us fresh, new insights into the history of science that we would never see if we

always looked at history through that lens that favors subjectivity so much? More than that though...is THIS method the end all be all way of looking at the history of science? What possible reason could anyone have to privilege Thomas Kuhn's method over any of the countless OTHER angles we could view the history of the world from? How much are we missing, by having such a rigid and narrow method of cataloging history? Well, Thomas Kuhn is just one example of many that are trying to find alternative histories...Foucault's another thinker that's calling this stuff into question...and you can see even before 1966 in *The Order of Things* that he's already looking for alternative ways of interpreting what has happened in the past. We talked last time about two distinct, sort of, epochs that exist when it comes to the way we punish criminals, the sovereign age and the disciplinary age...well there's similar sort of thing in Foucault's book titled *Birth of the Clinic* when it comes to the way we treat patients in hospitals. Once again, just so we're clear, Foucault is NOT viewing history in terms of the achievements of individuals, but instead in terms of vast periods or epochs that occur, for example when you READ *Birth of the Clinic*...same sorta thing...no individual doctors or technicians are featured prominently...no, the feel of the book is more like: Well, in the 18th century, when people are sick, you have a building patients go to called a clinic...in the 19th century you have a building patients go to called a hospital. In other words, the language has changed in some small way between these two periods...another example: 18th century...when a patient is sick...they're seen as sort of immersed WITHIN a disease...that's how people talked about illness in the 18th century...the patient that's being treated is under the grip of the disease Cholera, for example...whereas in the 19th century in a hospital the disease is seen as something inside the patient that needs to be fixed. Once again, the language used to describe the patient has changed...another example: 18th century disease is talked about as a thing that is almost A priori...disease exists as it's own thing, out there, independent of any human being contracting it...in the 19th century the collection of symptoms within the person IS the disease itself. In other words, in both centuries we're studying the same disease, you could have the same exact patient in both periods, but when the fundamental language we use to describe the illness changes, so too does the

way that we see the illness and the patient and the task of the doctor and really some pretty important things about the way that we see the world! Now it might be tempting here to think that Foucault and Kuhn are essentially saying the same thing: instead of looking at individuals they're just looking at movements and trends...but the nuances in the differences between them are actually crucial if we want to fully understand Foucault and his work. Foucault breaks down history into long periods or epochs that he calls epistemes...and maybe the best place to start explaining this is to talk for a second about the differences between the paradigm shifts of Thomas Kuhn and these epistemes that Foucault is talking about. Paradigms are easy...all that Thomas Kuhn is referencing when he says paradigm are the dominant theories, practices, instruments, methodologies of a given period of time within the sciences. The scientist using these things not only knows all about them, they know that they are the best practices of the time they're living and if they're going to be conducting any sort of respectable science, they better be using them. Paradigms, generally speaking, don't last very long. They last for a while, but it's not long before better or different science comes along and replaces them. Paradigms...can quite possibly only effect one discipline, for example, there could be a dominant paradigm specific to Biology that doesn't carry over into other fields of science. Now, epistemes on the other hand are NOT so easy. Here's the definition of what Foucault means by an episteme: "the historical, but non-temporal, a priori which grounds knowledge and its discourses and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch." So let's unpack that and explain it using a bit more English. Similar to a paradigm, an episteme is a period of time. But UNLIKE a paradigm, where scientists are consciously aware of all the best scientific practices of the world they're living in, an episteme is set of entirely unconscious assumptions that are made. Foucault is making the case that every scientist, regardless of when they're conducting their work, does that work proceeding from certain background epistemological assumptions that make conducting science even possible, and these assumptions...not only do scientists not realize that they're making them, but they are so deeply ingrained within the culture that the scientist lives in... that they ultimately dictate everything from the experiments the

scientists chooses to run, to the questions the scientist thinks are worth answering, all the way down to what the scientific community as a whole decides should be accepted or rejected as fact. The best way I've ever seen it put is to think about it this way: you woke up this morning and chose the outfit that you were going to wear. Now, short of you being an exhibitionist or one of the chieftain nobles of a nudist colony, chances are there wasn't a single second in your mind when you entertained the possibility of going to work completely naked today. In fact...let's say you're a complete weirdo...in the event your mind actually went to a place like that even for a second, what would happen?...well, you'd immediately dismiss it as an idea...and why? Because there is a cultural norm against nudity in public that runs so deep that to even entertain the possibility of going to work naked would not only be preposterous, but it would be a complete waste of your time to consider it as an option. Well, what if this same dynamic extended to the way you think and talk about everything? What if you were a scientist? The point that Foucault's making here is that all of discourse, the entirety of the way you think and talk about things has been filtered through a set of background assumptions given to you by the cultural and historical conditions you were born into...and these assumptions in the background are things that most people take to be just the common sense way that the world should be chopped up, if they're even aware of these things at all. But this set of background assumptions change over time...much less frequently than Thomas Kuhn's paradigms, not only that though! WHEN one of these epistemes changes it has a much more transformative effect on the world than when a scientific paradigms changes. A paradigm can change and it may only effect one or two fields...when an episteme changes, it effects ALL of the sciences simultaneously. To return back to our definition...these epistemes are the historical A priori (prior to experience in the world) that GROUNDS KNOWLEDGE...and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch or period of time...let's talk about a couple examples of these epistemes. Foucault would say that if you could go back in time to the 17th century and talk to Hobbes or Francis Bacon or many others that are doing work...and you could read their work from the perspective of someone living at the time, what you would notice is

that they are always trying to make sense of things in terms of resemblances. The episteme of THEIR time, the background epistemological assumptions that they brought to bear unconsciously whenever they tried to make sense of things, was that they were always looking for similarities...how one plant or animal species resembled another...how one disease had similar properties to another disease...how some idea from earlier theology was the same as some idea within philosophy. Resemblances and similarities between things defined the entire epoch of the Reannaisance to Foucault. Another example: if you could go back in time give or take to the 18th century, you would see the rise of philosophy that sees the world in terms of differences rather than similarities, you'd see abstractions about things like "human nature", you'd see other ways of categorizing people, you'd see the period that gives rise to the taxonomy of many different fields, not just people, plants and animals. Again, these tendencies are a byproduct of the unconscious, background epistemological assumptions, the episteme that the thinkers of this time were born into. If you were in the 19th or early 20th century, the modern episteme may dictate that you're done with things like taxonomies and are more in the business of categorizing what it means to be a human being. The question Foucault would want us to ask ourselves is: do you think even for a second that the 21st century DOESN'T have an episteme that we are all unconsciously participating in? What Foucault's getting at is that he wants to get away from this nonsense of lumping all of these periods together and referring to them collectively as The Metaphysical Age, and he wants to start breaking them up and calling them what they are: different periods, distinct from each other, each with its own unique systems of acquiring knowledge, it's own systems of visibility and articulatability, it's own discursive and non-discursive formations and here's the kicker! All of these systems, and all of this discourse...ultimately put in place and maintained by people in positions of power...now, couple places your brain may go when I say that...You may picture a king wielding a scepter enforcing this stuff by decree...you may picture a bunch of dudes in powdered wigs banging a gavel...for our post-modern episteme you may picture police in riot gear with their foot on the back of someone's neck. In reality, systems of acquiring knowledge

are rarely, if ever, enforced by this kind of power, and its right here...that Foucault would want to draw a distinction between two different types of power that we come face to face with in our societies: a distinction between what he calls repressive power and normalizing power. Repressive power is the type of power I was just referencing...boots on the back of the neck, military invasion...essentially someone forcing you to do something you don't want to do. But there's a sense in which this type of power is inefficient and really only necessary if someone is actively defying you, which can raise the question: are you really in power if someone has the ability to cross you like that. No, TRUE power would be if you could somehow get people to believe that it was their idea to behave the way you want them to behave. True power would be if you could get people to think it was part of their personality, the very DEFINITION of what it is to be themselves is in accordance with the way you say they should be. THAT is the task that's accomplished by the normalizing power of society. Think about it. You woke up this morning and there was probably no part of you that thought what you want to do with your day today is you want to go down to a sketchy part of town and you want to score some black tar heroin from the guy on the street corner...and why is that? Is it because you are scared of being arrested? Are you scared of Hank and the DEA kicking down your door? Or is it because going to sketchy parts of town and doing hardcore drugs like that is just not who you are? In other words, not only are people WILLING to not do drugs, not steal, not punch their neighbor in the face and countless other things, but they're actually EXCITED about filling their role as a "normal person" within society. That's the power of normalization. So if you consider all the stuff we've talked about on the episode so far you can start to see the problems that you run into as a scientist from the perspective of Foucault. Because if you're someone born into an episteme, you already have a set of unconscious background assumptions that you're making that shade every thought you have...you already have a narrow set of tools, instruments and methods that make up the scientific paradigm of your day, you already, by the time you're a working scientist, have gone through the school and university system and have had 20+ years of influence from a society trying to normalize your thought. Not only that though, the very

field of science itself to Foucault, is an incredibly important part of the social structures that surround us...all of which have a normalizing influence on thought. We need doctors to determine who is sick and who is well. We need psychologists to determine who is sane and who is crazy. We need thought leaders within the sciences to determine who is credible and who isn't. Science itself becomes a crucial part of the process of normalization...because it becomes the standard that everything is measured up against to make sure things fit. But what is this scientific standard that we're weighing everything up against other than a consensus, arrived at by a bunch of people born into an episteme, working through a scientific paradigm with 20+ years of normalizing influence on their thought? Foucault would say, the social structures that make so many aspects of our world even possible... are fueled by a narrow cultural discourse...a cultural discourse that is constantly changing...a cultural discourse that offers commentary on any topic you can possibly imagine, including, what it even is to be a human being. You know, if it's not completely obvious by this point, Foucault is first and foremost in the business of questioning dominant narratives about things that most people just take to be "the way that things are." It's been said, and this is where we will begin the next episode of the show...it's been said that Immanuel Kant...considered by some to be the greatest philosopher to ever live...one of the primary ideas that he explores in his work is the idea that through analysis of the subjective we may be able to arrive at objectivity. Through analyzing the lens that we experience the world through, our senses, our mental faculties, our ability to reason, if we study these things closely enough... we may be able to arrive at properties that are necessarily true about them or the world of phenomena that we're accessing. In other words, Kant is interested in taking the subjective, and arriving at things that are necessarily true about the world. Well, Foucault, again if it isn't entirely obvious by this point, is turning that whole thing on its head. Foucault is interested in finding things that we THINK are necessarily true, and showing them to be subjective and grounded in history. We'll pick up here next time. Thank you for listening. Talk to you then.

Michel Foucault pt. 3 - Power

Episode #123

This is a transcript of episode #123 on Michel Foucault. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So we ended last time by comparing the projects of Michel Foucault and Immanuel Kant...Foucault essentially taking one of the main focus points of Kant's work and turning it on its head...as we talked about: while Kant wanted to take the subjective and contingent of the world, analyze it...study it...and hopefully arrive at necessary truths about the way that things are, Foucault on the other hand wanted to take things that most people assumed were necessary truths and show how ultimately they were subjective, contingent and rooted in history...to show how what we think of as the "truth"...is often nothing more than just the dominant narrative of the time we're living, now...Last episode we talked about epistemes and paradigms...Foucault questioning the dominant narrative of Scientism, of science being this disinterested vehicle for arriving at the "truth" about things or "facts" about the way that things are. Two episodes ago we talked about the book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault questioning the dominant narrative that we used to be these barbaric savages that tortured our prisoners, but now we've evolved ethically to the point that we have seen the error of our ways and now we treat them in a way that is much more humane. Well, it'll probably come as no surprise when I tell you...these aren't the only two narratives that Foucault questioned in his lifetime. In fact, pretty much every major work Foucault produced is taking aim at some widely accepted narrative about the way that things are...narratives that he thinks, when looked at from a different angle, show themselves to be narrow, arbitrary and potentially damaging to the people caught in the mix that the narrative is referencing...for example: Take Foucault's 1961 work *Madness and Civilization*. *Discipline and Punish* is to the way we've treated criminals over the centuries, as *Madness and Civilization* is to the way we've treated people over the centuries that society deems to be mad. See, Foucault realizes that it's easy to be born into the world in the 20th century and take for

granted...that if someone is mentally ill, what you should do is lock them up, have a bunch of experts study them, come up with a treatment plan for them...and then medicate them and give them intensive therapy until they start to act like a "normal person". But this hasn't always been the way society treats the mentally ill, in fact, the idea of rounding these people up and locking them away in an asylum is actually a very recent thing...for example...in former societies...in Ancient Greece for example, it wasn't an uncommon attitude at the time to see the people considered to be mad as "touched by the Gods"...they lived pretty normal lives, among the rest of the population and were accepted as just...different, with a sort of outside of the box way of looking at things as long as they weren't hurting anybody...there are many Greek plays where the protagonist is informed by somebody that everybody else in the play would see as crazy. In other societies the mad were seen as an important cog in the whole machine of society because through the crazy stuff they said they helped everyone around them identify the limits of reason. Foucault would recognize, once again, the assumption that's easy to make being born into the 20th century is that for thousands of years these people were unmedicated, untreated, living their lives in abject suffering, and that nowadays, now that we have them in custody, now that they're in front of a panel of experts and on the right pill that makes them act normal, that their lives are better. But Foucault wouldn't let you off the hook there...he would probably ask: what specifically is responsible for this sudden change in our attitudes towards how we treat the mentally ill in our societies? Foucault would no doubt think it is in large part due to science... and the discourse science produces surrounding the concept of mental illness. Because it's just been in the recent past that for the first time in human history, madness has become the object of scientific inquiry...and over the years as science has progressively diagnosed, categorized, and medicated people that society deems to be mentally ill, the more they've dehumanized these people and turned them into objects that exist for the sake of science being able to study them...objects of study, rather than human beings. The more that science worked to understand these objects and turn them into something that looks like a normal person, the more torture they put these people through. There was a great quote on a

Foucault documentary I watched a couple years ago, it went: "The more people cared, the less people cured. The more they intervened, the more they oppressed." That quote just captures the essence of what Foucault is saying in *Madness and Civilization*.

Nonetheless, you can see how this book is yet another example of Foucault questioning a dominant narrative of his time and offering an alternative take on things. But none of these alternative takes would ever be possible if Foucault wasn't looking at history with some sort of alternative method. Remember, Foucault's not writing a history of this stuff...outside of a couple exceptions he'd NEVER use the word history to describe it.

When it comes to three early books of his: *Madness and Civilization*, *Birth of the Clinic* and *The Order of Things*, HE would call them all Archaeologies...and there are very specific reasons for why he would call them Archaeologies. Think about the job of an Archaeologist for a second...when an Archaeologist goes on a dig...and maybe the task of the day is to excavate some vase from the 1500's buried deep underground...the job of the Archaeologist is to comb through layers and layers of sediment left behind by the hundreds of years in between the 1500's and today, and at the end of the job the goal of the archaeologist is to capture a snapshot in time. In other words, the Archaeologist isn't concerned with how the vase was made, the way vase makers were thinking about their craft at the time, how the design of the vase evolved out of the vase designs that came before it...no, the task of the archaeologist is to dig through the layers to uncover THIS vase in THIS moment...a snapshot of a very specific point in time. Well, this is similar to what Foucault is trying to do in the three books I just listed...he's sifting through hundreds of years of ideas... trying to uncover and dust off moments when things were different...snapshots in time when the discourse and conversations about these topics were just as effective at producing knowledge for people, but people looked at the subjects in an entirely different way than we do today. This is an important point to understand about Foucault that a lot of people miss out on. They think, okay...here's Foucault questioning the dominant narrative about these things and offering an alternative narrative about what went down...if only I can point out the flaws in HIS narrative and then make a better narrative of my own then he'll have no choice but to

cower in the corner and admit defeat. I win. But Foucault would absolutely welcome this process and had no desires of HIS narrative being seen as the ultimate way of looking at things. There's a sense in which the actual point he's trying to make with his work is that we need to get away from that kind of thinking altogether...that all we'll EVER have access to are narratives, constantly in competition for the dominant position within society, none of which containing anything close to the Truth about things, just a slightly different angle and way of making sense of the world. But anyway, eventually Foucault found the Archaeology method that he used all throughout his early career to be extremely limiting...he found that when you're in the business of just uncovering moments in time throughout history, all you can ever do is compare the discourse surrounding a subject in one period to discourse of another period. In other words, there can be no talk about how one period led to another...just comparisons...and describing how these shifts took place would eventually become an extremely important part of his later work. It is for this reason...that Foucault introduces yet another new method of demystifying the narratives of the past, something he calls a genealogy. You can picture a genealogy...picture tracing your family tree all the way back to someone that lived in the 1500's. Not only would you have a snapshot of the person, you'd also have the entire evolution that took place from their world to your world. THIS TYPE of analysis is more in line with what we did on episode one of this series with the book Discipline and Punish...because if you remember: Foucault lays out how the evolution took place from the 1750's to the 1830's...from the sovereign age to the disciplinary age...and it's THIS type of analysis that's going to occupy almost all of his later work, the genealogy is CRUCIAL if you have the goals of Foucault in his later work...it's absolutely crucial if you want to call into question the assumption that so many people make, that history has just been a long succession of progress where we use rationality to make things better. The genealogy can show how different periods can give rise to each other for reasons that have nothing to do with rationality. Now, one thing Foucault always said was that if you are going to make one of these genealogies, always make it about a subject where there seems to be a lot of people agreeing about the way that things are...subjects where there

doesn't seem to be any further discussion required for us to understand how they work. This is why Foucault always seems to end up in weird places like prisons and schools and hospitals...nobody's ever looked at this stuff before like he does...and it's also the reason why in his final work he decides to question the dominant narratives that surround the topic of human sexuality. Now, Foucault never finished this work. He died of AIDS in 1984 and just didn't have time to finish it. There's a lot of speculation about where he would've went had he lived long enough to write the rest of it, but one thing nobody questions is that the beginning of this work mirrors the rest of his work in that he is calling into question dominant narratives that seem to us in our time to be so obvious and based in common sense that they're practically chiseled into stone, the narrative he takes aim at in *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1 is something known as the Repressive Hypothesis. The main argument of the Repressive Hypothesis is that all throughout the 17 and 18th centuries... people's thoughts and behaviors surrounding the topic of sexuality have been repressed by people in power...the motives people assign for WHY this happened range considerably...some people say it happened for religious reasons...some say for political gain, some say it was for economic reasons...that for capitalist society to succeed we needed people focused on work rather than the idle task of exploring their sexuality; whatever the reason: the dominant narrative towards the end of the 20th century was that sexuality in the 17 and 1800's was punctuated by rules...rules where you can't talk about it...you are to be ashamed of it, you are to feel guilty afterwards for having done it...people in the 20th century were making the case that if we allowed sex to be more natural and less constrained by cultural norms people would be a lot less repressed and a lot more happy. Foucault would strongly disagree with the idea that there's some "natural" type of sexuality that's installed in us...or some scientific "truth" about the nature of sex that can even be arrived at...I mean, sure, sex, pregnancy, the sexual lives of married couples...these are things that have been talked about almost since the beginning of recorded history...but these things were never referred to over the years as an individual's "sexuality". Foucault makes the case that if you look back at history, the idea that people possess a set of qualities that make up their

own personal sexuality...really is something that's only existed since the 19th century...when science for the first time in human history directed its gaze towards sex and tried to study and categorize it. It's actually kind of weird to think about...up until around the 19th century... nobody ever thought of themselves as heterosexual vs homosexual vs any other form of sexuality...there were people that engaged in certain behaviors...if they lived in a particularly religious society maybe they were guilty of the sin of sodomy but there was never any labeling like we do in today's world so much...they didn't take the labels and ways of categorizing people that science came up with and then use them to describe to others who they are as a person...there was no attempt by the science of their time to study and proclaim the TRUTH about sexuality...or what type of sexuality corresponds with human nature, as though what being a human being is is a cookie cutter enterprise. So, on the contrary Foucault would say...sexuality hasn't been repressed over the centuries...there's never been a period in our history where sex was studied or talked about MORE! It just can't happen in public...it happens in private when you're talking to your therapist or your doctor or some other self-appointed authority on the topic of sexuality. There's been what Foucault calls a, "political, economic and technical incitement to talk about sex." He actually compares these back room meetings with our doctors or psychologists... to a modern day confessional booth. In the same way people were asked to atone for their sins by privately talking about their sexuality in explicit detail to a priest in a creepy booth...so too do we ask people in our modern day to give that same information to a scientist or doctor... whose job it is to study them and tell them whether what they do is normal or abnormal. In the same way the priest controls the discourse surrounding sex, along with it the final judgment on what normal sexual behavior is...so too do scientists, psychologists, doctors control our modern discourse...and when you control the discourse that surrounds a behavior, you control the behavior itself, to Foucault. Not only do we have these scientific confessional booths where we are studied and told whether we're in need of fixing...but simultaneously we internalize norms given to us by the sciences, accept them as the way we SHOULD be, and then we actually monitor ourselves to make sure we conform to the standard. Now,

these points alone could spark some pretty interesting conversation with someone who believes we've been repressed for the last 300 years, but the biggest weakness of the Repressive Hypothesis, to Foucault, has nothing to do with any of this stuff... and...just to come back to a theme common among these post-structuralist thinkers...the problem with the Repressive Hypothesis has to do with the fact that the entire theory is built on top of an understanding of the way power works that is naive, outdated and to continue looking at power in this way knowing what we know now would be delusional. Foucault would say that most people when they think of power, look at it in an overly simplistic way. Most people look at power in the same way we looked at it back when we were living in monarchies in the 1300's...as though power, is executed from a single source be it a king, a president, the halls of congress, the type of power that says NO to things. The type of power that forces you to do things you don't want to do. Foucault calls this type of power a bunch of different throughout his work: Contract oppression, sovereign power, repressive power; the most important thing to understand is that this is the type of power that has ultimate authority to take things from you...from taxes, to goods and services to your time...they can ever take your life should they deem it to be necessary. But Foucault thinks despite how common this type of power has been in the past...when it comes to our modern societies, this is just not the kind of power we come face to face with anymore. Foucault would ask, "what are the types of power that actually touch you and effect you in your life?" Is it your direct relationship with Donald Trump? Is it a debate you're having daily with supreme court justices? IS that the type of power that effects you most on a daily basis? No. Power, to Foucault, has undergone a fundamental transformation in the west throughout the last couple hundred years. Power in our modern societies is not something with a stable center that can be identified and stopped. Power in our modern societies is what he calls Capillary. To Foucault, power is an unstable network flowing in all directions from every point at once...we all, whether we realize we're doing it or not, we're all exerting our power over everyone else around us every single day. Through constant surveillance, cultural norms, advertisements, persuasion, suggestion, encouragement and discouragement of certain behaviors we

approve or disapprove of, even down to the things you like and share on Facebook, you are constantly defining, redefining and reinforcing the standard of what is normal and what is abnormal. Who should be accepted and listened to and who should be silenced or considered not worthy of being taken seriously. Power, in this way, is incredibly diffuse. Power is not something that lies in the relationship between you and a king or you and Donald Trump. No, in our modern societies, power is something that operates at all levels of society...yes, at the level of public policy that effects everyone, but at the same time at an individual level that only effects you and dictates the narrow set of choices you have to navigate...power is between you and your government, but more relevant to your everyday life it's between you and your therapist, your boss, your doctor, your teachers, your parents, your friends, your family, your co-workers, the strangers that may judge you in public...really stop for a second and try to get a sense of just how much these people shape who you are as a person. Power is everywhere, to Foucault...but to most people power is invisible. The ability for this power system to change your behavior has become so subtle, the micro tactics of power have become so normalized in your world that most people don't even notice themselves gradually being shaped into a mold of normalcy like a soldier in boot camp...or like a prisoner in a cell. In fact, think of yourself as a prisoner for a second...picture yourself in the Panopticon that we talked about on episode one of this series. Real quick if you don't remember that was the hypothetical prison devised by Jeremy Bentham where a single guard in the middle can see what the prisoners are doing inside of every cell, but the prisoners can't ever know when they're being watched. What Foucault is saying...is that if you could somehow get the prisoners to be socialized in such a way that they watched each other, they created a system of norms and expectations, and they had some form of feedback where the prisoners felt judged and rejected when they get out of line...you wouldn't even need a guard in the center of the Panopticon. That guy could go on vacation because the reality of that world would be to Foucault that the prisoners themselves would police each other far better than any system you could come up with that was implemented by force. You don't need to use repressive power and force people to do anything if you can get them to want to do

on their own what you were otherwise going to force them to do. Remember, knowledge to Foucault is intrinsically connected to power...and when you have one guard in the center that has access to complete knowledge of everyone's actions...and a bunch of prisoners in a cell that can't even see the outside world...this creates a massive imbalance of knowledge, and along with it, an imbalance of power. The prisoners themselves become active, supportive participants in the very system that suppresses them. To Michel Foucault, THIS example is far more comparable to the power model we face in our modern societies and FAR MORE EFFECTIVE than any king, on a throne, sentencing people to death. Like I mentioned earlier, to Foucault, there has been a fundamental shift in the way power is exercised in the west; we've moved from this outdated style of sovereign power to a new age that is defined by what he calls "Biopower"...now, why come up with a clever little name like that and why Biopower? Doesn't bio mean it has something to do with life? Well, yes...yes it does. What Foucault's talking about is similar to what we started to talk about towards the end of last episode...throughout the last 300 years or so, the more science has made society the object of scientific study, the more tactics scientists have come up with to 1. optimize life and productivity and 2. to categorize people within a society. Because of science... and the way it tries to organize the world, for the first time in our history we are looking at BRAND NEW ways of objectifying people...things we've never really thought about much before...things like the population, birth and death rates, advanced demographics, the prevalence of disease, the happiness index and about 50 other things that we accept as the scientific discourse of our day, and then quietly USE these metrics to determine who we are and how we fit into the bigger picture. This is why the repressive hypothesis is wrong, to Foucault. Power...is not repressive in our modern world...power is productive. It doesn't repress and do away with some true or natural sexuality that we all possess deep down...no, power is productive...it PRODUCES...through cultural norms and scientific discourse...the methods we use to even be able to identify and CONCEIVE of our sexuality...but here's the crazy part: it's NOT JUST our sexuality. Because it's right here...this is a big reason why, to Foucault, the people that are TRULY in power are the

thought leaders within the sciences that control the dominant narratives about the way that things are in the universe. Knowledge is intrinsically connected to power...and they're the ones that produce all the knowledge. They control the parameters, the language, the concepts...they control the entire discourse that everyone uses to determine who they are, what they care about and what things are worth spending effort on. Foucault calls this "Biopower" because: "The exercise of power over living beings no longer carries the threat of death, but instead takes charge of people's lives." In other words, Biopower...there is no need anymore whatsoever to threaten people and force them to do things under penalty of death. Not only is that method outdated and inefficient, it's also entirely transparent when it comes to identifying who is in power. Biopower, in a sense, hijacks the lives of unsuspecting people, and uses the current period's scientific discourse and cultural norms to turn them into willing participants. Biopower is the type of power that actually effects us in our daily lives. Now, if there's any part of you that hears this and thinks that the obvious next step is to try to do away with this Biopower, Foucault would probably tell you to rethink your strategy. Power dynamics, at this point, are an inexorable part of the world we live in. You're never going to get rid of them. No matter how much you resist the micro tactics of power, no matter how much you question the dominant narratives of your time, all you can EVER hope for....is a world that is a little more tolerable. All you can ever hope for is a different set of dominant narratives that may, for all we know in the long run oppress more people than the CURRENT set of dominant narratives. Fight all you want against power, against narratives, against meta-narratives, fight all you want...but before you do, Foucault would want us all to take a second to stop and understand...what you're replacing those meta-narratives with. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Gilles Deleuze pt. 3 - Anti-Oedipus

Episode #127

This is a transcript of episode #127 on Gilles Deleuze. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So in 1983, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari release the first book of what would eventually be a two volume series that aimed at discussing the political reality of the modern western world...the TITLE of the series...ALLUDING to the situation they were about to describe in the western world...was Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Now, the foreward of the first book...was written by someone that we've recently talked about on this show...Michel Foucault. Now Foucault, when writing the foreward to this book...talks about how the 20th century has been marked by a whole bunch of philosophers looking back, trying to warm over and reimagine the work of Freud and Marx... in an attempt to arrive at some sort of synthesis...some new interpretation or combination of these older ideas that can provide us with a new perspective moving forward...remember Freud and Marx are seen as the sort of proto-structuralists that foreshadowed the structuralism of the 20th century. Freud, through the introduction of the concept of the unconscious mind...showed how it was possible that fundamental parts of your character and preferences and motivations can come from places that you're COMPLETELY unaware of, at least consciously. Marx, through his superstructure theory we've talked about showed how it was possible that things that are produced within a society, including ideas, always emerge first out of an economic climate that people are born into. Lot of philosophers were going back and looking at the work of both of these thinkers...we've seen examples of this in the work of some of the Frankfurt School...Marcuse, for example, and his reworking of Freud in Eros and Civilization...or his new, Hegelian interpretation of Marx that tried to breathe new life into some of those older ideas. But Foucault says that two people who DIDN'T go this route...are Deleuze and Guattari. Remember, Deleuze, as a postmodernist, would NEVER center his philosophy around the thinking of Freud or Marx. See, to Deleuze, to think of

yourself...to think of your thought in terms of being a Freudian...or a Marxist..is just incredibly naive at least to a postmodernist that isn't interested in sweeping grand narratives like that. To Deleuze, to go back and try to microwave up some leftover Freud and Marx to find new some ideas moving forward...you're TRAPPING yourself in modernity. Freud and Marx are in many ways trapped in modernity...and if you relegate yourself to an ism...whether it's Freudianism or Marxism or anything...the best you will EVER have to Deleuze is a single vantage point...the best you'll ever do is to see the universe from one angle and then spend the rest of your life arguing for why YOUR angle is THE angle everybody else should be viewing it from. See because again, Deleuze is a philosopher of new ideas...we saw how he called into question the entire history of ontology when he was searching for new ideas there...well he does the exact same thing...when he turns his focus towards the political realm. See if it seems like the modern political landscape doesn't have any new perspectives being offered...if it feels like it's mostly made up of the same groups having the same arguments with each other over and over again, well, that's because for hundreds of years we've been looking at things from the same angle over and over again. The political landscape is similarly trapped in modernity. Deleuze is going to call for us to look at things from a different angle, and by different he means different from the long classical liberal tradition spanning from the work of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau of always viewing politics through the lens of the individual. The individual with their individual desires, individual needs, individual issues that effect them...thinking about political change in terms of an individual vote and how a candidate or the government is going to bring about a world that fulfills what they individually see as important. But Deleuze is going to ask: could we be looking at politics in a completely different way? We always look at things in terms of old, worn out political categories like the individual...but also the state, society, nationality, race...but is it possible to look at politics from a perspective that is much more adaptive and fluid than any single option like that...maybe one that can change in a moment and see things from a variety of different perspectives simultaneously...instead of our tendency which has always been to pick a single perspective and exalt it onto a pedestal as "the way that

things are".When you look at things in the world solely in terms of the individual, or any of these other traditional, rigid political categories...you can miss out on so many other perspectives that might reveal to you an interconnectedness of all of these complex systems that makes hyper focusing on any single one perspective seem like a waste of time...and if this reminds you of the relationship between Deleuze's ontology of difference and the traditional ontologies that have existed throughout history...you may be starting to understand his approach here.Now just to be clear...Deleuze is NOT saying that we SHOULDN'T be looking at things through the lens of the individual, or society or the state or whatever...what he's saying is that we should recognize these things to be what they are: SINGLE perspectives. We can't limit ourselves to a single perspective, and this is part of the reason Deleuze and Guattari introduce another approach towards these political units that we view everything through...Deleuze and Guattari ask us to consider the world instead through the lens of what they call machines.So what are machines? Well, it's important to note right at the outset that Deleuze and Guattari are introducing the term "machine" to specifically try to get away from the common way of thinking about this stuff in their time: viewing things in terms of the individual subject...the SUBJECT is what they're trying to get away from for a number of reasons, NOT ONLY because they're trying to get away from thinking about politics through this conventional, classical liberal tradition that we've been looking at it through for hundreds of years...but also because when somebody says the word subject and defines people that way...then it becomes extremely easy for someone to mistake subject...for consciousness. To mistakenly think that when someone talks about a subject as a political unit...what they're referencing is really just the individual consciousnesses of people. This is CLEARLY an oversimplification, when we're talking about political change there's CLEARLY more that Deleuze and Guattari want to reference other than just consciousness, so they sort of distance themselves by introducing this new concept of "machine" that they define much more broadly.The term "machine" is used in multiple different ways over the course of multiple different works. To define what a machine is in a single sentence is impossible. Deleuze and Guattari themselves often talk about

machines as total multiplicity...as not definable by the sum of their parts. So I'm going to give metaphors and examples, but maybe the best place to insert ourselves into this discussion about machines from the outside is to just talk for a few about machines generally. So we've already mentioned how machines can be seen as a unit, or an entity that we can use to think about how political change occurs in the world. Well, one way to CLARIFY that would be to say that we can think of machines as entities...within a given political landscape or the world for that matter...that seek connections with other machines in an attempt to bring about a particular actuality. Now, that may sound abstract and like it's difficult to understand what they mean, but by "actuality" they're referencing the work of Bergson and his theory of time that we talked about last time with the distinction between the virtual and the actual. Machines, and everything that falls under that heading, not only actualize the political reality we live in, but ALL reality. So just at first glance already we can see that Deleuze is trying to get people to think more broadly about what they think of as an entity that is trying to bring about political change in the world...maybe it's not as narrow as we've been looking at things for the past couple hundred years...to Deleuze and Guattari the political landscape is NOT just a bunch of individuals interacting with each other trying to get people to vote a certain way. By using this BROADER definition of "machines" that are seeking connections...they're offering a much more versatile political unit to view things through...one that accounts for things that are CLEARLY NOT individuals... but nonetheless have an undeniable agenda towards bringing about political change...quick example before we talk some more about machines, political movements...let me explain: So individuals are examples of one TYPE of machine that exists. A group...would be an example of another type of machine. These two things are examples of machines in the sense that they are entities seeking connections with other machines trying to bring about an actuality...they're machines in that they weren't created by anything for an EXTREMELY particular purpose...and what I mean is that an important aspect of a machine to Deleuze and Guattari is that it DOESN'T have a fixed purpose and can change its goals or desires at any time. This is where things start to get interesting when it comes

to how we look at the moving parts that are bringing about political change in the world...because based on this criteria for what classifies a "machine"...couldn't we think of things like social or political movements as machines in their own right as well? I mean, they TOO weren't created with a rigid, inflexible purpose in mind...they aren't beholden to a fixed identity...we could say a movement is JUST as much an entity that seeks connections with other machines, like people, for the sake of producing something. For example, take the movement of environmentalism...or the green movement or save the planet or whatever you want to call it. This movement can be thought of as an extremely complex machine, connected to millions of other machines... people, groups, moving parts...and this machine is always seeking MORE connections...picture environmentalism meetups, tree plantings, speeches, public service announcements, signs, bumper stickers...a community potluck where we all get together and recycle some stuff... consider the fact this machine is always embedding itself into OTHER groups leveraging OTHER machines to be able to bring about its OWN actuality...picture the NFL having their players wear a green wrist band to promote environmental awareness...or a car company changing their exhaust system so that it's more environmentally friendly. Not only that, but very similar to what an individual or a group is in a given moment...a movement in a given moment is defined by the sum total of the connections that make it up IN that moment, connections that CAN change and are CONSTANTLY always changing...once again there IS no fixed identity...like these other types of machines a movement is flexible...it has a fluidity to it...it can evolve and adapt. Now that said, machines are NOT just limited to individuals, groups or political movements. There are of course tons of other examples of abstract political processes that can be thought of as machines...but the REALLY important thing that I want to emphasize is the fact that machines go in the other direction as well. Just as a group of machines (a collection of people) can make up a larger machine in the form of a political movement...collections of machines make up the individual. We are ourselves a complex collection of machines and their processes. Deleuze and Guattari give the example of a new mother...we can even think about machines at the level of bodily processes...they say

the breast of the new mother can be thought of as a machine just as the mouth of the newborn baby can be thought of as a machine...each seeking connections with other machines and each using the connections WITH other machines to actualize themselves... Machines connect with other machines to ACTUALIZE reality. But the BIG SHIFT here from the traditional way we've thought about things: Thinking about political change in terms of machines... which are themselves complex groups of connections driving other machines which are also groups of connections allows for a level of flexibility that traditional political categories like the individual just don't offer. The famous quote from the book about machines is: "Everywhere it [what Freud called the id] is machines – real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections. . . . we are all handymen: each with his little machines." So that's the famous quote, the common EXAMPLE people give to talk about how these machines actually work is to consider a bicycle. So a bicycle is a machine. By itself...the bicycle just kind of sits there...purely virtual in terms of its potential, when a bike sits by itself in a garage it doesn't have a SLIVER of hope to become actualized in any way. What the bicycle needs...are OTHER machines around it to make connections with...those connections determining what actuality is going to be realized...so for example, a bike doesn't have a fixed identity. Say that the machine of a bicycle connects with the machine of a human being. That person could do a THOUSAND different things with that bicycle...they could ride it around as transportation...that might be the first thing we think of...but think of all the other ways that bike could be actualized...they could take the bike apart and sell the parts at a bike shop...they could give the bike to charity...they could see the bike as a sculpted work of art they're going to put on display at their house...they could name the bike...and think of it as their new imaginary best friend...they could beat somebody to death with the bike...they could hook the bike up to some sort of stationary treadmill situation that generates power when you turn the pedals...the point is: there is no FIXED purpose of a bicycle...and it's only through its connections with other machines around it...that its momentary purpose becomes

actualized. Think about the parallels to individuals, groups and political movements here. Political movements are machines...people are machines...Think of how often political movements USE the individual human beings that make up the movement like this person we're talking about uses this bicycle. Once again as Deleuze says, it's everywhere...machines driving machines...machines being DRIVEN by machines. Not only that...think of how possible it is for an individual...especially one in a position of leadership...to use the machine of a political movement to bring about something for their OWN personal gain. Machines driving machines. When we remove the default humanism of the way we traditionally have thought about politics...and instead think about it in terms of complex groups of connections interacting with other groups of connections...we open up the door to new perspectives that see things from a different angle, for example, consider for a second the Earth as a machine...and instead of thinking about it in a solely humanistic way...consider the slightly different perspective of seeing the movement of environmentalism as the machine of the earth, driving other machines that are part of what makes it up...people... to make further connections that promote a certain agenda that is in its best interests. This is a very simple example of how thinking in terms of machines as political units, opens up different perspectives than just looking at it in terms of how people feel about it. Few more important points about this concept of a machine. Deleuze says that machines are always connected to other machines...and what this means is that machines are always productive in some sense, but again ONLY when connected to other machines. Deleuze and Guattari at this point introduce a concept that is a driving force behind machines and what motivates them to produce things or seek connections with other machines in the first place. See, as far as they can tell, this... driving force is NOT ONLY the driving force behind machines and their behavior...it seems to them to be a fundamental driver of ALL LIFE in the universe. Something they call "desire production"...now, the name desire production is pretty transparently just a mash up of the driving force of desire from Freud and the driving force of production from Marx...but Deleuze and Guattari aren't looking at the work of Freud and Marx so that they can rework their ideas and come up with some sort

of synthesis...they look at their ideas and launch one of the most radical critiques of their work in existence...people sometimes go so far as to say what Deleuze and Guattari do is not so much critique their work...but subsume it. Probably the best place to start is with their REINTERPRETATION of both Freud's concept of desire and Marx's production. See traditionally the way people have thought about desire is that people always desire something that's LACKING in their life. The LACK of something is what creates the desire to produce in the individual. But Deleuze and Guattari are going to question this...they're going to say that desire and production are in fact... default, fundamental properties of what it is to be a machine at all...which includes.... what it is to be a human being. Desire DRIVES these connections between machines...and in the same sense, put a little more dramatically by Deleuze...desire PRODUCES reality. Desire is the vehicle for changing things from the virtual to the actual. Desire isn't a motivating force that is responding to a LACK of something...desire production is INHERENT to life itself...think of desire production as Deleuze's version of Nietzsche's will to power. So, this is the reason the first volume of Capitalism and Schizophrenia is titled Anti-Oedipus...To Deleuze, just as there's no transcendent governing body that dictates the rules of ontology...there's no transcendent governing body external to you like Freud's Oedipus that dictates what desires you feel or what connections you're going to seek as a desiring machine. Desire isn't something dictated by some standard of living outside of yourself and what you're LACKING in relation to that standard...desire is a natural process of experimentation. What this ALSO implies is that desire is NOT something that is located deep inside the psyche of the individual...what desire REALLY is...is a social force. What Deleuze is trying to do here...is get us to RETHINK the concept of desire...so that we might be able to rescue it from these rigid, outdated theories and instead see it for what it actually is to him: the source of revolution. The ONLY real source of revolution that we have. This desire production...fundamental to all life...the very thing that drives machines to take action turning the virtual into the actual...desire is revolutionary...and it's been suppressed over the years not only by the work of Freud, but any form of psychoanalysis that relies on transcendent, external concepts...Jacques

Lacan is another target of theirs...they're calling into question this older FREUDIAN, "lack based" view of desire...and what they're going to say is that this Oedipal way of looking at desire has very real consequences on the societies that believe in it. Because IN these societies...desire becomes something that gets turned inward, towards your immediate family...what you think of as your desires...is really just you misinterpreting some deeply rooted psycho-sexual framework that you don't quite understand...the result of this on a social level being...that the vast majority of the desire of the individual gets interpreted inwardly...with any excess desire that someone might have, however small of an amount that may be...well that is the only desire that can eventually spill over into the social and political realms trying to bring about change...but here's the thing: even that VERY SMALL AMOUNT OF DESIRE that spills over is ALWAYS subject to the limitations of the social and political realms which are themselves to Deleuze and Guattari conveniently controlled by the forces of Capitalism. Now...in an interview in the 1990's towards the end of his life Deleuze says that he still refers to himself as a Marxist. To people unfamiliar with the rest of his work and the rest of the interview...this has caused some to label Deleuze as some sort of postmodernist neo-marxist type. But even a cursory reading of the rest of his work would no doubt make someone really confused...how can this guy be a Marxist...when he spends so much time in his work talking about how rigid, hierarchical systems like Marxism are not even CLOSE to the full story? The answer is that Deleuze is not a Marxist in the traditional sense of the word...he was speaking in a philosophical context...that in the sense that so much of the work of Marx was dedicated to an analysis and critique of Capitalism...for anyone that wants to do meaningful work in the field of economics during his time...you're PROBABLY going to want to start from an analysis and critique of Capitalism. Which is what he and Guattari DO in Capitalism and Schizophrenia...so IF throughout the course of their two books they have anything negative to say about Capitalism...this isn't coming from the perspective of some tribal, hateful Marxist that wants to do away with one rigid system and replace it with another...no their perspective is more like: just because Capitalism is better than the Feudal system...does not mean that we're done talking

about economics for the rest of time. How else are we going to make the world a better place if we don't critique the dominant ideas of our time? Who is going to critique them other than the dominant economic and political philosophers of our time? The aim of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is less a hit piece on Capitalism like so many works of the past...and more an analysis on what natural effects Capitalism has on the world and what problems, if any, are created by that. Nothing showcases this fact more than all the GOOD things Deleuze and Guattari have to say about Capitalism. They credit capitalism with drastically improving the lives of almost everyone on the planet by abolishing the hierarchical rules and power structures of the middle ages. You know, if you're a peasant...living under the Feudal system...there are tons of rules, that are imposed upon you by the Aristocracy and land owners. Now if at any point you don't like those rules...or one of those rules makes your life absolutely miserable...there's really not much you can do...you can't request a transfer to another plot of land. You can't save up and buy a different plot of land where you make your own rules. But in Capitalism this isn't the case and this is often given by proponents of Capitalism for why it's the best economic system we have...show me another economic system...where if a worker is alienated or miserable because of their job they can work hard, apply themselves and go get some OTHER job that they enjoy more with no detriment to society as a whole. THAT'S A STRENGTH...of Capitalism over the Feudal system and Deleuze and Guattari would agree with that. What they'd probably say next though is that just because somebody has the freedom to change jobs and not be subjected to the rules of a landowner does not mean that they're free...or that Capitalism as an economic system is impervious to criticism. Yes, Capitalism has dismantled feudalism, or as they say "deterritorialized" these rigid rule systems people had to live under in the past...but then after deterritorializing these rules...Capitalism then reterritorialized it with an axiomatic...or more SIMPLY put...Capitalism, notably the world of banking and finance, dictate every narrow parameter that human beings have to navigate in their lives. We're going to talk about how in the next episode, along with Deleuze's concept of looking at the universe in terms of different "flows" and a constant process of deterritorialization and

reterritorialization...but how Deleuze and Guattari ARRIVE at this unique analysis of Capitalism and how things change and connect together in the universe is by LOOKING at the universe through a different lens than any philosopher that had come before them. This is one of the most important concepts in ALL of the work of Deleuze...his concept of the Rhizome. This is a good way to end the episode...something to think about throughout the week so that next time you can understand where they're coming from. Now a common thread that by this point you've no doubt noticed in Deleuze is that he's looking back at our history as a species and how we've looked at things in terms of what HE sees as rigid, narrow categories...and he's trying to offer a DIFFERENT perspective...one where we step OUTSIDE the traditional ways we've thought about things like ontology or politics...and by considering different approaches...by looking at things in terms of difference...the hope is that we might be able to see that traditional accounts of the way things are don't even come close to telling us the full story. He compares the dogmatic way that we've traditionally thought about things to a tree. Now, a tree...is very straightforward...it is rooted in one place. Not moving. There are clear lines of demarcation between the different PARTS of that tree. There are the roots...the roots give way to the trunk...the trunk gives way to the branches, the branches give way to the leaves. There is a clear beginning middle and end to that tree and the tree is structured in a hierarchical way... much like our systems of ideas from the past like we've talked about over the course of the series, be it in ontology or Freud's psychology or anything else. Deleuze would ALSO want us to consider that the different PARTS of this hierarchy work together in the tree. The roots gather moisture and nutrients from the soil, sends them up to the trunk which support the branches, the branches support the leaves that collect sunlight and oxygen and just as the rest of the tree supports the leaves the leaves support the rest of the tree. In other words, this tree is a static system...with well defined parts that perform specific functions...and the structure of the tree mirrors the structure of the way we've traditionally thought about ontology or politics. For example a deeply rooted system incapable of movement...with well defined parts that make it up and perform different functions, for example...the individual, the state, the

economy, laws...these things all work together and play their part within a system. So we have this great visual of a static, rigidly defined tree that Deleuze compares to the way we often think about politics...but a more ACCURATE way of looking at what that tree really is, to Deleuze is to think of it as a single pattern...we shouldn't think of the hierarchy and "tree" of our modern political system as... "the way that things are"...but instead... think of it as a single pattern....that happens to be the way we talk about politics in this particular day and age...there are countless other ways we might otherwise be talking about politics, countless other angles we might view it from...which is why if you wanted to come up with a plant based analogy describing our modern political landscape that was more accurate...take that tree... that embodies the narrow way we've looked at politics for hundreds of years...pull the entire tree out of the ground roots and all...shrink it by about a hundred times until it's the size of a baseball...and instead picture that tree as just a tiny part of a giant wall of vines and leaves spanning off in every direction. This...is where Deleuze's concept of the rhizome comes into play. So, a rhizome...in the world of plants...is an extremely chaotic and unpredictable root structure. Actually depending on the baggage you're bringing along with the meaning of the word chaos it may not be the best way to describe it...and I think technically a rhizome is a subterranean plant stem, not a root... but look none of these labels really matter. The point is: look up a picture of one. A Rhizome is a root structure that doesn't grow in a uniform direction or pattern, like a tree...its root system is not fixed to one place in the ground, like a tree...when you look at a rhizome there's no clear beginning middle and end to what's going on...the rhizome at any point in time can sprout a new root out of the side of it in a completely different direction, then THAT root can have OTHER roots growing out of IT seemingly randomly in all different directions...what follows from this, naturally, is that networks of root systems become formed...and then these random root offshoots can often times connect one network of roots to another network of roots sometimes in bizarre ways. THIS...is a much more accurate metaphor when it comes to how thought, ideas and movements link together. Think of the visual of the giant wall covered by vines again...where is the CENTER of that vine? Where is the beginning,

middle and end to that vine? There ISN'T one, to Deleuze, just as there's no beginning, middle and end to systems of ideas...just people getting tunnel vision on one little SECTION of the wall and then making a case for why they have the whole wall figured out...this is the mistake of the philosophers of the last two thousand years...when someone creates a hierarchical system of ideas...when someone makes a tree...all that a tree is is a blocked rhizome. One little section of the wall masquerading as the WHOLE wall. Consider two networks of roots that may in the past have been thought of as COMPLETELY different from each other. Political power and linguistics. So in the past we may have studied these very different fields and thought of them as completely separate from each other...how often throughout history have we seen someone who specializes in linguistics writing extensive commentary on political power or vice versa? But on closer examination consider how many ways these two root systems are connected...consider how ideas in linguistics often dictate the boundaries of how we're even able to TALK about politics...they dictate the boundaries of what we can even bring up as a criticism of people in power...they dictate how we even THINK about our relationship to political power...but it goes the other way as well...think of how often people in political power will try to control the language that is used to be able to get elected or stay in power...consider how calculated down to the word their use of language is in speeches to harness political power...to think of linguistics and political power as two distinct fields that can be studied and fully understood in isolation from each other, is an old way of thinking. There are roots that connect these networks of roots, and roots that connect both of these networks with countless OTHER networks of roots. When you pay attention...and look closely...to Deleuze...the universe is a rhizome. Rhizomes are everywhere...not just in human ideas. Sure, there's the actual rhizome and the wall of ivy and many other plants...but consider the countless other examples all around us: ant colonies, rat burrows, termite nests...vast ecosystems, human cultures, nervous systems, the layout of a city, the behavior of the people WITHIN the city...yes, this is ALSO the development of human ideas...books are rhizomes, connected to other books, documentaries, magazines, movies...philosophical systems are rhizomes connected to

everything around them. This rhizomatic way of looking at the universe to Deleuze...can get us out of this rigid way of thinking of philosophy in terms of hierarchies and history in terms of it being this linear thing that progresses from beginning to middle to end...and instead understand that our systems of ideas are often MASSIVELY interconnected...and that history is not some single line of progression but instead many DIFFERENT histories all progressing and regressing at extremely different rates. But just to illustrate how impossible it is to nail Deleuze down like one of the philosophers of the past...despite all of this talk about the rhizome...he still has no problem at all...with the tree. We'll talk about why at the beginning of next episode thank you for listening...I'll talk to you next time.

Deleuze pt. 4 - Flows

Episode #128

This is a transcript of episode #128 on Gilles Deleuze. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So all throughout this series we've talked about different ways Deleuze and Guattari want to get us out of thinking about things in the traditional, rigid ways we've approached things in the past. They've asked us to think about ontology differently, politics differently, they've questioned the individual, humanistic perspective we typically view everything through...they've even asked us to question things like the nature of time and the linear way that we typically view history as though it's been this straightforward crescendo of progress that's all been leading to this moment...right now. So it will probably come as no surprise that in the second volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* titled *A Thousand Plateaus*... Deleuze and Guattari are going to want to do this SAME THING in other areas...they want to offer a completely different way to think about the questions surrounding... social theory...or if you wanted to get all Webster's Dictionary on people: social theory, meaning the analytical frameworks, or paradigms, that are used to study and interpret social phenomena, Deleuze and Guattari want to offer a different way of thinking about all this...and by different what I mean is, different from the four or five ways philosophers have always approached these questions in the past. I mean, just on this show we've already seen tons of examples of philosophers trying their hands at social theory and almost every time they seem to fail miserably. We've seen people try to actually DESIGN the entire society from the ground up. Think Plato's *Republic*...social engineering on a massive scale to the point of carving out and designing social classes and even grooming and designing the minds of all of the future leaders from the moment they're born. Think St. Augustine's *City of God* in the 5th century. Think Thomas More's *Utopia* in the 16th century. We've seen TONS of examples of this...but we've also seen OTHER attempts at social theory. When we get to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment... the focus is less on coming up with some grand

design and more on seeing things through the lens of the individual, and subjectivity, and what this leads to is social contract theory...through the work of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and many others basic elements of society are structured around an agreement, signed at birth, between the individual citizen...and the sovereign. This agreement lays out the parameters for how many of the relationships between things within that society are going to function. Social theory... has been talked about extensively from a variety of different angles, but even still: Deleuze and Guattari think that we're still missing out on a LOT...when it comes to other ways that elements of society connect and work together and they're going to ask us to instead take a look at society through the lens of what they refer to as "flows". General theory about society, to Deleuze and Guattari, can be understood in terms of a theory of what they call flows, and how they relate to each other. So obviously the first thing we gotta talk about is: what is a flow. Why do we need some new term to talk about the way social phenomena unfold...well the reason is fairly similar to what we talked about last episode in the realm of politics. See in the same way it would be a mistake to only limit ourselves to the long tradition of looking at political change from the perspective of the individual...and how by broadening that perspective, by seeing the world as a complex laboratory of machines using other machines and making connections, actualizing the political reality...look, one of the points from last episode was that by seeing political change from this broader, more versatile angle we see perspectives and potential solutions that we just can't possibly see when we look at things solely from the perspective of the classical liberal tradition of individualism. Well, so too when it comes to social theory, and the broader perspective Deleuze and Guattari want us to consider by looking at things in terms of flows. Let's talk about flows...We all already have a frame of reference to understand what they mean by flows, because we all already use the word "flow" in a BUNCH of different everyday situations, to describe the way things sort of "move along" in the world we live in...the fact is Deleuze and Guattari first develop this idea of looking at society in terms of flows when they're studying the field of economics...and then once you see flows in the context of economics...the concept of a "flow" just kind of expands

outward from there and seems to apply to all the other different areas of society. Daniel Entier (on-tee-yay) in his analysis of Deleuze describes a pretty good starting point for thinking about flows from this economic perspective...he says "from the economic point of view, we can call flows the values of the quantities of goods and services or money that are transmitted from one pole to another" Now, when it comes to these two "poles" that are being talked about...think of them as two bookends where BETWEEN these two bookends there is some economic flow occurring, whatever that may be. For example, the flow of economic transactions between an employer and an employee...or between a store and a manufacturer...these economic flows alternatively could extend into the realm of finance...think of the movement of transactions or the flow between a bank or an investor and some machine trying to actualize a new business venture. There are even economic flows going on INTERNAL to businesses or people's personal finances...think of the term "cash flow" think of the "flow" of material resources or inventory based on what is being received or sold. The larger point here to understand and the reason this is gonna apply to all these other areas of society is that in all of these cases MOVEMENT is occurring, and we seem to be able to see this movement, or flow at all different levels of analysis, just like machines when we were talking about political change last episode...remember, by looking at things in terms of machines we aren't just LOOKING at things through the lens of the individual...yes, individuals are machines, but again, so are groups, companies, organizations, spiritual movements, planets...but it goes the other way we can think of parts of our bodies as machines, we can think of bodily processes as machines, the very collections of cells that make us up: Political change can be understood by looking at this interaction between and confluence of machines at all levels...well in the same way we can understand social phenomena in terms of these flows and how they interact with each other at all levels. But again, flows are not just economic...this is just where Deleuze and Guattari identify them for the first time...so let's expand on that...we've talked about economic flows, you know: the movement of money between parties, movement of capital in finance...But in another area a flow could easily be the flow of immigration, the movement of new citizens into a country. That's a

social phenomenon. Another example could be the flow of commodities, the movement... of oil or electricity or coffee or any commodity for that matter...that's another aspect of society. We could look at the flow of traffic. The flow of ideas from person to person. The flow of how citizens live their lives within a particular city. We can even think of flow in terms of the raw human excrement flowing through the sewage facilities of a city and this is not me making some sick joke...this is actually an example they use in the book.

Because flows, like machines, are EXTREMELY varied in terms of their definitions and exist at what seems to be all levels of a society. Now in the interest of understanding what flows are...I want to point out some similarities between all these examples of flows that were just laid out, and I think the best way to do that is through a metaphor...let's compare ALL OF these flows ...to the flow of water in a river.OK, so if we think of a river as a metaphor for what a flow is...we can analyze that river as philosophers have traditionally done in the past...there are of course ways to break down that river into a bunch of different parts, give each of those parts an identity, and then study the identities of all those different parts to try to understand the river better. But there's a sense in which if you were to ONLY look at the river in this way... you'd be potentially missing out on a layer of understanding ABOUT that river that you'd only have access to if you were looking at the entire river as a whole process, or movement or flow. This has been one of the big mistakes of so many great philosophers of the past when looking at social theory. They pay way too much attention to prescribing identities to the things that are moving and not enough attention to lots of OTHER important factors...such as, why the river is moving in the direction it is at all. What is responsible for that movement? Why is there a flow between these two poles in particular? Another thing that often gets overlooked by philosophers that are overly concerned with the identity of things...is that just like in the case of a river...human intervention often fundamentally changes the nature of the flow, and so often in the past, this has distorted our ability to see things in the world clearly. Just to clarify what Deleuze and Guattari are talking about here let's return to the example of a river as a flow, and as we talk about this remember we are NOT JUST talking about large scale cultural movements here...again flows exist at all

levels down to things that might seem insignificant to outdated ways of looking at social phenomena. But back to the metaphor: So a river is almost NEVER...just some uninhibited stream of liquid that sort of meanders anywhere that it happens to go. There is a specific reason that river is moving in the direction that it is, at the SPEED that it is. For example, a glacier melting on the top of a mountain and gravity pulling water to its lowest point. What this means is, just like flows we can spot in society, there is always some sort of force responsible for why this flow exists between these two poles...WHY is there a flow of immigration into a particular country? WHY is there a flow of traffic to THIS part of the city at THIS particular time? What force is driving the flow and spreading of ideas among members of a culture? Or from generation to generation? What force determines which ideas have the most movement and at what speed those ideas move? Also, picture the river again...water flowing between two poles in a specific direction...well if at any point that flow of water becomes inconvenient when it comes to ANY activity we want to engage in as human beings, what do we do?...we intervene, we fundamentally CHANGE the nature of that flow... so that it corresponds with some demand we have. We put up a dam...and stop the flow of the river altogether. We redirect the flow of water into a different direction. We change the grade of the river bed to adjust the speed in certain areas. We build a bridge so we can cross the river in a particular place. So in the case of the river...human intervention plays a vital role in determining how that flow looks and functions...and this is exactly the case... when it comes to all the other flows we've talked about. We have immigration laws and procedures to regulate levels of citizenship. We have market regulations to govern economic flows. We have traffic laws and streetlights and signs to regulate the flow of traffic. We have sewage systems and processing facilities that carry out what we've decided needs to get done with the Mississippi river of human excrement that would otherwise be flowing down the street. Market regulations to economic flows are like the dam is to the river in our metaphor. Traffic laws are to the traffic flow as redirecting the course of the river is in our metaphor. These interventions, in the language of Deleuze and Guattari as we talked about last time...are the effects of the constant process that's going on...of

territorialization, deterritorialization and then reterritorialization by machines interacting with these flows. The key to a new level of understanding about how society functions, to Deleuze, lies in understanding these flows, these forces of movement that exist between polarities, how these flows interact with each other, and how they are shaped and changed by this constant territorialization by machines. Deleuze and Guattari give an example of this interaction that occurs between flows and the machines that are making connections, and territorializing those flows...and it's through this example that they illustrate an extremely important point if we want to view social phenomena by thinking in terms of flows...these machines... when seeking connections and creating this territory...in a sense BECOME PART OF the flow. The same way a dam becomes a part of the river and dictates several critical aspects about THAT flow...the dam BECOMES part of the flow, machines often become critical parts of what makes other flows of social phenomena possible. You can just imagine how complicated and rhizomatic these flows within society get when they have this many moving parts. The example Deleuze and Guattari give is of a particular kind of wasp that plays a crucial role in the reproductive process of orchids. So the process of an orchid fertilizing and reproducing with other orchids can be thought of in its own right...as a flow between these two orchids. This specific type of wasp, that Deleuze and Guattari write about, carries the pollen from one orchid to another, which in this context makes that wasp an absolutely crucial part of this flow of reproduction. There's a sense in which this wasp...has become a machine. The wasp doesn't have a fixed identity...the identity of the wasp in this moment as it's transporting the pollen is defined by the connections it has IN THIS MOMENT. Whatever goals or connections that wasp had a week ago or what the wasp does immediately AFTER doesn't really matter in this context. The wasp has become deterritorialized, there is no sense of identity given to that wasp from the outside...Deleuze and Guattari say that for all intents and purposes...that wasp...has become a verb, something IN MOTION. That wasp has BECOME part of that flow of reproduction...which is to say in some capacity...that wasp...cannot be thought of as just a wasp anymore...that wasp has BECOME part of the orchid. The wasp and orchid

themselves forming a rhizome, with countless roots connecting them with other root networks around them. You can imagine what this means when it comes to our views on society...if we replace the wasp and the orchid's reproduction...with some OTHER machine and some OTHER flow...say an individual in their car and their impact as a part of that flow of traffic. Say a group of lobbyists and their impact as a part of that flow of commodities like oil within a society. Say a cultural movement and the role it plays in the flow of ideas that dominate thought leaders in media. Just like the wasp becoming the orchid...machines are often engaged in a process of becoming...becoming part of these flows. Maybe the state, as a machine, is becoming what it is in relation to the flow of history. Maybe an individual is becoming what they are in a given moment in relation to flows of advertising on television. To see what's going on in the world from the broader perspective of machines and flows is potentially revolutionary. Now, we could talk for an entire series about what exactly changes in a worldview when you see everything in terms of flows...there have been several anthropologists through the end of the 20th century that have dedicated their lives to studying flows and have developed the concept far beyond what Deleuze and Guattari ever did...but the most important takeaway here, I think, when it comes to understanding the work of Deleuze is that by looking at things in terms of flows, you see the world from a crucial vantage point if what you want is a comprehensive picture of the world and how it works and that vantage point is this: the world...is fundamentally a world in motion. Seeing the world as a collection of static identities, objects to be studied and understood...to Deleuze, that certainly gives you one perspective...but it's FAR from the full story. See if we want to understand social phenomena...we can't make the same mistake we've talked about when it comes to understanding how political change occurs and we can't make the same mistake philosophers have made for centuries when trying to understand ontology. There is a way of interpreting the world that is missing from our thousands of years of discourse. This is an alternative picture it's taken four episodes to prepare the vocabulary for. The world we live in...is a world of difference. It is a world that is constantly in motion. A rhizome of different flows, forming networks, connected together in sometimes chaotic

ways. Networks of machines and their connections with other machines that themselves create further rhizomes...these machines when actualizing their political realities territorialize and regulate these flows which are themselves always changing...this picture of a massive, ever-changing, enormously complex rhizome is only available to us when we get out of the business of identity and instead adopt the broader Deleuzian perspective of machines, flows and an ontology of immanence. And by the way, here you can see how tempting it would be in the interest of trying to understand the complexity of this rhizome...to try to break it down into a thousand smaller rhizomes...or to try to break each of those down into a hundred different trees of hierarchical systems. Maybe you spend an entire lifetime as a philosopher playing this game of trying to get to the static identities of things and at the end all you have to show for it is the identity of a single hierarchical system of thought. That seems to be the fate of many of the philosophers that have existed throughout history. But the concept of identity is nowhere near this simple. We started this arc of the show on poststructuralism by talking about how thinkers wanted to get away from what they saw as naive, enlightenment era ideas about a lot of different topics including identity. Well this is a perfect example of how one poststructuralist named Deleuze tries to move past that...and show how these outdated ways of looking at identity often have real negative effects on people's lives, not to mention the opportunity cost of thinking in the same rigid ways for hundreds of years. See, the general thinking has always been among philosophers that identity must exist prior to difference. The logic has always been that if you're talking about two different things, say a table and a chair. Well, if there's a difference between a table and a chair that **MUST** mean that they have an identity as a thing before a difference **BETWEEN** their identities could ever be pointed out. That's a table. That's a chair. They're clearly different. So what this has led to is a long tradition of philosophers trying to get to the bottom of these identities that exist...but Deleuze is going to come along and turn this entire thing on its head...what he's going to say is that there is no reason we have to assume that identity is prior to difference. There is no ultimate form of a chair sitting up in a world of forms. There is no static identity of "chairs" in the universe, there is no

scientific category that really spells out the identity of a chair...what we have thought of as identity, to Deleuze, is not us touching something written into the fabric of the universe. Identity is always derived from difference. To TRULY grasp identity is to understand that fact. No two things are exactly the same, and if we want to stay honest when identifying things, we have to understand that what we've traditionally thought of as identity is the contrast between some thing, and all the things it is not. In other words, difference is prior to identity, for Deleuze...not the other way around. Once again, this is fundamentally a world of difference. What Deleuze is also calling into question here is the long standing dichotomy that's existed in western philosophy of being vs becoming...and the origins of this criticism go all the way back to the work of Nietzsche and Deleuze's own unique interpretation of one of his most famous ideas: the eternal recurrence. Deleuze thinks, when you read Nietzsche correctly, his concept of the eternal recurrence is actually making a very similar point to what Deleuze is saying following the work of Spinoza and Bergson that we talked about earlier in the series. So if you remember, we mentioned the eternal recurrence very briefly back in our episodes on Nietzsche, we sort of referenced the most popular or practically useful side of it. The idea is that you should think of your life...every living situation, every relationship, every job...every single choice that you make you should do so with the policy that the moment you die your life will restart and you will have to live the exact same life, precisely as you did the first time, over and over again for all eternity. Nietzsche describes it here: "What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have

answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.' The idea is that we often do things that are self destructive or stay in situations that are clearly causing us a lot more pain than the benefit we're getting from it...and that it's easy to get complacent and tell ourselves that the suffering is temporary and it's gonna be over soon, but how different would we look at things if we knew that the complacency was going to cause us to suffer for the rest of time...and that the level of suffering you're going to endure is ONLY limited by your willingness to take action, right now. This idea from Nietzsche just raises the stakes and puts things in perspective. But this isn't the only takeaway from Nietzsche and his work on the eternal recurrence. Deleuze thinks that what this idea leads to...is an entirely new perspective and a long tradition throughout the history of philosophy of dividing the world up in terms of being vs becoming. We'll talk about it first thing next episode which is out for you to listen to, right now. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Deleuze pt. 5 - Difference

Episode #129

This is a transcript of episode #129 on Gilles Deleuze. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So we ended last episode with a passage from Nietzsche and I want to re-read it for anyone that may not be listening to parts four and five back to back...Nietzsche asks us to consider how we might view our lives differently if THIS was the case: "What, if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more' ... and there will be nothing new in it, but every pain and every joy and every thought and sigh and everything unutterably small or great in your life will have to return to you, all in the same succession and sequence—even this spider and this moonlight between the trees, and even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence is turned upside down again and again, and you with it, speck of dust!' Would you not throw yourself down and gnash your teeth and curse the demon who spoke thus? Or have you once experienced a tremendous moment when you would have answered him: 'You are a god and never have I heard anything more divine.'" Now, this passage was the first time Nietzsche ever talked about the eternal return, or eternal recurrence...this was in his book *The Gay Science* in 1882...and it was just one year later in 1883 that he expands on the concept some more when he releases one of the most revolutionary books in the history of the world: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. But this time, he talks about the eternal recurrence through the voice of a group of animals that are yelling at and taunting Zarathustra. They say: "Behold, we know what you teach: that all things recur eternally, and we ourselves too; and that we have already existed an eternal number of times, and all things with us. . . . I come again, with this sun, with this earth, with this eagle, with this serpent –not to a new life or a better life or a similar life: I come back eternally to this same self same life . . ." So already just a year later we see Nietzsche developing the concept into something that isn't merely some practical way of looking at

your life...but in this second passage there starts to be a level of metaphysical baggage that's being smuggled in...that ALL THINGS recur eternally. The significance of this change is Deleuze's interpretation of Nietzsche. He believes that Nietzsche is ultimately making a pretty profound statement here about the long tradition in philosophy of being vs becoming. What he means is...you know, many philosophers throughout history...have divided up existence in terms of being and becoming. Traditionally the category of "being" has always referred to things within our perception of reality that are constant. Some philosophers say it's things that are unchanging. Some say things that are ENDURING. Generally speaking "being" has always been the things about reality that act as a solid foundation, things that aren't going to change. Depending on the philosopher, we've heard this expressed in a number of different ways on this show: God is being. Nature is being. etc. Now this concept of "being" is always contrasted with a concept that philosophers have called "becoming"...which as you might be able to guess are all the things about existence that are constantly changing, or in flux...or you could say, in reference to this picture of the world Deleuze is painting, the parts of the world traditional philosophy has seen as "in motion". The thinking has always been that there is something more real, more foundational about being...than becoming. Becoming...is just in motion...it's always changing...it's contingent, surface level appearances...you want to get to the bottom of things as a philosopher...understand being. Understand the foundation that everything that is becoming relies upon. But Deleuze is going to question this...and he finds inspiration in several passages of Nietzsche's work on eternal recurrence. Nietzsche says: "If the world had a goal, it must have been reached. If there were for it some unintended final state, this also must have been reached. If it were capable of pausing and becoming fixed, of 'being,' if in the whole course of its becoming it possessed even for a moment this capability of 'being,' then all becoming would long since have come to an end . . ." What Deleuze takes from this reading of Nietzsche is that in the same way he thinks identity is a derivative of difference, not the other way around. The appearance of being, or what we've mistaken as constants of the universe, are only possible to categorize as a result of us seeing what is TRULY fundamental...the constant

process of becoming. See, to Deleuze, there IS nothing foundational in the classic way philosophers have talked about it...the closest thing you could ever get to it would be the process of the world in motion, that process of becoming, from our episode on ontology: that unfolding of immanence, from our episode on politics: that desire-production and machines seeking connections...ALL OF THESE THINGS...this WORLD IN MOTION...BECOMING is the foundation. Being, identity, any static system of thought...these are just attempts by people to grow roots into the ground and reduce the rootless, complexity of the rhizome to the rooted simplicity of a hierarchical tree. The fact is, to Deleuze, that identity is just not this simple of a concept...and thinking about identity this simply only leads to problems when we try to impose these old, enlightenment era ideas on building the world we live in. For example, in professor Todd May's analysis of Deleuze he gives an example of this by talking about the movement in the 50's and 60's of the urban renewal of cities in the United States. This is a perfect example of us imposing this naive picture of identity onto entire cities of people. The idea was that during the decades following world war two there seemed to be an uptick in the amount of crime, poverty, unemployment and generally anti-social behavior that was going on in big cities around the country. The THINKING was that the reason for this was because cities, and city life were just too chaotic and unpredictable to ever produce a functioning situation. There were too many people, or too many different walks of life, or too much of a variance in income levels...the solution, people thought at the time, would be to get things organized...and so began a multi decade effort to cordon off different areas of the city and designate them as THE AREA where certain activities were going to take place. There was the shopping district where people would go to buy things. The business district where people would go during the work day. The living district where they'd make new, efficient high rise apartment buildings that would be more affordable for lower incomes than when living situations are more spread out. We identified all of the different elements of city life, cordoned them off into their own little sections and expected everything to run a lot more smoothly. What really happened was the opposite. Things fell apart. What happened was that now nobody could get anywhere because the

flow of traffic was always to one section of town at one particular time...the whole city is trying to going to work in one district...they're all going to the entertainment district at the same time after work. The high rise, low income apartment buildings just corralled lower income people into one small area even more, which had the opposite of the intended effect: it concentrated and worsened the ghetto. More than that...when it came to the reduction of crime that was expected...it turned out by funneling the vast majority of people into different sections of town at specific times of the day...this just created a HOTBED for crime. For example, when the entire section of town that people LIVE in is empty because everyone's in the work section of town...how much easier is it to break into a home with confidence? This dividing of the town had the same worsening effect on relations between people of different walks of life. People felt MORE isolated and separated, and it would be far less likely for someone from two different walks of life to run into each other and have a conversation. Professor Todd May cites the work of Jane Jacobs in her book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. The problem with city planning of the type that went on in the urban renewal of the 50's and 60's is that cities just don't work in the same way that suburbs work. Put more in the language of Deleuze and Guattari...city life, is a rhizome, cities themselves, are machines...and when you try to impose rigid identities and static rooted structure onto them you're left with a lot of unintended consequences like they were in the 60's. Remember machines don't HAVE a rigid identity that they're beholden to...their identity within a given moment is defined by the connections and relationships to difference around them WITHIN that moment. Well isn't this a much more accurate description of how a city works? See, from the outside looking in...if you were to analyze a city and try to identify all the different parts that make it up...a city might seem to be pretty chaotic...city planners may come along and think they know how a city works and try to impose order onto what seems to be chaos...but the reality, to Deleuze, is that it is NOT chaos. The city is a machine seeking connections...the connections that it makes: a rhizome. The fact is there IS an order to cities and city life that unfolds. The problem for city planners or anyone trying to assign rigid identities to the way the city functions is that there is no template for a city. There is

no cookie cutter way that order emerges. The order doesn't come from the outside...the order emerges or unfolds from the diverse connections made within the city. Think of the similarities to ontology here: substance doesn't come from something transcendent from the outside, substance is immanently unfolding from within. Think of the similarities to identity vs difference or being vs becoming...notions of identity or order unfold out of difference or the world in motion. When things within a city are not cordoned off from each other, unable to make new connections...when workplaces and residential areas and restaurants and theatres and low income and high income when everything is all mixed together...it turns out cities just function way better that way. There's less isolation. Machines make connections that are more diverse and thus have a less compartmentalized view of the world. There's never areas of town that are completely empty where crime can flourish, there's always eyes on the street, people feel more safe, people feel a sense of community as a member of the city as opposed to just a member of their neighborhood. To Deleuze and Guattari: the mistake we're making is we cannot think of the needs or identity of a city as something that can be pre-planned and executed...the reality is there is NO SUCH THING as "the identity of a city" because its identity is not static...its identity will always be determined by the connections that make it up in a given moment which no city planner could ever possibly plan for without the help of miss cleo. When you try to impose rigid identities onto a rhizome, you will ALWAYS run into problems. Another example Todd May gives when talking about this clear departure from traditional ways of thinking about identity. Picture a guy...that several times a week goes into a music store...and in between looking for whatever it is he wants to buy, being a single man, he comes to realize that he is extremely attracted to the woman working behind the counter. Now, he ALSO notices...that every time he's IN the music shop when she's working she's always playing jazz music that features the trumpet. So this guy decides that what he's going to do is start playing the trumpet so that she might like him more, he might have something to talk to her about that isn't painfully forced and awkward, regardless of the reason: he picks up the trumpet. Now technically...if we wanted to assign an identity to this man after this moment, as he's

practicing the trumpet...he would be a trumpet player. But where exactly did that piece of his identity come from? Was there some sort of latent trumpet player identity hidden inside of him since birth? If two weeks from now both his arms get ripped off by a passing trolley and he quits the trumpet...is there a trumpet player identity lying dormant inside of him that can just never be expressed? Deleuze would say no. The fact that man decided to be a trumpet player in a given succession of moments was entirely contingent on his open-ended identity as a machine seeking connections, and then the connections that he sought to make as that machine. Also, consider the fact that the only thing that's going to determine whether in five years this guy is still a trumpet player or not is ALSO entirely contingent on the connections he makes. Will he watch a documentary on Winton Marsalis that inspires him to be the greatest trumpet player ever? Will there be a welcoming jazz community in his neighborhood that invites him to come play with them every week. When he goes into the music store and casually brings up how he was playing his trumpet the other day...does the woman behind the counter seem to be more interested in him. The point is: there wasn't some static pre-planned identity that determined that this guy was a trumpet player, only the connections made when interacting with a world that is constantly becoming, unfolding and in motion...and this SAME dynamic applies when it comes to all other aspects of the identity of a machine...whether that's a person in a music store, a city being organized and planned out or a movement of thought that becomes the voice of a generation. See this is the mistake that so many people make when it comes to trying to understand their own personal identity. So often people run into the trap of just conforming to the identities handed down to them by their parents. Or doing their best impression of some character they like on a TV show. Or if they WERE to do something like pick up the trumpet... to just completely copy the way trumpet players have always played the trumpet that came before them...just parroting the people that came before you the same notes, the same scales, the same riffs and transitions...what happens when you live your life in the same safe, pre-planned way so many people play music when they pick up an instrument? What happens is: your life becomes a blocked rhizome. The possibility of a random root

shooting off and making a new, exciting connection with another network becomes impossible. The possibility of playing new music with your life becomes impossible. You turn yourself into a tree, rooted in one place, restricted to the same riffs and transitions for the rest of your life unable to see new possibilities. But this is what so many people do, to Deleuze. They want an identity given to them by some third party, outside of them that tells them how to live...a city planner for their own identity, someone to answer the question for them: what does it mean to be me? This is why it's so common for people to want answers to these old questions from philosophy that we began this series with. People desperately want an answer to the question: how should one live? How should one act? As though being a human being could ever be marginalized to questions that simple. As though there IS some sort of human nature, some constant of the universe...some essence where if only the right philosopher comes along and identifies it for us...THEN I'll have the answers. Then we can rest easy knowing that some transcendent body prescribed a way that I "should" be. The same way the entire history of philosophy has tried to explain ontology in relation to transcendence. The same way psychoanalysis has tried to explain away desire by relating it to something transcendent. The same way people watch the news, read a few books, hyper focus on one little tree sized section of the rhizome and then spend the rest of their life looking at things from their narrow, one dimensional, hierarchical world view making declarations about the way that things are. So what should be completely obvious by this point is that when it comes to the question of "how should a person live?", the kind of question that dominated the ethics of people like Plato and Aristotle...Deleuze, would never even THINK to try to answer a question like that. This is why, knowing what we know now, the question that's far more relevant to Deleuze is the question "How MIGHT a person live?" What possibilities exist, what connections can potentially be made? Remember in the first episode of the series we talked about his answer to the question What is Philosophy? The conclusion being that when you're engaging in philosophy you're not looking for the "truth" or some set of objectives or identities about "the way that things are"...but instead, you engage in philosophy to hopefully arrive at the interesting, the

remarkable, the useful. There are parallels when it comes to approaching life: we shouldn't engage in living with the expectation that there is some way that we "should" be living that we're going to arrive at. See because again the world is fundamentally a world in motion. Constantly emerging, or becoming or in flux. But this picture of the world that Deleuze is painting goes far beyond just metaphysics...this entire worldview is in many ways a call to action...a gauntlet being thrown down, challenging anyone who hears it to rip off the shackles of a rigid identity that's been given to you and to engage in a process of becoming. To allow your identity to emerge immanently, from inside of you rather than accepting it as a gift from someone else. But it goes beyond just you...his work is a call to embrace seeing the entire world in terms of difference rather than identity. Because if the world is fundamentally immanent and in motion and rhizomatic...then to embrace that immanence and motion and the enormous, fractal complexity and interconnectedness of the rhizome is to affirm existence...rather than negate existence and hide behind identities and hierarchical systems of thought. To affirm existence is to embrace difference. To seek out different people, different cultures, different ideas, different answers to the question "how might a person live?"...which could include different jobs, different relationships, different lifestyles...to spend your time engaging in different activities, maybe this year it's the trumpet, maybe next year it's archery...the point is with ALL of these that you are a single perspective when it comes to making sense of all this. When I say all this I mean the universe...you are one perspective. Nothing more, nothing less. And as tempting as it is to cling to one of those hierarchical tree-like systems of ideas like you're a koala baby...to Deleuze, the ONLY way to take a step back and see the interconnectedness and complexity of the world around you is to embrace difference and like the world, stay constantly in motion yourself, having new experiences. Doing things. There is always more to be done. You've never seen it all, and Deleuze thinks if you're telling yourself that you have you should examine what it is you're REALLY saying about yourself. That is the call to action. Let's embrace the world that's spontaneously unfolding and in motion by ourselves remaining in motion, and part of living our lives that way is going to include being okay with not

knowing how things are going to play out. See if you had some transcendent answer to how you SHOULD be living your life...you'd basically know exactly how your life was going to play out. If you had some static identity of exactly who you are, some dormant trumpet player that lives inside of you then it wouldn't be a surprise at all when you decide to start playing the trumpet one day. But this isn't reality to Deleuze...when you're affirming existence you can't know how your life is going to play out until you're actually doing it...and you can't know exactly what kind of person you're going to be until you're actually living as a machine and see the connections around you. To truly affirm existence is to seek difference while also understanding that there IS no cookie cutter template of identity to follow and to accept the fact that when it comes down to it: the universe doesn't owe you anything. There are no guarantees. To affirm life and to truly embrace immanence and a world in motion is to accept that the universe is going to play out the way it's going to play out and to get attached to any single outcome, good or bad, is to deny the way that reality is unfolding. Now, Deleuze is not saying that you shouldn't try...or that you should resign yourself to total acceptance of whatever comes your way...try your hardest, have a plan, stay in motion, but understand and find peace with the fact that you can't ever really know ahead of time where that motion is going to take you. For this reason Deleuze is a really big fan of looking at life almost as a series of experiments. Because an experiment is always in some way seeking something new, but you can't ever know the outcome of the experiment until you actually run the experiment. This is a worldview that can start to sound a lot like Nietzsche, and it's no coincidence that both Nietzsche AND Deleuze talk a lot about this process of living by affirming life, rather than negating life. But maybe if there's one thing that both of them have in common is that they both despise conformity...and the idea that the person that stays in motion, embraces difference, creates their own values and identity, makes connections, experiments...the idea that THIS is the person that owes the world an explanation rather than the person conforming to the safety of the systems of thought around them...they'll often spend their entire lives never seeing enough of the rhizome to even ` know how small of a vine they're conforming to. But regardless...in closing...when

it comes to living life, maybe the best advice is from Deleuze and Guattari themselves, “This is how it should be done: Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continuums of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times.” Thank you for listening. I’ll talk to you next time.

Dewey and Lippmann on Democracy

Episode #130

This is a transcript of episode #130 on Democracy. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So just thinking ahead...I think it's going to be extremely valuable for us to spend a little bit of time on 20th century political philosophy...and that's what we're going to do right now. See, there's a lot of conversations in the REALM of 20th century political philosophy that...NOT ONLY are going to be useful for us, and the future of this show...but the 20th century is just FILLED... with famous political debates that end up being INCREDIBLY fruitful for the societies they were conducted in...these debates in many cases, you could argue...did more for their societies in the 20th century, than ANY OTHER century of political debates... did for theirs, ever...even though...to philosophers at the BEGINNING of the 20th century...it really didn't seem like it was going to be that way at first. See there's this conversation going on at the end of the 19th century heading IN to the 20th century.... about whether it's a good idea to even be TALKING about political philosophy anymore. Where this is coming from... are the same conversations that eventually give rise to Structuralism. Remember, Structuralism...one of its main tenants is to talk about how the ideas that we've come up with over the years... haven't been some ongoing progression towards some ultimate Truth as we may have thought in the past...when it comes to your subjectivity...you are not some free acting agent just disinterestedly navigating the universe. That everything that you DO think and CAN POSSIBLY think is ultimately dictated by the narrow historical, cultural and biological parameters that you were born into, the ideas that you have EQUALLY narrow and subject to an arbitrary historical context. Well the problems people are having at the end of the 19th century with the idea of engaging in political philosophy stem from this... they were saying, you know, if the essence of political philosophy is to ask questions like what is it to be a citizen, what is the role of government, how should power be delegated and regulated, how do we best live TOGETHER in communities of different types of

people...if these are the questions we're trying to answer...and the ideas you have about the ANSWERS to those questions ultimately are products of the time and culture you were born into...then when it comes to the task of trying to find THE BEST political philosophy out there...when we have these discussions, what are we even talking about? Because if this stuff is true, can't we never arrive at any sort of satisfying answers to these questions? Well then is political philosophy something we should even be DOING anymore? Nonetheless...even if there WERE these reservations at the time...political philosophy still went on...and if you were to dissect the conversation that was going on at the time, there were three major branches of the conversation going on, we're going to talk about all three of them...but one of the branches would have been philosophers taking a much closer look at the subject of Democracy...and one of the biggest, if not THE biggest, conversations ABOUT Democracy that's going on during this time...is between the famous political commentator Walter Lippmann, and the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. Probably the best place to insert ourselves into their debate, and start to uncover the position that Walter Lippmann held about Democracy...is to talk about an old criticism of Democracy that probably initially stems from Plato's Republic...the paraphrased version of this question would be something like: "Is the average citizen of a society...the right person to be making the decisions about who should be making the decisions for a society?" Now, the implication there is that they clearly are not, and just to move us along so that we can save some time another way of PUTTING that would be to say...that we all need to be willing to consider...that a fundamental flaw...in the way a Democracy functions...is that any political action carried OUT by that democracy...is ultimately going to heavily rely on public opinion. Which is the name of Walter Lippmann's famous 1922 critique of Democracy. This critique of Democracy...John Dewey would later say is the GREATEST critique of Democracy that was around at the time...and John Dewey, if you don't already know, is the POSTER BOY for a person in support of Democracy. But more on him later...let's talk about Walter Lippmann. Lippmann's main point, when it comes to the first half of his book Public Opinion, is that there are several, fundamental problems with the structure of

Democracies that have existed in the past... that are going to lead to a LOT of serious problems for societies of the future if we don't all get serious and DO something about them. The place a lot of these problems stem from: Democracy's reliance on Public Opinion. Lippmann would say that public opinion being the driving force behind political action in a society SOUNDS great in theory, but in practice...things just didn't work out the way the founders of our modern democracies had in mind. He references the founders of the United States: he talks about how back then, things were different. Back then...not everybody could vote...the people that COULD vote were relatively wealthy landowners that had a vested interest in understanding their local communities because it directly affected their land. The expectations of the founders were that yes, things would change. The country may grow exponentially. The lives of people may change dramatically, but no matter what happened with the country the PRIMARY focus for a citizen politically...would BE these immediate subcommunities that they were the closest to. The reason this was a check mark in favor of democracy was that if the scope of the world you're thinking about politically is limited just to your local community, and likely the place you've spent your entire life, it's going to be a lot easier for you to be qualified to make intelligent decisions about the FUTURE of that community. But as we know and Walter Lippmann knew in 1922...this just isn't the way the world has shaken out. The scope of the world we're expected to have thoughts on politically is global. When you really take a step back...and LOOK, at all of the enormously complex systems you are expected to have intelligent thoughts about as a modern member of a democracy...fields with THOUSANDS of years of work done, fields people dedicate their ENTIRE LIVES to and don't even come CLOSE to understanding fully...the world is NOT like the subcommunities that the founders thought were going to keep going...the world is as Lippmann says, "too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage it." What he's talking about is that as people when we're face to face with the unbridled complexity and nuance of the political world,

that almost as a DEFENSE mechanism we construct a simpler, alternative model of the world that is more managable...he calls these models of the world that we construct of the ACTUAL environment...pseudo-environments.To construct one of these pseudo-environments, what we do is we take a look around us...and create a collection...of stereotypes. Not just stereotypes about people or cultures, he's speaking more broadly than that. Stereotypes about the environment. Stereotypes about medicine. Stereotypes about the government. Whenever we're prompted to give our intelligent thoughts about a particular subject as a member of a democracy, we look to our pseudo-environment, go into our grab bag of stereotypes and pull one out to do battle with the stereotypes of everyone else. When you combine the pseudo-environments and stereotypes of each and every member of a particular democracy, the sum total of them to Lippmann "crystallize into what we call public opinion". To Lippmann in other words, what WE refer to as public opinion and the resource we use to drive our democracies forward, is nothing more than the crystallized version of everyone's collective pseudo takes on the world based on stereotypes.But if that fact wasn't bad enough...Lippmann would want us to consider where we even GET these narrow pseudo-collections of stereotypes.See to Lippman if you're somebody trying to create one of these pseudo-environments...in other words: if you're someone interested in having an opinion on the world, or forming a political stance all...what you NECESSARILY HAVE to do in order to do that is hear about events that you don't experience, have never seen, yesterday you had no idea this thing even EXISTED, this thing is usually happening so far away from you that you couldn't POSSIBLY understand its proper context, and YOUR JOB...is to form emotional responses to these events.Not just that...these emotional responses are ALWAYS based on the moral intuitions of the pseudo-environment the person has already created in their head...in other words...the events of the world are ALWAYS filtered through this preset collection of stereotypes the person had that helped them create a vision of the world up until that point!Now if THAT weren't bad enough...Lippmann would want to ask where we even GET these events of the world that it's our job to form emotional responses to? The media!We are living in a world where

media products are the best tools the average citizen has to create one of these pseudo-environments. Media products created by people with their OWN set of stereotypes they use to chop up the world. Media products delivered through extremely narrow mediums...through the moving images on a TV screen...through the limitations of an existing format of a podcast...through the extremely narrow metric of what it is to "report" on something. Not to mention the profit motive of media outlets which is driven by consumer decisions, not by how accurate the media is...Lippmann has a quote:"For a dollar, you may not even get an armful of candy, but for a dollar or less people expect reality/representations of truth to fall into their laps."But if even THIS weren't bad enough, consider all of the OTHER obstacles in the way of getting to even these MEDIA sources. Consider that the media itself is ALWAYS delivered by the vehicle of language, which is itself an extremely crude and narrow thing. Consider the socio-economic limitations that face the average citizen when constructing this pseudo-environment. For example, most people work 40 hours a week, they have families and lives to maintain, they have recreation time to tend to so they don't burn out of the whole process...how much time is there really at the end of it all to educate yourself on all of these extremely complex systems so you can be some sort of weekend warrior road scholar?You know, the prominent idea for a long time was that access to information was going to be an extremely good thing for political discourse. The more information people had the smarter they were going to be, the smarter they were the more complex their ideas and discussions would become...the one dimensional political fanaticism of the past was a result of the ignorance of the populations. This is why a lot of people were extremely optimistic when the internet first came along...you want to talk access to information...the internet is like throwing gunpowder on that fire. So why does it seem like it has simultaneously thrown gunpowder on one-dimensional political fanaticism?Walter Lippmann saw this coming. Because he knew that when people seek information they are not seeking truth. They're seeking to reinforce a pseudo-environment of stereotypes they already believe in, and even if they're not...the whole process of seeking information is filtered through their EXISTING set of

stereotypes...and it sabotages the whole process. Lippmann says so often what we think of as developing our understanding of politics and the world...is really just us choosing between which of the handful of existing authorities and thought leaders we're going to entrust our worldview to. There's no question as to why Lippmann would have had a problem with using Public Opinion as a means of directing society. Now, let's switch sides of the argument here and talk about the position of the philosopher John Dewey. You know....there's that classic way of breaking down the two different ways people see themselves as citizens within a society. They either see themselves as in competition with the other people around them...or they see themselves in cooperation with the other people around them. The idea is...you know...when you go down to the Farmer's Market and you see the dude getting the avocados...when you look at that guy do you see it like I am an individual...he is an individual...and we are two individuals embarking on two separate journeys within the same society. Or...do you look at the guy and see him as a team member, and the two of you are part of a team in cooperation towards a common goal? One certainly isn't inherently better than the other...the philosophical question that's being asked here is do you look at your place in society through the lens of the classical liberal tradition of individualism or the progressive liberal tradition ala John Dewey? Now this contrast between competition and cooperation is going to be important when it comes to explaining Dewey's positions on Democracy. See, because John Dewey...would no doubt give credit where credit's due. He would say Walter Lippmann makes some very strong points about Democracy in Public Opinion...that is IF you are looking at Democracy as a system of government. Looking at Democracy as MERELY...a system of government as Plato did in the Republic. John Dewey tears into Plato. See, it was the ancient greeks...in their pursuit to try to uncover the "best form of government" in their form of political philosophy...that initially included democracy in their discussion. We had the monarchy government by the one. The aristocracy government by the few. Democracy government by the many. But here's where the shift happens. John Dewey is going to ask: what if Democracy...is not JUST a form of government? What if what we think of as society is an organism...and government is merely something

produced by that organism, like a bird produces a nest? First question first: what if democracy is not just a form of government. John Dewey thinks this shouldn't really be THAT HARD of an idea to wrap our heads around. I mean, Democracy is something you see across almost ALL LEVELS of society, not JUST in Washington DC he says. Democracy is present in corporations, families, churches, groups of friends tons of other examples...you even see democracy present in the behavior of groups of animals in the animal kingdom. Democracy is CLEARLY not JUST a form of government, so what would be a more accurate way to classify it? John Dewey calls Democracy a lot of different things...he calls it a way of life. He sees it as tantamount to freedom, but probably the most important way that he classifies it if you want to understand his arguments against Walter Lippman is that he says Democracy is an ethical ideal, not just a form of government. This takes democracy as not just the result of some political discussion about forms of government and reframes it as an ethical imperative. Democracy is a tool for social unification that we all have an ethical obligation to maintain, and there's a lot of reasons why. First, John Dewey sees a fundamental problem when it comes to looking at society through the lens of individualism. Very short excerpt from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy that uses multiple John Dewey quotes just to illustrate what he means here: "men are not isolated non-social atoms, but are men only when in intrinsic relations" to one another, and the state in turn only represents them "so far as they have become organically related to one another, or are possessed of unity of purpose and interest" This is why democracy is such an effective and STABLE form of social unification for Dewey. Society is an organism, and the individual and society are what he refers to as "organically" connected to each other. So in this sense: within a TRUE democracy... the individuals are always able to CONTRIBUTE to and own part of the society, because they're participating in it... and the society is always able to CONTRIBUTE to and own part of the individuals because they are always a person ENGAGED in the issues OF that society. This is a major shift of perspective: instead of looking at this as a society with a government keeping it in order...Dewey is seeing this more as an "ethical community" of citizens, society...an

organism comprised of them...that none of us would ever have been able to survive or flourish except through our participation within this organism...this is part of the reason why, to Dewey, it is much more accurate to view others around you as team members in cooperation than to view yourself as an individual doing their own thing. In other words: yes, democracy is a form of government, but the only reason its a form of government is because it is also a deeper form of social unification. And not only is Democracy the most stable form of government because of this symbiotic relationship between the two organisms of the individual and society, but it's also the most stable because its the best at safeguarding against potential authoritarian systems taking control of the organism. He says in a famous passage:"...every authoritarian scheme, ... assumes that its value may be assessed by some prior principle, if not of family and birth or race and color or possession of material wealth, then by the position and rank the person occupies in the existing social scheme. The democratic faith in equality is the faith that each individual shall have the chance and opportunity to contribute whatever he is capable of contributing, and that the value of his contribution be decided by its place and function in the organized total of similar contributions: – not on the basis of prior status of any kind whatever."What he's saying is that if you look at every brand of authoritarianism that ever rears its head...one similarity you will always find is that it tries to use some birthright, some aspect of "nature", to justify it's power. Remember that these authoritarian regimes try to use "the natural order of things" because it's going to come up later, but think about it: the divine right of kings, being a ruler because you're part of the right bloodline, ruling over others because they're the wrong race, even down to ruling over others simply because people that came before you were high ranking in the social structure of THEIR time...Dewey is saying that authoritarian regimes all use this same trick. They justify their ability to rule based on some prior principle as he says. But Dewey is going to say this is yet another strength of democracy as a method of social unification, because it's the ONLY system where prior status doesn't really matter. Every person has the ability to contribute something to society if they have something valuable to say. To John Dewey, each and every person is unique and thus brings a unique

perspective to the problems society is facing. Don't we want as many good ideas as we can possibly get as a society? Then why would we EVER limit ourselves to a panel of oligarchs or a single dictator? This is part of the reason why John Dewey is such a huge advocate of education and its reform. When you consider that our society hinges on the ideas of the citizens that make it up...why WOULDN'T we do as much as we can to ensure that people are not only as educated as possible, but also are taught HOW to think and adapt with changing environments. True democracy SHOULDN'T just be a form of government...it shouldn't be DEFINED by just a bunch of people voting for what they want...Democracy is MORE than that to John Dewey...see a TRUE democracy should allow every citizen within it to realize their full potential, the good news being that allowing people to realize their potential helps society immensely as well. Yes, certain people are going to go down rabbit holes of information and become enraged political zealots, but that shouldn't discourage us when it comes to democracy, to John Dewey, it should cause us to re-up on our commitment to education and teaching the citizens the skills to be able to not fall into those traps of simplified thinking. Remember, society is an organism and government is part of what that organism produces, like bees produce a hive. THIS is the much more accurate way of looking at society...which is why he takes extreme issue with many earlier political philosophers that approach questions of government from the perspective of a "social contract" that is automatically signed at birth somehow. First of all, the idea that you're just born into a society and you are automatically enrolled in some subscription TO that society is just wrong to John Dewey. This is nothing more than yet another example of philosophers trying to use "the natural order of things" or "human nature" as a means of pretending they know a lot more about the way societies work than they actually do. The world is nowhere near that simple, in his view. And as we continue on talking about 20th century political philosophy this dichotomy between nature and culture is going to become more and more relevant. Whether you attribute to the behavior of human beings some aspect of their "nature" or whether you think cultural influence has much more of an effect on political matters will ultimately dictate a lot of things about which side of the political spectrum you fall on.

For example, do you think that climate change is a byproduct of NATURAL processes that we have very little control over, or do you think it is highly influenced by humans and that we should do something about it. Do you think that gun violence is the byproduct of a certain NATURAL percentage of people that are mentally ill, or do you think something about the way we structure our societies is causing gun violence. There are TONS of examples of this that you could point to and in many ways these disagreements come down to this distinction between nature and culture that flourished during the 20th century. Look forward to exploring it further with you...thank you for listening...i'll talk to you next time.

Antonio Gramsci on Cultural Hegemony

Episode #131

This is a transcript of episode #131 on Antonio Gramsci. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So imagine you're at a dinner party. Nice enough person comes up to you...starts talking to you...let's say the conversation starts to go in the direction of politics...you talk for a while...some point in the conversation you decide to ask this person, so... what are YOUR particular feelings about politics...where do you land on the whole political spectrum...imagine the person replies with...well, I'm a Communist! Communism is the solution...to all of our political problems. Now, to us, being people living in the 21st century that have seen history play out the way that it has, no matter WHAT you think about Communism, we would INSTANTLY have a lot of thoughts about this person and probably a few questions that we wanted to ask them. See because the word Communism carries with it an enormous amount of baggage to us in the 21st century...baggage, it's important to note, that just didn't exist when people were having political discussions at the beginning of the 20th century. That's what I want us to consider here at the beginning of this episode. Just how much has changed, just how much has transpired since philosophers were having political discussions at the beginning of the 20th century. What I want to do is try to take a step outside of our 21st century biases and try to do our best to put ourselves in the shoes of someone viewing the political landscape back when Communism was first being proposed as a potential solution. See because when you do that you can start to see the political philosophy of the time within its proper context...you can start to see...how in many ways the goals of the reformed democracy that we talked about last time and the goals of the Communism that was being proposed back then were actually incredibly similar. Remember at this point in the timeline of discussion about political philosophy, there were three major conversations that were going on that were all trying to solve the same general problems that existed in the political philosophy of the time. One was democracy, one was Communism and the

general problem they were both trying to solve was: how do we ensure that in the future society doesn't devolve into a situation where a relative handful of people have an inordinate amount of control over the lives of the majority of the population. This had been a serious problem in the past. Democracies of the past had produced this situation time and time again, which was why there was a discussion about a reformation of democracy that would preserve the true essence of a democracy which was a government by the many, not a handful of people. Well Communism was very similar in terms of what it was aiming to do. Like we talked about when we did the series on the Frankfurt School, for neo-Marxist thinkers at the beginning of the 20th century there was a short period of confusion when it came to what exactly was going on. See, Marx prophesized that very soon the proletariat would realize that all they had to lose were their chains and that inevitably, they would rise up, they would overthrow the bourgeoisie and implement a new system of economic order, let anyone who agrees with Marx cross their fingers and hope that it ends up being Communism. But this Communist revolution just wasn't happening in almost every case. So what was going on? Neo-Marxist thinkers went back to the drawing board: why does it make ANY sense that people living in these abject conditions, working jobs that were in many cases COMPLETELY brutal...why would those people stand for it? Why didn't Marx's prophesy come true? Well, very quickly the trend that emerged in neo-Marxist thought of the time was that control over a population of people extends far beyond the halls of congress or the ballot box. Political control is almost always dictated by cultural control. This is why the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci spends a considerable amount of his work exploring the concept of political control and more specifically the very important question of: when there is a dominant social group or a dominant class within a society...how exactly does that group ascend to power and then beyond that...how do they MAINTAIN that power once they've gotten it...especially when the social order that they promote WITH that position of power often times is at odds with the wellbeing of the average person? The fact is that sometimes when a leader is elected...they don't try to pass policy that's necessarily good for the majority of the population...sometimes they support policy that really only benefits them

or friends of theirs that are members of a dominant social class. Gramsci wants to find out: why is it that these leaders are sometimes capable of getting massive support from the people for policies that are actually hurting the average citizen more than helping them. How is it possible that the proletariat can feel so comfortable participating in a system that keeps them in chains, in the eyes of a neo-Marxist thinker. Gramsci begins his explanation by evoking and repurposing a word that had been thrown around all throughout human history but it was a word that he thought in recent years was starting to take on an entirely new meaning. The thing that was responsible for allowing a particular social class to ascend to power and then maintain a privileged status...was what he called Cultural Hegemony. This concept of hegemony is going to become massively important to the political conversation of the 20th and 21st centuries and by the end of this arc of the show we're going to have looked at it from a lot of different perspectives. Maybe we should start from the origins of the word...the word hegemony originates in ancient Greece...the root of the word comes from the greek word meaning "to lead", some translators say it's closer to "to rule over"...but either way during antiquity there were things called hegemons...now in the context of ancient Greece a hegemon was typically a state that had a significant military advantage over another state...the arrangement being that if the weaker state didn't comply with certain demands from the hegemon they would be annexed or dominated militarily or burned to the ground, take your pick. The term hegemony implied the threat of physical dominance over a population of people...this was the case all throughout human history. But Gramsci is going to say that in our modern world the definition of the word hegemony needs to evolve with the political reality we are living in. We are no longer living in a world where most political control is exercised by military dominance over a population of people. Since the advent of mass media people in positions of power have realized that a much more effective way of controlling populations is by manipulating the cultural parameters that citizens have to navigate. The general idea is this: to be a human being living a life in our modern world...you always HAVE to be living that life immersed within a particular culture. But what IS a culture other than an elaborate collection of norms, rules,

structures, mores, taboos, rituals, values, symbolic gestures...these things are not exactly abstract concepts...they are acute. They are visible. This is the cultural custom of a handshake to pay deference to someone else. This is not talking with your mouth full. This is the sum total of every ritual we engage in on a daily basis that all come together to create a cohesive society. But what Gramsci is going to ask is: who exactly created all of these norms and taboos that we abide by? We can easily look at different cultures around the world and all throughout history and see that a culture can function and flourish when doing things completely differently. The norms and taboos of a culture can be completely alien from the modern world that we're living in, and yet things still somehow managed to stay held together...so it makes Gramsci wonder: to what extent is the current set of norms and taboos serving to reinforce itself? To what extent are the citizens seeing the current set of norms and taboos not as an instantiation of culture, but as...just the way the world is? Once again this is another example of this classic debate that is going to become increasingly relevant: how much of the reality of the world can be explained by nature, how much of the world can be explained by culture? This is extremely important because to Gramsci if you can control the narrative and you can convince the average citizen that the current set of cultural norms is just the way the world is then there's not going to be much complaining, there's not going to be much in the way of seeking justice and trying to change things...this is similar to a point we discussed from Simone De Beauvoir and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*...we don't get mad at hurricanes. When a hurricane comes along and devastates multiple cities...people die, homes are destroyed, billions of dollars in damages...thousands of families displaced every one of those cases a tragedy in its own right...but as human beings what do we do? We accept it. Why? Because there's no sense in getting mad at a hurricane. There's no human intent or will behind a giant storm, nobody can be held morally culpable, so we chalk it up as an unfortunate series of events. Hurricanes are part of nature. There was nothing we could really do to stop it. Sometimes the world's at large and I just have to deal with that the best way I can and accept it. To Gramsci, this is the old switcheroo that's going on with cultural hegemony. Dominant social classes have the ability to

dictate cultural norms, these cultural norms often times serve to reinforce themselves and people born into these cultures often times view the normalized state of the world around them as nature rather than culture...Gramsci thinks this is a cultural story that is being told...so often citizens see it as just the way the world is and something they need to just accept. To Gramsci, this is why Marx's prophecy hasn't come true. This is why the proletariat continues to live in chains...because they've come to accept those chains as the natural state of the world that they need to come to terms with. Cultural norms become to the average person what Gramsci calls the "common sense" that they use to make sense of their place in the world. When the common sense of your world serves to legitimize the dominance of a particular class of people and tells you that anything you don't like about your socio-economic situation is just the natural order of things...then your very existence becomes reinforcing of cultural hegemony...you are reinforcing the political status quo simply by participating in the culture that you were born into. This is why people that would otherwise never stand for getting pushed around can find themselves getting worked into the ground in a factory during the time of Gramsci only to accept their place in the world as a necessary part of how the world works. Parts of my life may be hard...but you know what...that's life. But look it's not like Gramsci's saying that life should never be hard. The more accurate question is probably: how hard does life NEED to be and how many hard aspects of life have been made into a normalized part of our modern world that we just accept that disproportionately serve to benefit a dominant group within society? Being a neo-Marxist you can no doubt guess what his first and most commonly used target is throughout his work: Capitalism. So to Gramsci even people that are struggling within a Capitalist system have often times lived their entire lives immersed in a culture that promotes the merits of Capitalism...this, in turn, creates a sort of economic Stockholm Syndrome, where despite the fact they are struggling, the citizens identify themselves and their place in the world in relation to Capitalist ideology. When the entire way that you view the world has been given to you by a culture that benefits from maintaining capitalism, Gramsci would say don't be surprised if that education produces a few blind spots. These blind spots are the point.

Cultural Hegemony in many ways is accomplished by getting consent from the population to keep things the way that they are by making sure people are blind to other options at their disposal. Keep in mind as we continue talking about cultural hegemony that this isn't always accomplished by an organized group of people that are actively trying to control things. Cultural Hegemony can exist and people can be a part of perpetuating the status quo just simply by acting out of their own self interest, see because their self interest is always considered in relation to how the CURRENT system can help them...they unintentionally support things staying the same. What Gramsci is getting at is that for any single person or any social institution... to appeal to groups in positions of power for the sake of your own self interest you must...in some capacity...go along with the way things are currently structured. So for example if you're an aspiring politician or social commentator that wants to make the world a better place...the only way you are EVER going to be able to get your message across is by participating in the existing culture and using the tools at your disposal. This is an ideal situation for cultural hegemony and one of the goals of its final stages: to make the values of a particular culture seem so a part of nature and so in line with "common sense"...that the members of that culture don't even question them. To get people completely entrenched in this world where they mistake the reality of their culture for the reality of the universe. To think the reason things are staying the way that they are is because people are weighing all the options at their disposal and making the best choice, not complying with the demands of a cultural hegemon. Just like the militaristic hegemon of ancient Greece...the goal of cultural hegemony is to stay in power. Now over time dominant groups realized that the most efficient way of doing this is by controlling people's systems of values. Gramsci thinks by and large people acquire their systems of values by listening to and studying voices within a culture that to him are massively important: public intellectuals. Gramsci makes an important distinction here between two very different types of public intellectuals. There are ruling intellectuals and organic intellectuals. Now, the ruling intellectuals are going to be the sort of foot soldiers for the dominant set of cultural norms that are currently in place...these are the people whose commentary on the world

is going to reinforce the status quo. Keep in mind that this in no way is saying that these are BAD people necessarily...most of them may not even realize that they're doing it. But Gramsci wants to shine a light on the insular, often times self-reinforcing world that many of these intellectuals come from. So often it's from academia. So often these people are completely out of touch when it comes to what life is even like for most people in a culture. Think about the common archetype of a philosopher throughout history. Philosopher decides they're going to resign themselves from public life, lock themselves away in a tower and think about stuff really, really hard...THAT'S the path to creating better philosophy...the last thing you'd EVER want to do is have the basic thoughts of a normal everyday person corrupting your genius. Gramsci thinks this is completely ridiculous. Not only is this elitist...and making tons of value judgments about how certain human experiences of the world are inherently better and can even be corrupted by other people's experiences of the world...but aside from all of that...Gramsci thinks this approach actually prevents you from ever being able to participate in discussions about politics at all...because political discussions BEGIN from the starting point of self-awareness and self-reflection while considering how that self relates to all the other people around you...and how could anybody locking themselves away in a closet thinking about stuff ever hope to contribute to that conversation? But nonetheless these ruling intellectuals often times dominate the ideas that are available to citizens of a society. So often these intellectuals are the ones that write the articles, they're the ones published in journals, they conduct the studies, they write the textbooks...so often these intellectuals control the education of the next generation of citizens when so much of their prominence as an intellectual was only given to them simply because their ideas corresponded with the existing social order. Here's what Gramsci is saying: cultural hegemony is established by taking control of three things. The intellectuals of a society, the education within a society and the philosophy that drives people to political action. So in other words if you're someone that came up through the education system of an advanced capitalist society...Gramsci would say don't be surprised if there are some pretty glaring holes in your understanding of Capitalism...because just statistically...most

pieces of information you've ever had access to have been written by people that reached that level of social influence by participating in a Capitalist system that benefits them. Your high school or university wasn't taught by unbiased monks. That most likely, once again just statistically, you have come up in a world where you are far more likely to hear about the merits of Capitalism and all the good that it is doing for people in the world. When conversations about the downsides of Capitalism come up you are far more likely to hear them glossed over by other people...you're less likely to have someone call you out for glossing over them, and the conversation is likely to go in the direction of how the good of Capitalism drastically outweighs the bad. When you hear people talking about Socialism...when coming up in an advanced Capitalist culture you're far more likely to have run into conversations about the horrors of Socialism, how it's failed everywhere it's been tried and if anyone brings up something good that Socialism has done it's written off as a broken clock is right twice a day sort of thing. Now here's the really interesting part: this view of economics and how it plays out in the world may be absolutely true. Capitalism could just be BETTER than Socialism. But how would you ever know for sure? Because if you're an intellectually honest person you'd at least for a second have to consider that maybe your entire understanding of Capitalism and Socialism has been given to you by a handful of intellectuals you've entrusted your worldview to...that are intellectuals and gained their credibility simply because their view of the way the world is corresponds with a dominant cultural narrative that keeps the status quo going...whether maintaining the status quo is good for a particular social group that's pulling the puppet strings or whether it's good for just keeping society stable...what if you've lived your life learning from a lot of really smart people that are all just telling the same side of the story? Now Gramsci would say this is not just limited to Capitalist societies...that it's entirely possible to come up in a society that unfairly promotes the merits of socialism and creates the same sort of echochamber of ideas. Gramsci's goal was not to replace a western world dominated by Capitalist ideology with one dominated by Marxist ideology. His goal was to replace both of these narrow approaches with an ideology where the public has a general and intense level of skepticism about the status quo, no matter

WHAT the status quo looks like. The biggest mistake we can make is to see these ideologies as nature or the way that things are. We should ALWAYS be critical of the status quo...the fact he's so critical of Capitalism is just him following his own advice about the status quo of the world he happened to live in. To make a long story short: Gramsci thought that Marx and so many other Marxist thinkers that came after were putting the cart before the horse. They were all so wrapped up in the possibility...the inevitability of a Communist revolution in the west. They were so wrapped up in waiting to see Capitalism destroy itself that they completely missed the fact that different methods of cultural control could fragment a population to the point that a revolution could never take place. Gramsci makes another important distinction in his work to these people that were calling for revolution...that for any meaningful social change to take place, regardless of what it is, there needs to be two wars that are fought and won: first a war of position...then a war of manuevre. These orthodox Marxists of his time were far too focused on the war of manuevre...which was the actual Communist revolution that they wanted to bring about. But Gramsci says before that can ever happen you need to defeat the cultural hegemon in a war of position. Remember a cultural hegemon will have control over the intellectuals, the education and the philosophy of a society. The goal of anyone trying to bring about any kind of social change should be to provide alternatives in all three of these areas...they should create a counterculture...an alternative set of cultural norms and taboos reinforced by intellectuals whose job it is to actively CHALLENGE the status quo. He called this other type of intellectuals "organic" intellectuals and it was their job to be skeptical of the existing order of things...provide an alternative means of education that took cues from the counterculture that was created and to embolden the average citizen to take political action by giving them a philosophical outlook that changes the way they see themselves and how they fit into the world. This is why so many attempts at revolution have failed in the past to Gramsci...the orthodox Marxists that tried to organize it didn't understand the "common sense" of the workers that needed to carry out the revolution. These workers saw themselves and their place in the world solely in terms of how they relate to

Capitalist ideology...the ONLY WAY to shift their perspective enough to see the other side would be to fundamentally change the way they look at the world philosophically. See an extremely important term in the work of Karl Marx that was used to describe the way he saw things was "historical materialism". Gramsci was a neo-Marxist. When it came to these orthodox Marxists we're talking about...he distanced himself considerably from them and a big reason why was because he thought they were paying way too much attention to the "materialism" part of "historical materialism" and not enough attention to the historical part of it. Gramsci may have supported Communism and Communism may have played out in a particular way throughout the 20th century...but Gramsci hated Stalin. He would have hated Mao. He would've hated Pol Pot...he saw people like these as opportunistic dictators that took what would otherwise have been a revolutionary political philosophy and they used it to create dictatorships where the population was forced to deify and worship the state...when to Gramsci a much more accurate reading of the work of Marx would produce the true essence of his work: the spirit of revolution among common people united under the desire to never again allow a handful of people to dominate and control the population. To those living at the time of Gramsci...Communism and Democracy seemed to be two extremely different approaches to trying to solve the same general problem. See as we already know from earlier episodes the feeling around this time in the world of philosophy is an intense skepticism towards reason. The Enlightenment gave us hope that science was the answer. Science when given enough time to develop was capable of giving us answers to problems that throughout history have seemed completely unsolvable. When applied to the realm of political philosophy for over a hundred years it seemed totally plausible that something like science...something as unbiased and without an agenda as science could eventually study the way that people are and the way that people work together in a society and it didn't seem crazy to think that science could eventually give us answers to some of these questions in political philosophy that seemed so difficult to answer. But along came Friedrich Nietzsche. Philosophizing with a hammer. Because at the end of the 19th century he asks the question: what if the very act

of conducting science at all carries with it cultural values that narrow and distort its findings? We know there are many different ways of conducting science depending on the specific field you are in...we know that scientific revolutions have occurred where there have been wholesale transformations of the methods and assumptions that science is conducted through. What if these limitations and the unavoidable narrow scope that categorizing the universe must be viewed through is missing out on something crucial about what it is to be a human being? What if science, useful as it is, was never the savior that everyone thought it was? More on next episode. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Carl Schmitt on Liberalism pt. 1

Episode #132

This is a transcript of episode #132 on Carl Schmitt. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So we're three episodes into this new arc of the show and as you know we're talking about the early 20th century here. Once again it's important to keep in mind what is going on during this time. Political philosophy is going through a serious transition phase...the WORLD is going through a serious transition phase...revolutions are taking place, world wars are on the horizon, the rise of fascism, authoritarianism, the entire legacy of the Enlightenment is being called into question...and what this means for the world of philosophy is that the thinkers doing their work during this time are very quickly coming face to face with the realization... that in this post-nuclear world... where for the first time the consequences of war could threaten the entire existence of the human race...THEY are the people... that are going to have to figure this all out. Think of the pressure these thinkers were faced with at the time...To be a thinker born in the early 20th century is to be born into a world...where the strength of your ideas is going to be tested in real time while the fate of the world hangs in the balance...being born into this time period is like the forces of history commandeering you for one of the most stressful jobs in the history of the world. Imagine your first day at a new job and the orientation is: here's the entire history of western civilization...and day one at the new job is: time for you to fix it all...get to work. Now this job would be difficult enough if we were looking back at a history of total chaos in the west...but keep in mind the western world at this time is the self-proclaimed center of political thought...the self-proclaimed most advanced collection of societies that have ever existed in history. So if this really is such an advanced, developed environment that the rest of the world should draw inspiration from...why do we have such a rich history of things failing miserably? Think of the history this world is emerging out of: The age of reason and the political thought of the enlightenment produced for us what we've long considered to be the greatest political

strategy in existence: Liberal Capitalist Democracy. By this time for over a hundred years Liberal Capitalist Democracy has been the gold standard in the west when it comes to how we should be structuring our societies. The problem facing political philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth century is this: what exactly is it about our long-standing strategy of Liberal Capitalist Democracy that seems to invariably lead society into an endgame of dictatorship, bloodshed and political instability. When John Dewey and Antonio Gramsci show up with their lunchbox the first day at the new job...this is the first order of business that people like them are going to have to deal with. Now, it's right here that we can understand why the two of them went in the respective directions they did...because like we talked about the beginning of the 20th century can be broadly understood in terms of three major branches of political discussion, three primary conversations...that are going on...we've already talked about two of them and understanding all three of them is absolutely crucial because the contents OF these conversations is going to go on to dictate the direction of almost all subsequent political philosophy all the way up to the present day...when a philosopher sets out to contribute something to the political discussion of the 20th century they are almost without exception doing so in consideration to one of these three major critiques of the way we've done things in the past. Once again, what we've done in the past is Liberal Capitalist Democracy...the three major critiques are going to be John Dewey and his critique of traditional Democracy...Antonio Gramsci and his critique of Capitalism...and the guy we're going to be talking about today...the philosopher Carl Schmitt and his critique of Liberalism. But where's the best place to begin explaining one of the most scathing critiques of Liberalism in existence...maybe the best thing to preface this with just given the demographics of this show is that when Carl Schmitt sets out to critique the doctrine of Liberalism...he is not setting out to critique Liberalism in the context that some living in the modern United States may think of Liberalism...that it is one end of a political spectrum diametrically opposed to conservatism with these two poles being defined by the current state of the US political landscape. That's not the Liberalism he's talking about here...Carl Schmitt is not setting out in his work to critique some modern political

cliche...some pro-choice Greenpeace platinum member who rollerblades to work and thinks healthcare should be a human right. Let's talk about what the word Liberalism is actually referring to in the context of this broader philosophical discussion. The term Liberalism is referring to a political philosophy and method of determining political legitimacy that emerged out of the beginning of the Enlightenment. Modern historians when looking back at history often describe Liberalism as the dominant political strategy of the Enlightenment era that should be contrasted with the methods of determining political legitimacy before the Enlightenment-- which historians sometimes just group altogether and refer to as "pre-Liberal thought". So we have the Liberalism of the Enlightenment...that is to be contrasted with the pre-liberal thought which is the way we did things before the Enlightenment. To put all this in a very Philosophize This way...look, people form into societies...those societies have problems that need to get solved...the people that make up those societies have to figure out the answer to several basic but very important questions: what kind of society do we want to produce? what sort values do we want to uphold when engaging in our political process? what makes something a legitimate political problem at all? how do we solve these problems? specifically what is having a political disagreement even going to look like in our society...because that's a very important distinction that might not immediately seem like something our political process defines the parameters of...but keep in mind political disagreements of today look nothing like the political disagreements of a thousand years ago...and this is a big reason why Liberalism is often contrasted with pre-Liberalism. Before Liberalism burst onto the scene societies determined levels of political legitimacy with very different methods than we do today. Pre-liberal societies often informed their political process through things like divine revelation, tradition, ritual, pure authoritarianism, theological scholarship, the interpretation of scripture was an important part of the process...pre-liberal societies relied on these methods and these methods reliably produced a certain type of society...people got fed up with this type of society and put their heads together in the Enlightenment to try to come up with better criteria to base our political decisions on. These criteria and the positions they naturally

arrive at have come to be known as Liberalism. Now what this transition LOOKS LIKE...in keeping with the theme of the Enlightenment overall...political strategy starts to move away from revelation and instead is beginning to rely a lot more on reason. From pre-liberal to Liberal. When making political decisions...there's a turn away from pre-liberal methods of theological scholarship and a turn towards a new Liberal focus on secular scholarship. There is a turn away from political decisions based on divine intervention towards a new confidence in decisions that are hashed out through rational debate. The pre-liberal standard of there being some single, anointed authoritarian leader that has ultimate say over the political process is quickly being replaced by parliamentary politics, separation of powers, democracy, civil and human rights, there's a new focus on issues regarding equality...Capitalism starts to become the dominant economic approach...Liberal Capitalist Democracies as opposed to Feudal Aristocracies. Liberalism primarily aims to do away with the authoritarianism and divine revelation of the past and replace it instead with things like limited government, equality, freedom of expression, secular science and rational debate. Now...somebody born into our modern world that's largely grounded in Liberal principles might be confused as to how anybody in their right mind could ever possibly disagree with this method of doing things politically. This episode is not talking about the merits of Liberalism but Carl Schmitt's critique of Liberalism. Might think...look I know we've had our problems in the west, but this stuff all just seems like common sense...I mean back to the modern United States...Liberalism seems to be the foundation of BOTH political parties... how could anybody possibly think that Liberalism is the problem with our long time strategy of Liberal Capitalist Democracy? Carl Schmitt would probably say to this person that the most dangerous political ideology is the ideology that's currently popular. The kind of ideological assumptions you make about the political process that are so engrained, so steeped in tradition that you don't even think twice about them. Because if we should regard the thinking before the Enlightenment as pre-liberal and the thinking during the Enlightenment as Liberal...then Carl Schmitt can be regarded as someone trying to bring about a NEW post-Liberal way of thinking politically-- modern anti-liberal is how he's

often described. So for the sake of understanding where Carl Schmitt is coming from...the important thing to keep in mind here right at the beginning is that when there is this shift towards Liberal principles during the Enlightenment... what comes along with that is a promise from the thinkers of the time that this new strategy is going to bring about a better world for us. One of the dominant theories among the thinkers of the Enlightenment was that if we let these Liberal values play out and allow them to reach their natural conclusions...we will be the architects of a brand new, cosmopolitan, peaceful world the likes of which we've never seen. To understand Carl Schmitt this is the perspective from which we need to VIEW liberalism. Liberalism was CREATED as an alternative political philosophy that was supposed to be a solution to many of the political problems of the past. These thinkers are looking back at history, seeing the pattern of dictators, bloodshed and political instability... and they're trying to come up with a NEW way of conducting politics where these things aren't going to happen anymore. This is actually a really good way to understand it: You can see why many of the hallmarks of Liberalism are what they are when you think about them in relation to some historical problem they were trying to solve. History of dictatorships and authoritarianism? Let's introduce separation of powers, checks and balances on the executive branch. History of sprawling empires and rigid national and religious identities? Well, we're ALL members of a global economy...let's have political and religious identities take a back seat for now and instead unite the world under the flag of mutually beneficial consumerism. History of political and religious wars? Well, let's not fight on the actual battlefield...let's instead hash out our political differences in the battlefield of rational debate...where people can still be at odds with each other and go to war...but this way nobody has to die. This was the hope and ambition of Liberalism as a political philosophy. Liberalism was supposed to be an alternative way of doing stuff that solved these problems of the past but Carl Schmitt is going to say this is nowhere near what actually happened...try to put yourself in the shoes of Carl Schmitt...try to see Liberalism through the eyes of a philosopher in the early 20th century...similar to the early Liberal thinkers...Carl Schmitt is looking back at history...he too sees the pre-liberal

world of dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability...then along comes Liberalism to save the day...and what he sees is really not much changing at all...what he sees is that throughout the entire tenure of Liberalism things continue to descend into dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability all the way up to the present day and he thinks the only reasonable thing to conclude from this state of affairs is that there is a big difference... between the hopes and ambitions of Liberalism...and how things actually play out in the world. Liberalism, to Carl Schmitt, doesn't produce the world that it claims to produce. Throughout several years of his career Carl Schmitt attacked Liberalism from so many different angles that there really isn't a clear starting point here...so I want to just jump right in to some different examples of hallmarks of Liberal thinking that Carl Schmitt takes issue with, use that as a skeleton and then try to flesh out the rest of his position from there. So just to get us started...one of the biggest delusions of Liberal thought in the eyes of Carl Schmitt is the expectation... that it is possible for us to produce a society where people can have extreme political differences...and by adhering to the tenants of Liberalism they can co-exist, live peacefully amongst each other and just agree to disagree...put in the words of political philosophy this is the toleration of difference. We see this kind of thinking in western Liberal democracies every second of every day... You'll often hear people talk about political discussion with the expectation that this sort of thing is possible...you know we may be totally different people...we may disagree on every element of how a society should be structured...but at the end of the day we can shake hands, live and let live and go on about our lives...Carl Schmitt would say that this is a Liberal fantasy world. That if you pay attention to what is actually going on in the real world of the political...this is not the way extreme political differences interact with each other in our societies. Liberalism just creates the illusion that they do. To Carl Schmitt...this expectation... that we're going to be able to co-exist tolerant of extreme political differences comes from the more fundamental Liberal belief that there is no political difference so extreme that there can't be some sort of solution eventually arrived at in an open forum of rational debate...that there is no chasm between worldviews that is so un-bridgable that there can't be some

sort of reasonable compromise that is arrived at by both parties. This is a hallmark of Liberal thought and a cornerstone of the Liberal political process. Now, Carl Schmitt would say...this idea...just in theory...no doubt SOUNDS really great. Who doesn't want a world where we can always just talk things through politically...who wouldn't want a world where we never have to implement political policy by force? The problem for Carl Schmitt is that this isn't how the world works. Liberalism is marketed to people as an alternative, more peaceful way of engaging in the political...but Carl Schmitt believes all that Liberalism REALLY does is allow people to AVOID engaging in the political. Rational debate puts on a good show...but it's mostly political theater. There are long periods of normalcy where a bunch of people get dressed up in suits and go to a building downtown and scream at each other about issues that are almost entirely inconsequential...this all provides a nice soap opera to watch that is supposed to be evidence of the Liberal political process in action. Look at how peaceful we've all learned to be! Hooray for Liberalism. But Carl Schmitt would say look at history...what happens every single time there is a truly serious political issue where the differences between parties are irreconcilable? What happens when you try to have a rational debate with someone who's political beliefs are that I should be king of the world and you should all be my slaves? Well, there's no REASONING with that person...you wouldn't try to SOLVE that difference of opinion with rational debate. You'd tell that person to sit down and be quiet or else they'll be thrown in jail. So it's at least POSSIBLE to have a political situation that all the debating in the world isn't going to solve...okay, now think of all the political differences that can possibly present themselves that are less of a cartoon. Carl Schmitt would start by saying look, there are going to be groups that emerge in the political landscape whose entire existence is predicated on the destruction of another group. The reality of the world is that there ARE political differences that are irreconcilable...and these differences are not all that uncommon...to Carl Schmitt this is one of the failures of Liberal political philosophy...no matter how good it feels to tell ourselves we're going to be open to outsiders and just talk things out when we disagree...rational debate CAN NOT SOLVE political problems of this magnitude. No

matter how much of a poster child you are for Liberalism...faced with political beliefs sufficiently hostile to Liberalism, faced with, for example, an authoritarian regime that wants to ascend to power...you are eventually going to have to do one of two things: choice number one...be willing to accept the destruction of Liberalism simply because something else was popular...choice number two...use the power of the state to silence opposition...or in other words temporarily behave like what we would otherwise call a dictator by using the sovereign authority that to Schmitt is intrinsically embedded into the political process. Choice number two is something Liberals are absolutely terrified of...and for good reason. Remember they're looking to societies of the past structured around social contract theory. Society is an agreement between the citizenry and the sovereign. The citizen's job is to serve the sovereign, the sovereign's job is to ensure the security of the citizen...sometimes in order to do this effectively the sovereign needs to wield an authoritarian level of power. To political philosophers in the days of pre-liberalism...having a designated sovereign body (like a king) that has the ability to maintain certain elements of society unincumbered by the political process was absolutely crucial. During the formation of liberalism people looked back at our history of doing things this way and realized many of the downfalls of great societies occurred when in this volatile place of a sovereign body seizing control. Liberal philosophers tried to do away with the concept of a sovereign...they saw it an outdated and dangerous idea. Carl Schmitt makes the case that this is why once Liberalism comes onto the scene...the thinkers at the time become absolutely obsessed with finding any possible way they can to make it so that we don't have to have a "sovereign" anymore. The idea of a dictatorship, which at the time was historically the most common structure of a successful society, dictatorships become unthinkable. Carl Schmitt wants to mark another distinction between Liberal theory and the reality of the world here. The reality of the world is that societies sometimes need the ability to make swift and decisive decisions and in the post-Enlightenment world this reality gets swept under the rug for the sake of pandering to the Liberal fear of authoritarianism. He thinks this taboo towards dictatorships certainly makes us FEEL good...but it simultaneously ignores

capabilities that healthy societies require. To Carl Schmitt this is yet another failure of the Liberal political process...not ONLY does it ignore society's occasional need for a sovereign but even if it WANTED to get rid of it altogether...Liberalism doesn't actually REMOVE the sovereign from the political process...once again it just creates the illusion that there isn't a sovereign until we actually NEED one. Liberalism performs this illusion by engaging in various different types of what Carl Schmitt refers to as: normativism. To put it bluntly: Carl Schmitt is saying that Liberalism is terrified of the idea of a sovereign dictator holding power, so to safeguard against that possibility they've come up with all these different attempts to hold political power to a set of predefined norms and rules. Liberals are obsessed with this process of normativism...this is the rise of constitutional democracies in the west. Constitutions are designed to be safeguards against the swift and decisive action of authoritarianism. Normativism is sold as an incredible feature of Liberalism that protects the will of the people. Now, Carl Schmitt uses this term of normativism in a way that is mostly intended to poke fun at the hopes of Liberalism...because like I just alluded to, normativism is an illusion to Carl Schmitt. The hope and ambition of Liberalism is that by coming up with these norms that political leaders have to follow...whenever somebody comes along that starts to look like one of these sovereign dictators we've seen throughout history...we'll just wave the constitution in their face and they'll just burst into flames and we'll never have to hear from them again. But Carl Schmitt is going to say this is yet another delusion of Liberalism that doesn't shore up with the reality of the world. First of all...it doesn't matter how long you sit down and talk about what the parameters should be for someone holding a position of power...you are NEVER going to be able to come up with a set of rules that accounts for every contingency given how many moving parts are involved when making decisions that affect this many people. To Carl Schmitt trying to normativize these highly volatile moments is at best drastically oversimplifying how complex the world can be and at worst severely weakening your society and its ability to adapt and defend itself. Here's the good news though: to Carl Schmitt...this isn't ACTUALLY how things ever play out in Liberal societies anyway...because even the most Liberal society in existence eventually

recognizes how necessary temporary extra-constitutional power is given the right circumstances. Carl Schmitt is saying that even in Liberal societies whenever it really comes down to it and they're faced with some sort of existential crisis the constitution goes out the window anyway. You know, citizens of Liberal Constitutional Democracies often have this expectation of...well the government can't just go rogue and do whatever they want...they're held to the constitution, there are checks and balances they gotta to get permission to do something, right?...but what happens whenever there's an emergency and something needs to get done? Oh, well they just take action. In other words, to Carl Schmitt...Liberalism claims to have gotten rid of the sovereign from the political process...but what happens in these societies whenever something ACTUALLY has to get done and we need a sovereign...abracadabra! Poof! The Sovereign was there the whole time. This is a great magic trick...and to Carl Schmitt the misdirection was performed by the Liberal political process. This is another liberal theory vs reality thing to him: the hope of Liberalism was to get rid of the sovereign...the reality of the world is that we have long periods of normalcy where the government does almost nothing...punctuated by rare moments of extreme action whenever things ACTUALLY need to get done. Liberalism hasn't REMOVED the sovereign and the only time pieces of paper like the constitution prevent the sovereign from acting are during periods of normalcy when the sovereign wouldn't be exercising authoritarian power anyway...to Carl Schmitt the biggest difference between our modern societies and the ones that existed in the pre-liberal world is that the pre-liberal societies were just a lot more honest about the authoritarianism that was going on. Nowadays we have this grand illusion of Liberalism that puts a bunch of window dressing on it and pretends the world is something that it's not. Liberalism is in many ways a utopian fantasy in the eyes of Carl Schmitt. There is a lot more to talk about and in many ways we've just started getting into the main section of the ideas...please if you have the time listen to the next episode while this stuff is still fresh in your brain...it's released for your listening enjoyment right now. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

So we're three episodes into this new arc of the show and as you know we're talking about

the early 20th century here. Once again it's important to keep in mind what is going on during this time. Political philosophy is going through a serious transition phase...the WORLD is going through a serious transition phase...revolutions are taking place, world wars are on the horizon, the rise of fascism, authoritarianism, the entire legacy of the Enlightenment is being called into question...and what this means for the world of philosophy is that the thinkers doing their work during this time are very quickly coming face to face with the realization... that in this post-nuclear world... where for the first time the consequences of war could threaten the entire existence of the human race...THEY are the people... that are going to have to figure this all out. Think of the pressure these thinkers were faced with at the time...To be a thinker born in the early 20th century is to be born into a world...where the strength of your ideas is going to be tested in real time while the fate of the world hangs in the balance...being born into this time period is like the forces of history commandeering you for one of the most stressful jobs in the history of the world. Imagine your first day at a new job and the orientation is: here's the entire history of western civilization...and day one at the new job is: time for you to fix it all...get to work.

Now this job would be difficult enough if we were looking back at a history of total chaos in the west...but keep in mind the western world at this time is the self-proclaimed center of political thought...the self-proclaimed most advanced collection of societies that have ever existed in history. So if this really is such an advanced, developed environment that the rest of the world should draw inspiration from...why do we have such a rich history of things failing miserably? Think of the history this world is emerging out of:

The age of reason and the political thought of the enlightenment produced for us what we've long considered to be the greatest political strategy in existence: Liberal Capitalist Democracy. By this time for over a hundred years Liberal Capitalist Democracy has been the gold standard in the west when it comes to how we should be structuring our societies. The problem facing political philosophers at the beginning of the twentieth

century is this: what exactly is it about our long-standing strategy of Liberal Capitalist Democracy that seems to invariably lead society into an endgame of dictatorship, bloodshed and political instability.

When John Dewey and Antonio Gramsci show up with their lunchbox the first day at the new job...this is the first order of business that people like them are going to have to deal with. Now, it's right here that we can understand why the two of them went in the respective directions they did...because like we talked about the beginning of the 20th century can be broadly understood in terms of three major branches of political discussion, three primary conversations...that are going on...we've already talked about two of them and understanding all three of them is absolutely crucial because the contents OF these conversations is going to go on to dictate the direction of almost all subsequent political philosophy all the way up to the present day...when a philosopher sets out to contribute something to the political discussion of the 20th century they are almost without exception doing so in consideration to one of these three major critiques of the way we've done things in the past. Once again, what we've done in the past is Liberal Capitalist Democracy...the three major critiques are going to be John Dewey and his critique of traditional Democracy...Antonio Gramsci and his critique of Capitalism...and the guy we're going to be talking about today...the philosopher Carl Schmitt and his critique of Liberalism.

But where's the best place to begin explaining one of the most scathing critiques of Liberalism in existence...maybe the best thing to preface this with just given the demographics of this show is that when Carl Schmitt sets out to critique the doctrine of Liberalism...he is not setting out to critique Liberalism in the context that some living in the modern United States may think of Liberalism...that it is one end of a political spectrum diametrically opposed to conservatism with these two poles being defined by the current state of the US political landscape. That's not the Liberalism he's talking

about here...Carl Schmitt is not setting out in his work to critique some modern political cliché...some pro-choice Greenpeace platinum member who rollerblades to work and thinks healthcare should be a human right.

Let's talk about what the word Liberalism is actually referring to in the context of this broader philosophical discussion. The term Liberalism is referring to a political philosophy and method of determining political legitimacy that emerged out of the beginning of the Enlightenment. Modern historians when looking back at history often describe Liberalism as the dominant political strategy of the Enlightenment era that should be contrasted with the methods of determining political legitimacy before the Enlightenment-- which historians sometimes just group altogether and refer to as "pre-Liberal thought". So we have the Liberalism of the Enlightenment...that is to be contrasted with the pre-liberal thought which is the way we did things before the Enlightenment. To put all this in a very Philosophize This way...look, people form into societies...those societies have problems that need to get solved...the people that make up those societies have to figure out the answer to several basic but very important questions: what kind of society do we want to produce? what sort values do we want to uphold when engaging in our political process? what makes something a legitimate political problem at all? how do we solve these problems? specifically what is having a political disagreement even going to look like in our society...because that's a very important distinction that might not immediately seem like something our political process defines the parameters of...but keep in mind political disagreements of today look nothing like the political disagreements of a thousand years ago...and this is a big reason why Liberalism is often contrasted with pre-Liberalism. Before Liberalism burst onto the scene societies determined levels of political legitimacy with very different methods than we do today. Pre-liberal societies often informed their political process through things like divine revelation, tradition, ritual, pure authoritarianism, theological scholarship, the interpretation of scripture was an important part of the process...pre-liberal societies relied on these methods and these methods reliably

produced a certain type of society...people got fed up with this type of society and put their heads together in the Enlightenment to try to come up with better criteria to base our political decisions on. These criteria and the positions they naturally arrive at have come to be known as Liberalism.

Now what this transition LOOKS LIKE...in keeping with the theme of the Enlightenment overall...political strategy starts to move away from revelation and instead is beginning to rely a lot more on reason. From pre-liberal to Liberal. When making political decisions...there's a turn away from pre-liberal methods of theological scholarship and a turn towards a new Liberal focus on secular scholarship. There is a turn away from political decisions based on divine intervention towards a new confidence in decisions that are hashed out through rational debate. The pre-liberal standard of there being some single, anointed authoritarian leader that has ultimate say over the political process is quickly being replaced by parliamentary politics, separation of powers, democracy, civil and human rights, there's a new focus on issues regarding equality...Capitalism starts to become the dominant economic approach...Liberal Capitalist Democracies as opposed to Feudal Aristocracies. Liberalism primarily aims to do away with the authoritarianism and divine revelation of the past and replace it instead with things like limited government, equality, freedom of expression, secular science and rational debate. Now...somebody born into our modern world that's largely grounded in Liberal principles might be confused as to how anybody in their right mind could ever possibly disagree with this method of doing things politically. This episode is not talking about the merits of Liberalism but Carl Schmitt's critique of Liberalism. Might think...look I know we've had our problems in the west, but this stuff all just seems like common sense...I mean back to the modern United States...Liberalism seems to be the foundation of BOTH political parties... how could anybody possibly think that Liberalism is the problem with our long time strategy of Liberal Capitalist Democracy? Carl Schmitt would probably say to this person that the most dangerous political ideology is the ideology that's currently popular. The kind of ideological assumptions you make about

the political process that are so engrained, so steeped in tradition that you don't even think twice about them. Because if we should regard the thinking before the Enlightenment as pre-liberal and the thinking during the Enlightenment as Liberal...then Carl Schmitt can be regarded as someone trying to bring about a NEW post-Liberal way of thinking politically-- modern anti-liberal is how he's often described.

So for the sake of understanding where Carl Schmitt is coming from...the important thing to keep in mind here right at the beginning is that when there is this shift towards Liberal principles during the Enlightenment... what comes along with that is a promise from the thinkers of the time that this new strategy is going to bring about a better world for us. One of the dominant theories among the thinkers of the Enlightenment was that if we let these Liberal values play out and allow them to reach their natural conclusions...we will be the architects of a brand new, cosmopolitan, peaceful world the likes of which we've never seen.

To understand Carl Schmitt this is the perspective from which we need to VIEW liberalism. Liberalism was CREATED as an alternative political philosophy that was supposed to be a solution to many of the political problems of the past. These thinkers are looking back at history, seeing the pattern of dictators, bloodshed and political instability... and they're trying to come up with a NEW way of conducting politics where these things aren't going to happen anymore. This is actually a really good way to understand it: You can see why many of the hallmarks of Liberalism are what they are when you think about them in relation to some historical problem they were trying to solve. History of dictatorships and authoritarianism? Let's introduce separation of powers, checks and balances on the executive branch. History of sprawling empires and rigid national and religious identities? Well, we're ALL members of a global economy...let's have political and religious identities take a back seat for now and instead unite the world under the flag of mutually beneficial consumerism. History of political and religious wars? Well, let's not fight on the actual battlefield...let's instead hash out

our political differences in the battlefield of rational debate...where people can still be at odds with each other and go to war...but this way nobody has to die.

This was the hope and ambition of Liberalism as a political philosophy. Liberalism was supposed to be an alternative way of doing stuff that solved these problems of the past but Carl Schmitt is going to say this is nowhere near what actually happened...try to put yourself in the shoes of Carl Schmitt...try to see Liberalism through the eyes of a philosopher in the early 20th century...similar to the early Liberal thinkers...Carl Schmitt is looking back at history...he too sees the pre-liberal world of dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability...then along comes Liberalism to save the day...and what he sees is really not much changing at all...what he sees is that throughout the entire tenure of Liberalism things continue to descend into dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability all the way up to the present day and he thinks the only reasonable thing to conclude from this state of affairs is that there is a big difference... between the hopes and ambitions of Liberalism...and how things actually play out in the world. Liberalism, to Carl Schmitt, doesn't produce the world that it claims to produce.

Throughout several years of his career Carl Schmitt attacked Liberalism from so many different angles that there really isn't a clear starting point here...so I want to just jump right in to some different examples of hallmarks of Liberal thinking that Carl Schmitt takes issue with, use that as a skeleton and then try to flesh out the rest of his position from there.

So just to get us started...one of the biggest delusions of Liberal thought in the eyes of Carl Schmitt is the expectation... that it is possible for us to produce a society where people can have extreme political differences...and by adhering to the tenants of Liberalism they can co-exist, live peacefully amongst each other and just agree to disagree...put in the words of political philosophy this is the toleration of difference. We

see this kind of thinking in western Liberal democracies every second of every day... You'll often hear people talk about political discussion with the expectation that this sort of thing is possible...you know we may be totally different people...we may disagree on every element of how a society should be structured...but at the end of the day we can shake hands, live and let live and go on about our lives...Carl Schmitt would say that this is a Liberal fantasy world. That if you pay attention to what is actually going on in the real world of the political...this is not the way extreme political differences interact with each other in our societies. Liberalism just creates the illusion that they do.

To Carl Schmitt...this expectation... that we're going to be able to co-exist tolerant of extreme political differences comes from the more fundamental Liberal belief that there is no political difference so extreme that there can't be some sort of solution eventually arrived at in an open forum of rational debate...that there is no chasm between worldviews that is so un-bridgable that there can't be some sort of reasonable compromise that is arrived at by both parties. This is a hallmark of Liberal thought and a cornerstone of the Liberal political process. Now, Carl Schmitt would say...this idea...just in theory...no doubt SOUNDS really great. Who doesn't want a world where we can always just talk things through politically...who wouldn't want a world where we never have to implement political policy by force? The problem for Carl Schmitt is that this isn't how the world works.

Liberalism is marketed to people as an alternative, more peaceful way of engaging in the political...but Carl Schmitt believes all that Liberalism REALLY does is allow people to AVOID engaging in the political. Rational debate puts on a good show...but it's mostly political theater. There are long periods of normalcy where a bunch of people get dressed up in suits and go to a building downtown and scream at each other about issues that are almost entirely inconsequential...this all provides a nice soap opera to watch that is supposed to be evidence of the Liberal political process in action. Look at how peaceful we've all learned to be! Hooray for Liberalism.

But Carl Schmitt would say look at history...what happens every single time there is a truly serious political issue where the differences between parties are irreconcilable? What happens when you try to have a rational debate with someone who's political beliefs are that I should be king of the world and you should all be my slaves? Well, there's no REASONING with that person...you wouldn't try to SOLVE that difference of opinion with rational debate. You'd tell that person to sit down and be quiet or else they'll be thrown in jail. So it's at least POSSIBLE to have a political situation that all the debating in the world isn't going to solve...okay, now think of all the political differences that can possibly present themselves that are less of a cartoon.

Carl Schmitt would start by saying look, there are going to be groups that emerge in the political landscape whose entire existence is predicated on the destruction of another group. The reality of the world is that there ARE political differences that are irreconcilable...and these differences are not all that uncommon...to Carl Schmitt this is one of the failures of Liberal political philosophy...no matter how good it feels to tell ourselves we're going to be open to outsiders and just talk things out when we disagree...rational debate CAN NOT SOLVE political problems of this magnitude. No matter how much of a poster child you are for Liberalism...faced with political beliefs sufficiently hostile to Liberalism, faced with, for example, an authoritarian regime that wants to ascend to power...you are eventually going to have to do one of two things: choice number one...be willing to accept the destruction of Liberalism simply because something else was popular...choice number two...use the power of the state to silence opposition...or in other words temporarily behave like what we would otherwise call a dictator by using the sovereign authority that to Schmitt is intrinsically embedded into the political process.

Choice number two is something Liberals are absolutely terrified of...and for good

reason. Remember they're looking to societies of the past structured around social contract theory. Society is an agreement between the citizenry and the sovereign. The citizen's job is to serve the sovereign, the sovereign's job is to ensure the security of the citizen...sometimes in order to do this effectively the sovereign needs to wield an authoritarian level of power. To political philosophers in the days of pre-liberalism...having a designated sovereign body (like a king) that has the ability to maintain certain elements of society unincumbered by the political process was absolutely crucial. During the formation of liberalism people looked back at our history of doing things this way and realized many of the downfalls of great societies occurred when in this volatile place of a sovereign body seizing control. Liberal philosophers tried to do away with the concept of a sovereign...they saw it an outdated and dangerous idea. Carl Schmitt makes the case that this is why once Liberalism comes onto the scene...the thinkers at the time become absolutely obsessed with finding any possible way they can to make it so that we don't have to have a "sovereign" anymore.

The idea of a dictatorship, which at the time was historically the most common structure of a successful society, dictatorships become unthinkable. Carl Schmitt wants to mark another distinction between Liberal theory and the reality of the world here. The reality of the world is that societies sometimes need the ability to make swift and decisive decisions and in the post-Enlightenment world this reality gets swept under the rug for the sake of pandering to the Liberal fear of authoritarianism. He thinks this taboo towards dictatorships certainly makes us FEEL good...but it simultaneously ignores capabilities that healthy societies require. To Carl Schmitt this is yet another failure of the Liberal political process...not ONLY does it ignore society's occasional need for a sovereign but even if it WANTED to get rid of it altogether...Liberalism doesn't actually REMOVE the sovereign from the political process...once again it just creates the illusion that there isn't a sovereign until we actually NEED one. Liberalism performs this illusion by engaging in various different types of what Carl Schmitt refers to as: normativism.

To put it bluntly: Carl Schmitt is saying that Liberalism is terrified of the idea of a sovereign dictator holding power, so to safeguard against that possibility they've come up with all these different attempts to hold political power to a set of predefined norms and rules. Liberals are obsessed with this process of normativism...this is the rise of constitutional democracies in the west. Constitutions are designed to be safeguards against the swift and decisive action of authoritarianism. Normativism is sold as an incredible feature of Liberalism that protects the will of the people.

Now, Carl Schmitt uses this term of normativism in a way that is mostly intended to poke fun at the hopes of Liberalism...because like I just alluded to, normativism is an illusion to Carl Schmitt. The hope and ambition of Liberalism is that by coming up with these norms that political leaders have to follow...whenever somebody comes along that starts to look like one of these sovereign dictators we've seen throughout history...we'll just wave the constitution in their face and they'll just burst into flames and we'll never have to hear from them again. But Carl Schmitt is going to say this is yet another delusion of Liberalism that doesn't shore up with the reality of the world.

First of all...it doesn't matter how long you sit down and talk about what the parameters should be for someone holding a position of power...you are NEVER going to be able to come up with a set of rules that accounts for every contingency given how many moving parts are involved when making decisions that affect this many people. To Carl Schmitt trying to normativize these highly volatile moments is at best drastically oversimplifying how complex the world can be and at worst severely weakening your society and its ability to adapt and defend itself.

Here's the good news though: to Carl Schmitt...this isn't ACTUALLY how things ever play out in Liberal societies anyway...because even the most Liberal society in existence eventually recognizes how necessary temporary extra-constitutional power is given the

right circumstances. Carl Schmitt is saying that even in Liberal societies whenever it really comes down to it and they're faced with some sort of existential crisis the constitution goes out the window anyway. You know, citizens of Liberal Constitutional Democracies often have this expectation of...well the government can't just go rogue and do whatever they want...they're held to the constitution, there are checks and balances they gotta to get permission to do something, right?...but what happens whenever there's an emergency and something needs to get done? Oh, well they just take action. In other words, to Carl Schmitt...Liberalism claims to have gotten rid of the sovereign from the political process...but what happens in these societies whenever something ACTUALLY has to get done and we need a sovereign...abracadabra! Poof! The Sovereign was there the whole time. This is a great magic trick...and to Carl Schmitt the misdirection was performed by the Liberal political process.

This is another liberal theory vs reality thing to him: the hope of Liberalism was to get rid of the sovereign...the reality of the world is that we have long periods of normalcy where the government does almost nothing...punctuated by rare moments of extreme action whenever things ACTUALLY need to get done. Liberalism hasn't REMOVED the sovereign and the only time pieces of paper like the constitution prevent the sovereign from acting are during periods of normalcy when the sovereign wouldn't be exercising authoritarian power anyway...to Carl Schmitt the biggest difference between our modern societies and the ones that existed in the pre-liberal world is that the pre-liberal societies were just a lot more honest about the authoritarianism that was going on. Nowadays we have this grand illusion of Liberalism that puts a bunch of window dressing on it and pretends the world is something that it's not. Liberalism is in many ways a utopian fantasy in the eyes of Carl Schmitt.

Carl Schmitt on Liberalism pt. 2

Episode #133

This is a transcript of episode #133 on Carl Schmitt. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So for anybody not listening to these two episodes back to back I want to briefly remind everyone of the end of last episode because the discussion on this episode jumps right in immediately where the last episode ended. Real quick, the last episode ended talking about the ambitions of normativism: "the hope of Liberalism was to get rid of the sovereign...the reality of the world is that we have long periods of normalcy where the government does almost nothing...punctuated by rare moments of extreme action whenever things ACTUALLY need to get done. Liberalism hasn't REMOVED the sovereign and the only time pieces of paper like the constitution prevent the sovereign from acting are during periods of normalcy when the sovereign wouldn't be exercising authoritarian power anyway...to Carl Schmitt the biggest difference between our modern societies and the ones that existed in the pre-liberal world is that the pre-liberal societies were just a lot more honest about the authoritarianism that was going on. Nowadays we have this grand illusion of Liberalism that puts a bunch of window dressing on it and pretends the world is something that it's not." So maybe the best place to begin our discussion today is just to say that the fact that the sovereign still exists at some level in our Liberal societies shouldn't come as an enormous surprise to people. I mean, after all what exactly are systems of norms like the constitution trying to normalize? Carl Schmitt would ask if the constitution is a regulatory document...what exactly is it regulating? He would say that what it is regulating is the more fundamental, underlying political process that has been going on since the dawn of civilization. Liberalism's been tacked on after the fact...makes us feel good...helps us FEEL like the world is a lot more peaceful and tolerant than its ever been...but once again, the reality of the world to Carl Schmitt, the reason we haven't seen a respite from dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability is because we are still engaged in the exact same political process we've always been

engaged in...one ROOTED in intolerance...to Carl Schmitt the foundation of the political lies in a distinction between friend and enemy. The friend enemy, self/other, us vs them distinction is probably nothing new to anybody listening to this...and to be fair it wasn't new during the time of Carl Schmitt...but the level to which Carl Schmitt defends this as the forge in which political identities are cast in makes for an extremely interesting take on what exactly is going on whenever we engage in politics. To Carl Schmitt whenever you are engaging in politics...whether you realize it or not you are necessarily positioning yourself on one side of a duality which from your perspective will always look like your friends vs your enemies. Carl Schmitt famously said show me who your enemies are and I'll show you who you are. This is actually a reference to Hegel's views on identity. The idea is that categories of identity can't exist unless if they have an opposite that they can be contrasted with. So the way this manifests in the political realm is that you only think of your political views and your political identity in terms of how it relates to political views that are the opposite of yours. Your enemies in the friend/enemy distinction. So an example just to illustrate this concept is...you know...nobody listening to this thinks of themselves as a person that is pro-oxygen. I mean why would you. You'd be an absolute weirdo to cordon off your political identity there...I mean who thinks of themselves as a person in favor of people being able to breathe? THAT IS until a group emerges in the political landscape that holds positions that make them ANTI-oxygen. Then and only then does it become a relevant piece of your political identity to think of yourself as a pro-oxygen kind of person. To hold a political position of any type IMPLIES the existence of a group that disagrees with you. To Carl Schmitt to engage in the political at all implies this friend/enemy distinction. The philosopher Leo Strauss summarized his views in a way that Schmitt approved of...he said: "Because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs dominion. But dominion can be established, that is, men can be unified only in a unity against—against other men. Every association of men is necessarily a separation from other men ... the political thus understood is not the constitutive principle of the state, of order, but a condition of the state." When you look at politics in this way it makes the Liberal political process start to seem kind of silly...and this is

another hallmark of Liberal thinking that Carl Schmitt thinks is a utopian fantasy world. The hope of Liberalism is a world of internationalism, acceptance of the other, toleration of different cultures, shaking hands and agreeing to disagree. Schmitt says no...Liberalism and democracy directly contradict each other...because unless if you are actually somebody that's calling for the formation of a one world government...you are at some level making a distinction between friend and enemy. Look at your views closely enough...there is some group of people who's interests, if it came down to it, matter more to you than some other group's interests. You can't have a democracy grounded in the idea that the citizens are going to vote along the lines that are best for their society without at some level making a friend/enemy distinction. To Carl Schmitt this is the essence of the political. The political realm is a violent ongoing process of friends banding together and going to war with their enemies capturing territory...whether that war is on a physical battlefield or in the halls of parliament...whether that territory that's captured is earth and water or control over the state...Liberalism allows for the illusion of multiculturalism and tolerance...when the reality of the world is that we're only going to be multicultural and tolerant as long as you mostly agree with us. Because when faced with enough difference from Liberal ideas...when faced with the TRUE essence of the political...when it REALLY COMES DOWN TO IT...Liberalism gets thrown out the window as well. This is why Carl Schmitt thinks Liberalism doesn't do what it claims to do. Liberalism doesn't provide an alternative, more peaceful way of engaging in the political process...Liberalism allows people to AVOID the political process altogether and further allows the political to operate covertly behind the scenes while politicians galavant around in the political theater of rational debate without really ever solving anything. See this is the other side of this that we still need to talk about...because for all the analysis of Liberalism that Carl Schmitt has offered so far...what we really haven't talked about yet is: why is any of this stuff a bad thing? The political process is still going on in spite of Liberalism. I mean, let's say Liberalism failed at what it set out to do...let's say it is not an alternative political process but just a bunch of window dressing that makes us feel good...well, it still makes us feel good right? What's so wrong about

that? To Carl Schmitt if you were making a list of all the failures of Liberalism...this may be the biggest one of all. Liberalism allows people to feel good about the political process when the world around them may actually be burning to the ground. Liberalism has created a world where more so than at any other point in history people can be completely apathetic about the political reality that they live in. See at many other points in history if there was a political situation going on in the world that was unfavorable for you... there was at LEAST a sense of obligation you were going to feel for finding some manner of recourse. For Carl Schmitt what Liberalism DOES is give people the ability to disconnect themselves from the political, oh politics? Well that's something that goes on in that creepy building way on the other side of town...I don't really get involved in all that. What I'm going to do is just live my life and leave all the debating about politics to the politicians...to Carl Schmitt the grand illusion of Liberalism, that politics is a normitized, peaceful process of finding ways to compromise with each other...that illusion gives people the luxury of being able to not pay attention to or care about politics at all...when in reality this isn't a luxury at all...and they are just as much at the mercy of the political as they ever have been. Carl Schmitt would want us to consider just what type of person this level of political apathy creates. He says that for someone that has voluntarily removed themselves from the political process...life in one of our modern societies sort of defaults to a life of being a passive spectator that just consumes stuff. With no political cause to feel a part of...when you're not part of the process of CREATING the political reality you're living in your life becomes that of a spectator...watching the world pass you by on TV screens...spending all day watching TV shows, movies and video games of fantasy worlds while you live in a fantasy world of your own...watching the Liberal soap opera of people in suits arguing about mostly insignificant issues buying IN to the story that you're told that this is all working really well...that you should feel GRATEFUL for your life as a passive spectator...that in the name of Liberal multiculturalism and tolerance you should not feel so connected to a strong political identity, religious identity or national identity...you should think of yourself MORE in terms of your identity as a global consumer...the reality of who you are

in modern Liberal societies is actually more connected to BUYING stuff than DOING stuff. To Carl Schmitt the promises of Liberalism often ROB people of their political identity. This crisis of identity is in many ways the political equivalent of Nietzsche's famous claim God is Dead. So as most people listening to this already know when Nietzsche writes those words God is Dead he is referring to an emerging world... where there is going to be a crisis of identity because people are no longer going to have automatic access to a strong religious identity that they can feel connected to. Now when Nietzsche writes this he is saying it with a bit of an ominous tone...because he realized that when this extremely important piece of people's identity was no longer going to be in the picture...that void within people that religious identity used to occupy was not just going to disappear. How were people going to respond? Carl Schmitt would want us to consider what it was like to be a citizen of one of these modern Liberal societies in the early 20th century...Liberalism in his view has asked people to give up their political, religious and national identities and replace them instead with the Liberal identity of multicultural globalism. Much like Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt would talk about this phenomena with an ominous tone...because he understood how important these types of identity can be to people. Part of living a fulfilling life as a human being is feeling like you're a part of something...feeling like you have some say in the way the world is unfolding around you. The founders of Liberalism saw that it was often THESE points of identity that led to wars and instability, so in the interest of making a better world they set up a blockade to make it more difficult for people to take these traditional paths to feeling part of something greater than themselves. But Carl Schmitt would say this is a tragic mistake by Liberalism...to deny these aspects of existence is to deny something extremely important about what it even is to be human. Just like in the time of Nietzsche...this crisis of identity is not just going to disappear...people are going to fill it in with something. The question becomes: what will that something be that people can feel like they're a part of? Nietzsche actually explicitly predicts a massive increase in political and nationalist fanaticism to come onto the scene at the beginning of the 20th century...which was precisely the story that unfolded during the early 20th century. This

is in many ways the story of Carl Schmitt. Carl Schmitt was an unabashed, anti-semitic Nazi who supported fascism. Carl Schmitt believed Fascism could be a prudent and intelligent political strategy given the right circumstances...he felt this way for many different reasons and understanding his rationale for supporting Fascism will be necessary knowledge to have if we want to understand the philosophical underpinnings of people's political moves all the way up to the present day. See it's easy to assume that anyone and everyone who could possibly support a fascist approach to political strategy must have been evil beyond all comprehension. But the more inconvenient and unnerving reality is that there are actually reasons Fascism emerged at the time that it did in the western world...there's a reason why early 20th century political discussions are centered around three primary approaches: democracy, Marxism and Fascism. Why did people living during this time think that Fascism was not only a viable political strategy, but the future of political philosophy? The answer to this question comes only after understanding Carl Schmitt's critiques of Liberalism that have been laid out so far. For all of the reasons already expressed and more...the bottom line is Carl Schmitt believes that Liberalism just produces weak societies. Liberal societies lack identity and thus are far weaker than societies that HAVE a strong sense of identity. We can at least understand how Carl Schmitt sees this happening...remember in his view Liberalism incentivizes inaction and complacency...Liberalism produces weak people that generally tend to be more politically uninformed or apathetic simply because they CAN be...Liberalism produces a world where even for the people that WANT to be involved in politics...there cannot be legitimate markers of political communities because within Liberal societies everybody is supposed to be holding hands in a circle singing songs of acceptance with their political opposition. Remember to be engaged in the political for Schmitt is to stand on one side of a friend enemy distinction...well if the whole goal of your society is multiculturalism and tolerance...that makes it EXTREMELY difficult if not impossible to really ever make a substantive friend/enemy distinction. Liberalism in this way undermines the formation of political communities and this dynamic when played out over the course of decades and centuries eventually produces societies that to

Carl Schmitt...really don't stand for anything. See historically countries would have something that they STOOD for...the citizens of those countries when faced with something that threatened what they believed in they would defend themselves...they'd be willing to fight and die for the cause. The natural endgame for Liberal societies is a population of people that are faced with a political enemy and are like eh, I disagree...but I'm not ready to go and get on a boat and die for something like this...Game of Thrones season 12 starts next week. This is the archetype of what a human being looks like in a modern liberal society. Devoid of any strong religious, political or national identity surrounded by a society that is terrified of the reality of the political process and so as to avoid the political denies the existence of any political identity as it goes around shaking hands with all the other countries telling everyone how super duper tolerant they are hoping nobody sees through that thin veneer to the intolerance just under the surface. This is a weak society in the eyes of Carl Schmitt filled with citizens who cannot be effectively emboldened towards political action because they are so disconnected from what is going on in the world they don't know who THEY are...they don't even know who their ENEMIES are. This is a sentiment expressed in Hobbes's Leviathan. When carrying out their end of the bargain in a Social Contract part of the job of the sovereign, part of what makes a state legitimate at all is when the sovereign has the ability to protect the members of the state and their political identities. When a sovereign can no longer do that...the social contract is void. But what if the members of a state don't HAVE a political identity to protect? What happens...what does the sovereign protect? This is what Carl Schmitt is worried about...Liberalism for its own reasons wants to do away with the sovereign and rob people of their political identity...what does this mean for the future of our modern liberal societies? Well there's the old cliché...if you don't stand for something you fall for anything. To Carl Schmitt...these weak Liberal societies that lack a sovereign and lack an identity to protect are essentially just sitting on their hands waiting around for a group that HAS a strong sense of identity to come along and impose THEIR will and identity onto the people with their anemic sense of purpose. This group that HAS a strong sense of identity could accomplish this in a number of different ways...they

could insinuate themselves into the Liberal political process, get elected to office and slowly use the tools at their disposal to fundamentally change the country...they could invade militarily...though that's probably a little old fashioned...think about it: if any group could manage to get elected to a high level of political office...the only thing it would really take is a state of emergency for that group to be able to assume the role of the sovereign in the name of protecting the constitution. Well imagine you're one of these groups...you want to go full authoritarian on everybody...what if you could just CONVINCE the population that there was an emergency going on? There really doesn't even need to BE an emergency if you are persuasive enough. Carl Schmitt thought that people living in liberal societies are sitting ducks just waiting around for things like this to occur. Carl Schmitt thought an extremely under-developed portion of political philosophy was who gets to decide one of these states of exception and why. Who gets to decide when a leader can make an exception when it comes to the rule of law and the constitution and on what grounds do they make that decision? This is a question that political philosophy has been oddly silent about since the formation of Liberalism...probably because we didn't even want to entertain the possibility that a dictator would ever be able to transcend these norms and rules we were trying to hold them to...but taboo towards the idea of a dictator or not, Carl Schmitt thinks they are all around us in hiding...some in plain sight...and we should be having a more serious conversation in our modern world about who or what gets to decide the exception. But anyway the possibility of an authoritarian group co-opting a weakened Liberal society and imposing their will was practically an inevitability to Carl Schmitt. Societies that refuse to acknowledge the essence of the political as friend/enemy distinctions will never know who their friends or their enemies are and are destined to get taken over politically. This is the set of assumptions that serve as a foundation when political philosophers start making a case for Fascism. So if you're someone that doesn't care about Liberal values...Fascism starts to seem like it's that far of a stretch. The idea is that societies ALWAYS have an authoritarian element to them or else they're too weak to handle real any problems...societies NEED something that they stand for or else they'll fall for

anything...societies that don't avoid the political process and KNOW who their friends and enemies are don't waste a bunch of time in gridlock debating the issues. When you reject Liberal principles...Fascism just becomes what a lot of different groups land on...the strategy basically being that the best defense is a good offense. Because if you are the group that is imposing your will on the groups around you...then at least you know you're not the group that's getting imposed upon. There are a lot of different theories for why Fascism emerged during the time that it did in the early 20th century...but at least when it comes to Carl Schmitt's brand of support many would say this level of skepticism towards the gospel of Liberalism comes as a reaction to the litany of promises that the enlightenment has failed to make into a reality. Liberalism becomes a mangled form of political theology. Their blind faith in normative parameters like the constitution when these parameters don't actually remove our need for a sovereign...blind faith in an open forum of rational discussion when in practice major decisions are always made by a handful of people...committees comprised of senior members of political parties...Carl Schmitt would say that when you truly consider the level of variance between the promises of Liberalism and the reality of the political landscape...how can anyone take it seriously when Liberalism promises to produce a more peaceful world for people? When it really comes down to it how is Liberalism any different than most other aggressive, alternative takes on how we should all be doing things? One really interesting thing that political philosophers have talked about over the years is the possibility that Liberalism if it were to achieve a level of total global cultural hegemony would eventually eliminate Fascism, remove the need for friend enemy distinctions altogether and make going to war for political or religious reasons an incredibly rare thing, almost non-existent. Then again how would it be different if we forcefully imposed ANY homogenous system of thought? Some would say that the world uniting under the flag of Liberalism, tolerance, multiculturalism...this would usher in an unprecedented era of world peace and economic prosperity. Some would say that is the VERY DEFINITION of Fascism. To say that the path to world peace is we just gotta get everybody to just with me! Then we'll be fiine! Whether there's a right or wrong way of looking at a global hegemony of

Liberalism, Carl Schmitt would say it really doesn't matter...because you don't want to be living in that world anyway. Might seem like a luxury at first to never have to engage in politics...but he would say really play your life out as one of those rootless, ever-consuming spectators...really think about how it would feel to live every day of your life utterly disconnected from the creation of the world you live in and ask yourself if that is really the kind of world that you want to be living in. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

So for anybody not listening to these two episodes back to back I want to briefly remind everyone of the end of last episode because the discussion on this episode jumps right in immediately where the last episode ended. Real quick, the last episode ended talking about the ambitions of normativism:

"the hope of Liberalism was to get rid of the sovereign...the reality of the world is that we have long periods of normalcy where the government does almost nothing...punctuated by rare moments of extreme action whenever things ACTUALLY need to get done. Liberalism hasn't REMOVED the sovereign and the only time pieces of paper like the constitution prevent the sovereign from acting are during periods of normalcy when the sovereign wouldn't be exercising authoritarian power anyway...to Carl Schmitt the biggest difference between our modern societies and the ones that existed in the pre-liberal world is that the pre-liberal societies were just a lot more honest about the authoritarianism that was going on. Nowadays we have this grand illusion of Liberalism that puts a bunch of window dressing on it and pretends the world is something that it's not."

So maybe the best place to begin our discussion today is just to say that the fact that the sovereign still exists at some level in our Liberal societies shouldn't come as an enormous surprise to people. I mean, after all what exactly are systems of norms like the constitution trying to normalize? Carl Schmitt would ask if the constitution is a regulatory document...what exactly is it regulating? He would say that what it is

regulating is the more fundamental, underlying political process that has been going on since the dawn of civilization. Liberalism's been tacked on after the fact...makes us feel good...helps us FEEL like the world is a lot more peaceful and tolerant than its ever been...but once again, the reality of the world to Carl Schmitt, the reason we haven't seen a respite from dictatorships, bloodshed and political instability is because we are still engaged in the exact same political process we've always been engaged in...one ROOTED in intolerance...to Carl Schmitt the foundation of the political lies in a distinction between friend and enemy.

The friend enemy, self/other, us vs them distinction is probably nothing new to anybody listening to this...and to be fair it wasn't new during the time of Carl Schmitt...but the level to which Carl Schmitt defends this as the forge in which political identities are cast in makes for an extremely interesting take on what exactly is going on whenever we engage in politics. To Carl Schmitt whenever you are engaging in politics...whether you realize it or not you are necessarily positioning yourself on one side of a duality which from your perspective will always look like your friends vs your enemies. Carl Schmitt famously said show me who your enemies are and I'll show you who you are.

This is actually a reference to Hegel's views on identity. The idea is that categories of identity can't exist unless if they have an opposite that they can be contrasted with. So the way this manifests in the political realm is that you only think of your political views and your political identity in terms of how it relates to political views that are the opposite of yours. Your enemies in the friend/enemy distinction. So an example just to illustrate this concept is...you know...nobody listening to this thinks of themselves as a person that is pro-oxygen. I mean why would you. You'd be an absolute weirdo to cordon off your political identity there...I mean who thinks of themselves as a person in favor of people being able to breathe? THAT IS until a group emerges in the political landscape that holds positions that make them ANTI-oxygen. Then and only then does it become a relevant piece of your political identity to think of yourself as a pro-oxygen kind of

person. To hold a political position of any type IMPLIES the existence of a group that disagrees with you. To Carl Schmitt to engage in the political at all implies this friend/enemy distinction. The philosopher Leo Strauss summarized his views in a way that Schmitt approved of...he said:

"Because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs dominion. But dominion can be established, that is, men can be unified only in a unity against—against other men. Every association of men is necessarily a separation from other men ... the political thus understood is not the constitutive principle of the state, of order, but a condition of the state."

When you look at politics in this way it makes the Liberal political process start to seem kind of silly...and this is another hallmark of Liberal thinking that Carl Schmitt thinks is a utopian fantasy world. The hope of Liberalism is a world of internationalism, acceptance of the other, toleration of different cultures, shaking hands and agreeing to disagree. Schmitt says no...Liberalism and democracy directly contradict each other...because unless if you are actually somebody that's calling for the formation of a one world government...you are at some level making a distinction between friend and enemy. Look at your views closely enough...there is some group of people who's interests, if it came down to it, matter more to you than some other group's interests. You can't have a democracy grounded in the idea that the citizens are going to vote along the lines that are best for their society without at some level making a friend/enemy distinction. To Carl Schmitt this is the essence of the political. The political realm is a violent ongoing process of friends banding together and going to war with their enemies capturing territory...whether that war is on a physical battlefield or in the halls of parliament...whether that territory that's captured is earth and water or control over the state...Liberalism allows for the illusion of multiculturalism and tolerance...when the reality of the world is that we're only going to be multicultural and tolerant as long as you mostly agree with us. Because when faced with enough difference from Liberal

ideas...when faced with the TRUE essence of the political...when it REALLY COMES DOWN TO IT...Liberalism gets thrown out the window as well.

This is why Carl Schmitt thinks Liberalism doesn't do what it claims to do. Liberalism doesn't provide an alternative, more peaceful way of engaging in the political process...Liberalism allows people to AVOID the political process altogether and further allows the political to operate covertly behind the scenes while politicians galavant around in the political theater of rational debate without really ever solving anything.

See this is the other side of this that we still need to talk about...because for all the analysis of Liberalism that Carl Schmitt has offered so far...what we really haven't talked about yet is: why is any of this stuff a bad thing? The political process is still going on in spite of Liberalism. I mean, let's say Liberalism failed at what it set out to do...let's say it is not an alternative political process but just a bunch of window dressing that makes us feel good...well, it still makes us feel good right? What's so wrong about that?

To Carl Schmitt if you were making a list of all the failures of Liberalism...this may be the biggest one of all. Liberalism allows people to feel good about the political process when the world around them may actually be burning to the ground. Liberalism has created a world where more so than at any other point in history people can be completely apathetic about the political reality that they live in. See at many other points in history if there was a political situation going on in the world that was unfavorable for you... there was at LEAST a sense of obligation you were going to feel for finding some manner of recourse. For Carl Schmitt what Liberalism DOES is give people the ability to disconnect themselves from the political, oh politics? Well that's something that goes on in that creepy building way on the other side of town...I don't really get involved in all that. What I'm going to do is just live my life and leave all the debating about politics to the politicians...to Carl Schmitt the grand illusion of Liberalism, that politics is a normitized, peaceful process of finding ways to compromise with each other...that

illusion gives people the luxury of being able to not pay attention to or care about politics at all...when in reality this isn't a luxury at all...and they are just as much at the mercy of the political as they ever have been.

Carl Schmitt would want us to consider just what type of person this level of political apathy creates. He says that for someone that has voluntarily removed themselves from the political process...life in one of our modern societies sort of defaults to a life of being a passive spectator that just consumes stuff. With no political cause to feel a part of...when you're not part of the process of CREATING the political reality you're living in your life becomes that of a spectator...watching the world pass you by on TV screens...spending all day watching TV shows, movies and video games of fantasy worlds while you live in a fantasy world of your own...watching the Liberal soap opera of people in suits arguing about mostly insignificant issues buying IN to the story that you're told that this is all working really well...that you should feel GRATEFUL for your life as a passive spectator...that in the name of Liberal multiculturalism and tolerance you should not feel so connected to a strong political identity, religious identity or national identity...you should think of yourself MORE in terms of your identity as a global consumer...the reality of who you are in modern Liberal societies is actually more connected to BUYING stuff than DOING stuff.

To Carl Schmitt the promises of Liberalism often ROB people of their political identity. This crisis of identity is in many ways the political equivalent of Nietzsche's famous claim God is Dead. So as most people listening to this already know when Nietzsche writes those words God is Dead he is referring to an emerging world... where there is going to be a crisis of identity because people are no longer going to have automatic access to a strong religious identity that they can feel connected to. Now when Nietzsche writes this he is saying it with a bit of an ominous tone...because he realized that when this extremely important piece of people's identity was no longer going to be in the picture...that void within people that religious identity used to occupy was not just going

to disappear. How were people going to respond? Carl Schmitt would want us to consider what it was like to be a citizen of one of these modern Liberal societies in the early 20th century...Liberalism in his view has asked people to give up their political, religious and national identities and replace them instead with the Liberal identity of multicultural globalism. Much like Nietzsche, Carl Schmitt would talk about this phenomena with an ominous tone...because he understood how important these types of identity can be to people. Part of living a fulfilling life as a human being is feeling like you're a part of something...feeling like you have some say in the way the world is unfolding around you. The founders of Liberalism saw that it was often THESE points of identity that led to wars and instability, so in the interest of making a better world they set up a blockade to make it more difficult for people to take these traditional paths to feeling part of something greater than themselves. But Carl Schmitt would say this is a tragic mistake by Liberalism...to deny these aspects of existence is to deny something extremely important about what it even is to be human. Just like in the time of Nietzsche...this crisis of identity is not just going to disappear...people are going to fill it in with something. The question becomes: what will that something be that people can feel like they're a part of?

Nietzsche actually explicitly predicts a massive increase in political and nationalist fanaticism to come onto the scene at the beginning of the 20th century...which was precisely the story that unfolded during the early 20th century. This is in many ways the story of Carl Schmitt. Carl Schmitt was an unabashed, anti-semitic Nazi who supported fascism. Carl Schmitt believed Fascism could be a prudent and intelligent political strategy given the right circumstances...he felt this way for many different reasons and understanding his rationale for supporting Fascism will be necessary knowledge to have if we want to understand the philosophical underpinnings of people's political moves all the way up to the present day.

See it's easy to assume that anyone and everyone who could possibly support a fascist

approach to political strategy must have been evil beyond all comprehension. But the more inconvenient and unnerving reality is that there are actually reasons Fascism emerged at the time that it did in the western world...there's a reason why early 20th century political discussions are centered around three primary approaches: democracy, Marxism and Fascism. Why did people living during this time think that Fascism was not only a viable political strategy, but the future of political philosophy?

The answer to this question comes only after understanding Carl Schmitt's critiques of Liberalism that have been laid out so far. For all of the reasons already expressed and more...the bottom line is Carl Schmitt believes that Liberalism just produces weak societies. Liberal societies lack identity and thus are far weaker than societies that HAVE a strong sense of identity. We can at least understand how Carl Schmitt sees this happening...remember in his view Liberalism incentivizes inaction and complacency...Liberalism produces weak people that generally tend to be more politically uninformed or apathetic simply because they CAN be...Liberalism produces a world where even for the people that WANT to be involved in politics...there cannot be legitimate markers of political communities because within Liberal societies everybody is supposed to be holding hands in a circle singing songs of acceptance with their political opposition.

Remember to be engaged in the political for Schmitt is to stand on one side of a friend enemy distinction...well if the whole goal of your society is multiculturalism and tolerance...that makes it EXTREMELY difficult if not impossible to really ever make a substantive friend/enemy distinction. Liberalism in this way undermines the formation of political communities and this dynamic when played out over the course of decades and centuries eventually produces societies that to Carl Schmitt...really don't stand for anything. See historically countries would have something that they STOOD for...the citizens of those countries when faced with something that threatened what they believed in they would defend themselves...they'd be willing to fight and die for the cause. The

natural endgame for Liberal societies is a population of people that are faced with a political enemy and are like eh, I disagree...but I'm not ready to go and get on a boat and die for something like this...Game of Thrones season 12 starts next week.

This is the archetype of what a human being looks like in a modern liberal society.

Devoid of any strong religious, political or national identity surrounded by a society that is terrified of the reality of the political process and so as to avoid the political denies the existence of any political identity as it goes around shaking hands with all the other countries telling everyone how super duper tolerant they are hoping nobody sees through that thin veneer to the intolerance just under the surface. This is a weak society in the eyes of Carl Schmitt filled with citizens who cannot be effectively emboldened towards political action because they are so disconnected from what is going on in the world they don't know who THEY are...they don't even know who their ENEMIES are.

This is a sentiment expressed in Hobbes's Leviathan. When carrying out their end of the bargain in a Social Contract part of the job of the sovereign, part of what makes a state legitimate at all is when the sovereign has the ability to protect the members of the state and their political identities. When a sovereign can no longer do that...the social contract is void. But what if the members of a state don't HAVE a political identity to protect? What happens...what does the sovereign protect? This is what Carl Schmitt is worried about...Liberalism for its own reasons wants to do away with the sovereign and rob people of their political identity...what does this mean for the future of our modern liberal societies?

Well there's the old cliché...if you don't stand for something you fall for anything. To Carl Schmitt...these weak Liberal societies that lack a sovereign and lack an identity to protect are essentially just sitting on their hands waiting around for a group that HAS a strong sense of identity to come along and impose THEIR will and identity onto the people with their anemic sense of purpose. This group that HAS a strong sense of identity could accomplish this in a number of different ways...they could insinuate themselves into the

Liberal political process, get elected to office and slowly use the tools at their disposal to fundamentally change the country...they could invade militarily...though that's probably a little old fashioned...think about it: if any group could manage to get elected to a high level of political office...the only thing it would really take is a state of emergency for that group to be able to assume the role of the sovereign in the name of protecting the constitution. Well imagine you're one of these groups...you want to go full authoritarian on everybody...what if you could just CONVINCED the population that there was an emergency going on? There really doesn't even need to BE an emergency if you are persuasive enough.

Carl Schmitt thought that people living in liberal societies are sitting ducks just waiting around for things like this to occur. Carl Schmitt thought an extremely under-developed portion of political philosophy was who gets to decide one of these states of exception and why. Who gets to decide when a leader can make an exception when it comes to the rule of law and the constitution and on what grounds do they make that decision? This is a question that political philosophy has been oddly silent about since the formation of Liberalism...probably because we didn't even want to entertain the possibility that a dictator would ever be able to transcend these norms and rules we were trying to hold them to...but taboo towards the idea of a dictator or not, Carl Schmitt thinks they are all around us in hiding...some in plain sight...and we should be having a more serious conversation in our modern world about who or what gets to decide the exception.

But anyway the possibility of an authoritarian group co-opting a weakened Liberal society and imposing their will was practically an inevitability to Carl Schmitt. Societies that refuse to acknowledge the essence of the political as friend/enemy distinctions will never know who their friends or their enemies are and are destined to get taken over politically. This is the set of assumptions that serve as a foundation when political philosophers start making a case for Fascism. So if you're someone that doesn't care about Liberal values...Fascism starts to seem like it's that far of a stretch. The idea is that

societies ALWAYS have an authoritarian element to them or else they're too weak to handle real any problems...societies NEED something that they stand for or else they'll fall for anything...societies that don't avoid the political process and KNOW who their friends and enemies are don't waste a bunch of time in gridlock debating the issues. When you reject Liberal principles...Fascism just becomes what a lot of different groups land on...the strategy basically being that the best defense is a good offense. Because if you are the group that is imposing your will on the groups around you...then at least you know you're not the group that's getting imposed upon.

There are a lot of different theories for why Fascism emerged during the time that it did in the early 20th century...but at least when it comes to Carl Schmitt's brand of support many would say this level of skepticism towards the gospel of Liberalism comes as a reaction to the litany of promises that the enlightenment has failed to make into a reality. Liberalism becomes a mangled form of political theology. Their blind faith in normative parameters like the constitution when these parameters don't actually remove our need for a sovereign...blind faith in an open forum of rational discussion when in practice major decisions are always made by a handful of people...committees comprised of senior members of political parties...Carl Schmitt would say that when you truly consider the level of variance between the promises of Liberalism and the reality of the political landscape...how can anyone take it seriously when Liberalism promises to produce a more peaceful world for people? When it really comes down to it how is Liberalism any different than most other aggressive, alternative takes on how we should all be doing things?

One really interesting thing that political philosophers have talked about over the years is the possibility that Liberalism if it were to achieve a level of total global cultural hegemony would eventually eliminate Fascism, remove the need for friend enemy distinctions altogether and make going to war for political or religious reasons an incredibly rare thing, almost non-existent. Then again how would it be different if we

forcefully imposed ANY homogenous system of thought? Some would say that the world uniting under the flag of Liberalism, tolerance, multiculturalism...this would usher in an unprecedented era of world peace and economic prosperity. Some would say that is the VERY DEFINITION of Fascism. To say that the path to world peace is we just gotta get everybody to just with me! Then we'll be fiine!

Whether there's a right or wrong way of looking at a global hegemony of Liberalism, Carl Schmitt would say it really doesn't matter...because you don't want to be living in that world anyway. Might seem like a luxury at first to never have to engage in politics...but he would say really play your life out as one of those rootless, ever-consuming spectators...really think about how it would feel to live every day of your life utterly disconnected from the creation of the world you live in and ask yourself if that is really the kind of world that you want to be living in.

Consequences of Reason

Episode #134

This is a transcript of episode #134 on The Consequences of Reason. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So this disagreement that defines the state of the philosophical landscape in the early 20th century: we've called it a lot of different things on this show. Nature vs Culture. Modernity vs Postmodernity. Objectivity vs inter-subjectivity.... Well one thing about this debate if it's not entirely obvious by this point on this show is that understanding the perspectives that are positioned on either side of this debate is absolutely crucial not only for understanding 20th century political philosophy, but even for understanding the world you're living in today...for understanding the smallest things...the philosophical underpinnings for many of the arguments you might see when you turn on the news. We've talked about bits and pieces of this debate for a long time on this show and it's high time there's an episode you can point people to that goes into a bit of detail about this aspect of modern discourse...something that talks about WHY the climate of the early 20th century was filled with philosophers that had such a strong level of dissatisfaction with the legacy of the Enlightenment. That is: rationality, individualism and the scientific method as THE primary way of arriving at truth about things. Because this whole state of affairs can start to seem pretty confusing to reasonable people...I mean, how could any serious person ever be anti-science? Look at the understanding of the natural world science has produced. Look at how it's let us manipulate and wield the otherwise chaos of the natural world to the benefit of human beings. Look at all the different ways every day that you USE the great things science has produced...and what you're just against that system...you're dissatisfied with the thing that made those things possible? Look at all the things rationality has produced...I mean open up a history book. Thousands of years of religious dogma gone...to be anti science and rationality can seem to some like you're being anti human. Or just pro- some other dogma that you want to impose on people. But an interesting place to get started with this conversation is that

the OTHER side of the debate, the ones skeptical of the tasks of the Enlightenment...they would ALSO see themselves as pro-science and anti dogma. There's of course an end to this story we're telling today about our history of using rationality as our guide, but this is the place I want to begin and the story starts in the late 19th century with the philosopher Nietzsche and some things he had to say about what the attitudes of philosophers were at the founding of the Enlightenment. So...some quick historical context: the beginning of the Enlightenment is often cited as the moment when Kant releases his famous essay titled What is Enlightenment? We have an episode on it...Kant famously describes Enlightenment as man's removal of his self incurred tutelage. What he's referring to is the tutelage of thousands of years of religious dogma. Later on in the essay he CHALLENGES the thinkers of his time to "dare to know" or "dare to think for yourselves" for once...in other words, we need another way OTHER than religious faith to be able to arrive at the truth about things, because faith, from these thinker's perspectives has caused us a lot of problems historically. Well the thinkers of the time take a look around them, look at all the available options and collectively decide to double down on reason instead of faith. This is the age of reason. This is the use of rational categories to make sense of things, proportioning our belief to the evidence, the political systems of the time take a strong turn towards the individual subject and mutually beneficial social contracts as opposed to teleologies or strict "roles" that people are supposed to play in a society. This whole strategy seemed extremely reasonable at the time. Ironically later philosophers would lament that that was EXACTLY what was wrong with the strategy...that it seemed reasonable at the time. But we'll get to that. Nietzsche looks back on this moment in history and sees what the philosophers of the time did as an absolutely giant missed opportunity. Because, he says, hypothetically this was a moment when philosophers could have realized that one of the biggest problems with those faith based views of the world centered around the idea of religious certainty...was certainty. What these thinkers DID, Nietzsche says, is throw out the religious certainty that caused them so many problems in the past and just changed the criteria for what makes something certain. RATIONALITY is now our path to certainty.

They replaced one dogma with another dogma. So what happened was with each progressive classical rationalist philosopher doing their work... we seemed to be coming to terms with how everything in the universe fit neatly into rational categories. We were FINALLY understanding the truth after all those years. With every progressive scientific experiment that was UNDENIABLY bringing us an understanding of the natural world that improved the lives of people...how could any reasonable person say that the process of science wasn't accessing something of the TRUTH about reality. But then hundreds of years go by...and as the goals of the Enlightenment are played out, problems start to arise and this dynamic starts to produce philosophers that want to understand the limitations of classical rational thought. One of the first major ones that gives rise to this trend was Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard has a quote and I'm paraphrasing here, but he says here are all these philosophers and scientists of his time that understand the deepest levels of reality and existence...and here he is and he can't even understand Abraham. What he's saying is science and rationality during his time is supposedly producing some of the most comprehensive understanding of reality that we've ever had...but when it comes to certain aspects of what it means to be a human being...rationality just can not help you, it's not a useful tool in that context. So many things about your life on an every day level...human existence is FILLED with paradox. There are times in our lives, and he gives examples from the life of Abraham, there are times when continuing to live in the FACE of that paradox...REQUIRES irrationality. Kierkegaard thinks this irrationality is an important part of our existence...JUST AS IMPORTANT as rationality...and if you ever tried to swear off irrationality completely and make purely rational choices all the time...you'd be left in a state of total paralysis. Maybe a good metaphor for this is to think what it would be like to look at the contents of a book that tried to tell you in 300 pages... how to be a person...a field manual for life. Better yet, picture having a book that is supposed to tell you how to raise a child...right? You open it up... and it's filled with math equations, syllogisms, geometric breakdowns of the nursery...for anyone that's ever actually raised a child before...you know how tremendously oversimplified something like that would HAVE to be. Now, the intent of the author may have been to arrive at a

NEW level of certainty about raising our children...you know, let's dare to think for ourselves! Remove ourselves from the tutelage of the parenting dogma of the past...but the best intentions in the world don't change the fact that there is something missing there. There is something about being a human being that's lost when we're using purely using rational analysis to try to explain it. More than that...no matter how much scientific progress we are making...the tools we use to catalog that scientific data...the means of analysis aren't even remotely similar to the way we experience reality. Perfect example to describe this phenomena used in the work of Professor Lloyd Kramer. So take time for example. There's this thing about the universe that we call time. We want to use rational analysis to understand it better. So we measure it, record and study it through the use of tools of rational analysis called clocks. Now for a clock...seconds are uniform. 60 seconds in a minute. 60 minutes in an hour. So on and so forth. Time...when viewed purely through the lens of rational analysis...looks like that. But what is our actual, human experience of time? Well sometimes... time flies. Sometimes a few seconds of something agonizing can feel like an hour. The point is: when it comes to understanding the universe clocks might be the ultimate tool, but when it comes to understanding aspects of our human experience of the universe...the tool of rational analysis just cannot tell the full story. So Kierkegaard becomes a symbol for a fracture in this idea...that starts to seem like a pretty extreme idea that rationality is going to be able to provide us with an exhaustive understanding of everything, but people might argue back to that...look, maybe there are things about being a person that aren't entirely rational...but informing every decision you make shouldn't be the GOAL of rationality anyway. The truth that science gives us about the natural world...THAT'S the goal here. THAT'S the thing we have certain access to through reason. Rationality is going to give you the most accurate information about how things are that's available...and then it's YOUR job to go out and actually DO something with that information. Well Kierkegaard was just the beginning. This critical look at reason that would eventually lead to the malaise of the early 20th century began to be critical of the scientific method as well...more specifically a few important questions...when we arrive at a scientific understanding about

something...and that understanding allows us to manipulate the natural world to benefit people...can we say that science is accessing the objective, TRUTH of reality? What I mean is: can we say... that science is at least IN SOME WAY communicating with SOME intrinsic structure of the universe? After all, why would it be so repeatable in a lab setting if it weren't? Sure, maybe our understanding of it isn't exhaustive, we still have many more years ahead of us to conduct more science...but there must at least be SOMETHING about the truth that we're touching there. But on the other hand when philosophers started asking these questions about what we're REALLY doing when we conduct science...what they started to realize is that there are aspects of science that are inextricably relative to the culture the science is produced in. The best way I've ever seen this dynamic explained is by the philosopher Richard Rorty...so I'll try to summarize his main points the best I can: think of the birth, existence and reproduction of scientific ideas the same way you would think about the birth, existence and reproduction of species in terms of Natural Selection. So for thousands of years it was believed that the universe was designed by a Grand Designer...and there were many arguments philosophers had for this...not the least of which was just LOOK AROUND. How convenient that I drink water and there's water around. That I exist in this very small range of temperatures and weather patterns, and that's exactly what the world is around me. The point was: How could you NOT THINK this was a celestial hamster cage designed with your survival in mind? For thousands of years THAT WAS THE DEFAULT...sure, you had the sporadic thinker that came along and questioned it, but the onus was on THEM to prove why this theory had any merit that was so contrary to our deepest intuitions about reality. Well you know the story: Natural Selection offered an alternative...this was a theory that explained how things could SEEM perfectly designed for the environments they were in, but the reality was just that all the beings that DIDN'T correspond with the environment died before reproducing. Well scientific ideas exist in an environment as well. That is, the set of scientific and cultural biases that they were produced in. The scientific theories that correspond with these biases subsist, they're rewarded with tenure, they may manage to reproduce. There's a sense in which if

a slightly different culture had come to pass...the way we scientifically understand things would change as well. There's a sense in which if a COMPLETELY different culture had come to pass...just as different creatures would have been able to gain tenure in a changed environment...a completely different way of scientifically categorizing the world could have emerged. So this in no way takes away from the utility of scientific ideas, but this does start to raise a very important question to the thinkers during the late 19th century...Rorty puts it this way:"Are the longest lasting and most frequently relied upon theories stable because they match a stable reality? Or because scientists get together to keep them stable, as politicians get together to keep existing political arrangements intact?"The answer to this question makes a giant difference when it comes to how you view the findings of science. The difference the answer to this question makes is actually very similar to the way postmodernity looked at the history of philosophy in our series on Gilles Deleuze. What is philosophy? Well it's not an act of discovery...it's an act of creation. In other words, philosophers when doing their work are not discovering the intrinsic structure of the universe...reality is far too chaotic to ever be able to do that...the more accurate analysis of what's going on would be that philosophy is an act of creation...philosophers create systems of concepts to give us one VERSION of reality...one perspective that might be useful.Well a very similar charge is being leveled here about the history of science. Science is not DISCOVERING and ACCESSING the intrinsic structure of the universe...science is CREATING one version of understanding what we have access to...and this understanding is ALWAYS relative to the perspective of the observer which is ALWAYS a person... who is also embedded in a set of cultural biases and a current set of presuppositions that the science of their time accepts and proceeds from.So if you're a philosopher in the early 20th century that happens to see science in this way...the impact this has on how you view essentially the last 200 years of western democracy becomes horrifying. Because they instantly realize that this problem they have with science is in actuality a problem with reason itself.So at this point in the story Rationality itself starts comes under fire...and some of these critiques are actually reworkings of OLDER critiques of reason...for example Edmund Burke spoke several

times about how when it comes to the progression of human thought, but more specifically when it comes to how we should structure societies...you never want to fully commit your strategy to Rational analysis. He gives many reasons not to but one of the big ones he would say is that...look, when you decide you're going to determine which thoughts are legitimate or not based on purely rational analysis...what you see when you actually put that into practice is that you can basically find a way to rationalize anything. Look no further than your own personal life for proof of this fact. How many times have you reasoned to a conclusion about something and still been wrong? Maybe you know somebody who made a big mistake in their life and after the fact they thought about what happened and they've found a million ways to rationalize it to themselves and others and it all makes perfect sense to everyone...but nonetheless its obvious to everyone that they've still made a huge mistake. See this is an important distinction to draw about rational analysis. When it comes to your personal life if you decide to take a purely rational approach to something and end up with problems it's no big deal. You're only hurting yourself. But on a societal level SHOULD we be using a purely rational approach when it comes to determining the legitimacy of thoughts? The bigger question that concerns this debate between these two groups: should thoughts be considered to be accessing the intrinsic structure of the universe simply because they correspond with human reason? Human reason is always doing its work within the parameters of human ignorance. And that, human...that's omnipresent throughout this whole process...is always subject... to cultural limitations. Just like we experience time and it's not like we're a bunch of giant clocks walking around...our experience of time is relative to the perspective of the observer...here are philosophers in the early 20th century saying that reason...and the criteria for what makes something reasonable or not are ALSO relative to the observer. Now it should be said: NOBODY...not EITHER SIDE...is trying to do away with reason. Nobody's trying to do away with science. They're trying to do away with what they see as dogma or the idea that what reason and science provides is access to certainty. This is why Nietzsche thought people like Kant at the beginning of the Enlightenment missed a big opportunity...that could've been the moment... when they

realized that certainty about things... shouldn't have ever been the goal in the first place. We should VALUE reason, we should VALUE science...but not deify them...we should understand them for what they are: they're not discovering anything...they're CREATING something. That subtle distinction may not seem like much, but it actually has massive effects on how things play out in the world...and this is ultimately why people CARE so much. Because if you're one of the philosophers in the early 20th century that thinks reason and science are relative to the culture they are conducted in and NOT objectivity...then one of the first critiques you have to have about the Enlightenment is that the Age of Reason might have been a horrifying period in history where we used Reason to justify cultural imperialism. Because when reason becomes something that's capitalized...then it becomes the standard against which every society is judged. See, to these critics...what happened at the beginning of the Enlightenment is we made this bold proclamation that the way to organize the relationship between government and citizen should be determined by reason. This marks a major shift not only in the way the western world typically structured their states, but also in how the citizen saw their role in the political process. This is the birth of the individual in modern western culture. We'll talk about it more on next episode when we go deeper into the work of Leo Struass, but essentially this is the moment when societies in the west move away from teleologies and societal roles and move instead towards rational individualism. This is yet ANOTHER criticism of the Age of Reason from around this time period...that Rationalism when applied to the political process necessarily moves thinking towards a focus on the individual...and that it's THIS SHIFT towards the individual person as the focal point that's responsible for a centuries long progression of people becoming more and more narcissistic and self centered...but again, we'll talk more about that next episode. Back to the primary point though: Rationality, to these critics, LEADS to cultural imperialism when applied at a societal level. Because if rationality is relative to the culture it's being used in...and things like rational debates are the way that we determine political legitimacy...then what the goals of the Enlightenment produce are societies that appoint themselves as judge, jury and executioner of the rest of the world based on

narrow parameters. Think about it: THEY get to decide the definition of what's "rational" or "irrational" based on their own cultural makeup...and THEN they get to slap on their world police badge and be the moral arbiter of everyone else. The rest of the world constantly under this magnifying glass of their version of Rationality...the default way to view all other cultures becomes comparing them to this Rational ideal...how much do they deviate from the ideal society that WE'VE determined the values of? THAT becomes the new question when dealing with other cultures...knowing that if any point a culture becomes TOO "irrational" in how they set up their society...Rationality can ALSO become the justification for invading. See... that's ALSO one of the problems early 20th century thinkers were starting to have with Reason. Reason as it turns out is not this sort of ahistorical, acultural objective tool for arriving at facts about things. The results of rational analysis were varying to such a large extent...societies were using the guise of reason to justify such massively different conclusions...these philosophers started to realize that David Hume may have been right all along: Hume's Fork, Hume's Guillotine as it's often called...the central thesis being that you cannot possibly derive an ought from an is. No matter how optimistic thinkers were at the beginning of the Enlightenment...no matter how much they thought Reason could eventually provide us with Objective Morality...the more that science and rationality were left to do their work...the more it became clear to these thinkers in the early 20th century that it was never going to happen. The more the political process focused on the individual and tried to use the results of science to arrive at values about how to structure our societies and how people fit into them...the more the goals of the Enlightenment were left to play out the more it became clear that when you force reason to try to come up with objective values about ANYTHING...you're doomed to failure. Because, to these thinkers, that's just not what rational analysis is capable of doing. See that's the problem here...Rational analysis can CREATE values...because rational analysis always has cultural values embedded into it...but in order to justify any sort of values it needs to use the results of science...and modern science HAS to assume value neutrality. This became a big problem for modernity. This became the fate of science in the early 20th century political

landscape. Science cannot provide us with any values on its own...the only thing it can do is serve as a tool... to justify values that are smuggled into it by culture...all while wearing that costume of value neutrality. This will be another thing we expand on moving forward with our series on 20th century political philosophy...the goal of this episode is to put you in the shoes of one of these early 20th century political thinkers and understand WHY so many of them were having such a problem with the legacy of the Enlightenment. Despite having not put out an episode in a while...I'm actually pretty deep into the writing phase of this entire series...that front loaded work is actually WHY I haven't put something out for a while; not my health for once. So that's good news, I guess. But I just wanted to say that when I considered trying to tie together a cohesive story of where we're going over the century...I felt this episode was necessary. Maybe the best place to end today is back in Ancient Greece. You know...this tension between postmodernity and modernity just saturates our modern discourse. Seems like you can't turn on any form of media for more than five minutes without being faced with some reminder of this battle that's going on. It's actually pretty amazing to see...think of how lucky you are that at any moment you can turn on a screen and watch two people argue with each other that are living in completely different universes. Pretty cool stuff, and this battle is often cited by people in the media as a bad thing for society. They say this is a sign we're living in some pretty dark times. Some people go so far as to say this is a catastrophe...the likes of which the world has never seen. When people can't even agree on some of the most basic ideas that make up their world views...how can we even have a conversation with each other? Could this series of disagreements spell the end of Western Civilization? Some people may say yes. There are a lot of philosophers out there who would say no. This isn't the end of the world. This isn't some unprecedented existential threat...this isn't even a new disagreement between people. Remember in Plato's dialogues back in the Athenian Agora...this battle was going on between heavyweights in the western world all the way back then. One corner you had Protagoras, Godfather of relativism, Man is the measure of all things, the other corner you had Socrates, largely a mouthpiece for Plato's ideas but him arguing for the idea that No, there MUST BE some sort of intrinsic structure to the

universe that we can access...and rational debate is the absolute best tool we have to get there. Some philosophers would say that this argument is nothing new...this has been going on for thousands of years. This very well may be one of those debates that will NEVER have a winner. This may be one of those questions that causes arguments on the news for as long as humanity's around to have news programs to argue on. Cultures will ebb and flow with any one time period's answer to this question. One side of this may win out for a while...we may have a long period where we believe in the power of FAITH to arrive at the objective truth...or the power of REASON to arrive at the objective. The OTHER side may win out for a while...we may have long periods of historicism, relativism, nihilism. Some philosophers would say there are pros and cons to EITHER side gaining a greater level of cultural control and that we should just try to understand the times we're living in. The point is: some would say that there are many things that may sink the ship of Western Civilization...but this is not going to be it. People have been arguing about this stuff in one form or another for thousands of years...maybe cultures DO ebb and flow in their answers to this question...and maybe if the popular view is that we are currently embroiled in a culture of rampant subjectivity and relativism...maybe the thing we should all be looking out for is: what will be the NEXT THING to stake its claim to the objective truth?

Leo Strauss - Ancients vs. Moderns

Episode #135

This is a transcript of episode #135 on Leo Strauss. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So picking up from where we left off last episode...there's a strong contingency of philosophers living in the early 20th century that have grown increasingly dissatisfied with rationality as a guide for arriving at certainty about things. They feel this way for a number of different reasons... but it should be emphasized that their critique of rationality was not the only side of the story here. Like any good philosophical critique... sometimes questioning something can't offer a sense of clarity for any real length of time...sometimes when the critique is good enough...when we ask questions...it just leads us to more questions. This was definitely the case in the early 20th century...you know...speaking of strong contingencies there's ALSO gotta be a strong contingency of people listening to the last episode of the show...living as the beneficiaries of the last 100 years of human thought...who found themselves a little frustrated with the critique of rational analysis overall. There must be some people out there who are willing to ask the extremely VALID question: what are we even supposed to DO with any of this information. This person might say: Look, I hear all your criticisms of rationality, and lets SAY, for the sake of the conversation, let's say that EVERYTHING you're saying is an amazing point that needs to be taken into consideration...well don't we still need to have a working arrangement with the reality we live in? Don't we still need SOME METHOD of determining what's going on vs what's NOT going on? What's the plan? I mean, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to throw out rationalism now? Buy everyone a magic 8 ball and say "start shakin' everybody!" What's the plan here? Not to mention, let's look at the entire basis of your critique of rationality for a second here...uh, Got a few problems...I mean, for one...you're USING rational analysis...to critique...rational analysis. How you gonna reconcile that? Because that's the thing: maybe we DO run into problems the minute we try to use rationality as a tool to arrive at certainty, but none of

these criticisms has adequately made a case that reason isn't the best thing we have going for us....and they CERTAINLY haven't made a case for some alternative that's better. See if rationality is a tool that we have in our toolbox, the early 20th century wants to show us that it's not the only tool we have and it's not a universal tool that you should use for every task you have. But none of that is to say that there aren't specific areas where rational analysis isn't the best type of analysis. For example, some thinkers would come to say that maybe the most effective setting for the usage of rational analysis is at the sort of macro level of navigating the world. That in the same way in the quantum world there is a different set of rules that things seem to play by, and in response we need a different set of assumptions we proceed from in our analysis...maybe at a societal level or at points in our internal experience of things rational analysis is less useful... but it is by far the best tool we have in the middle territory between those two extremes. Here's the point: this is a baby bathwater situation here. We can't do away with reason entirely...it's proven far too effective at producing SOMETHING that's extremely useful to us. The question is what exactly is that SOMETHING it's producing and how does its production fit into discourse at large? Another problem someone might have with this whole critique is that the unintended flip side of critiquing reason... is that the enemy of my enemy unintentionally becomes my friend. What I mean is: showing the limitations of reason was for these philosophers in the early 20th century an attempt to dispel dogma...but as you can imagine... these arguments can easily become ammunition for any extremist group to drum up support for their cause, all the while not having to conform to the bounds of reason. When thinkers in the early 20th century were faced with all these questions...There were a lot of different responses. But it's important to note that virtually NONE of these responses had anything to do with throwing out reason in its entirety. When someone says something like, Rational analysis doesn't produce certainty...so let's throw it out and find something to replace it with...that person is making the SAME MISTAKE the thinkers did at the beginning of the Enlightenment when they replaced faith based certainty with rational certainty. Remember...these early 20th century thinkers weren't opponents of reason...they were opponents of dogma...and

nothing showcases that fact better than considering how hard these thinkers worked to preserve reason moving forward...and there may be NO philosopher MORE emblematic of this approach...than the early 20th century thinker... Leo Strauss. Leo Strauss was a huge fan of rational analysis...so it may seem contradictory to say that he also thought that the entire project of modernity was doomed to failure from the start. This may SEEM contradictory...but let me explain why it's not...and the story begins with his response to one of those critiques of rational analysis that we talked about last episode: the cultural contingency of reason. When people say that reason is relative to the culture that's doing the reasoning...limited to the cultural biases, limitations, the perspective of the observer, etc...when people are making that case: a common thing they'll say is, well, look at ancient Greece. What was "reasonable" in ancient Greece is MASSIVELY different than what we'd call reasonable today. Their point being that clearly rationality is not some ahistorical, acultural tool for arriving at the objective truth about things...what was rational in ancient Greece was relative to their own biases and limitations as a culture...the ultimate point being that: we're no different. Now as a fan of rational analysis, Strauss doesn't REJECT that point...instead he accepts it and he asks the question: well then what, does, that, mean... for how we should be using reason in our societies moving forward? So, a concise way to sum up Strauss's answer to this question is: the fact that reason is relative to the culture it was produced in...is not a WEAKNESS of reason at all...it's actually a strength in his eyes. Strauss thinks: Rationality is not a lost cause just because it doesn't produce certainty...what we should be doing...he thinks is using the limitations of reason to the benefit of our societies...because here's the thing, he would say: there are many...MANY different elements to building and maintaining a society, and a SINGLE approach to rationality.... may not be able to deal with all of them...different societies have different strengths and weaknesses...the rational approach of one society is going to be good at some things and bad at others...another society's approach might be good and bad at other things. He thinks our rationality...the rationality of the Enlightenment...did a lot of good... but it also has produced a lot of problems that are proving very difficult to solve simply with OUR VERSION of

rationality...Here's his idea: what if we used the societies of the past as a guide...and returned to a different TYPE of rationality that can help us solve the problems that Enlightenment rationality has produced? To start building his case here...what he'd want us to do is consider the fact that there's a lot of people in our modern world that carry some pretty over-simplified views when it comes to the idea of progress, throughout history. There's this very popular idea...that the entire history of the western world has been some sort of linear, constant progression that all culminates in this moment, right here. Societies have all built on the mistakes of the societies before them... and we are currently living in the PINNACLE of what humanity has ever achieved, now...Strauss would say: that is absolutely TRUE... when you look at it in terms of a few specific, narrow markers. For instance, and for the sake of argument, modern medicine is just far more advanced than the medicine developed during the time of the ancient Greeks. The technology we have today...is just far more advanced...the level to which we can harness and manipulate the natural world to our benefit...is just more advanced than back then. But Strauss would say if you ONLY looked at the idea of progress based on these criteria...then you're putting a very charitable, modern bias on what the word PROGRESS really means. Progress...he's going to say...is a far more complex idea than just whether you have rocket ships and stem cells. Strauss would ask do you think there are any areas of society where the rationality of Ancient Greece produced better results than our modern rationality? Well just to throw one out there to get the conversation started: how about the fact that ancient Greece produced a society... where there weren't masses of people desperately trying to find meaning? A society where it wasn't downright impossible for reasonable people to believe that their life had any sort of natural purpose that belonged to them? To feel any sort of connection to the universe or some grand design. Think of the tragic ways that people often cope with this alienation of modernity...and then Strauss would want us to consider that progress is not something that can be quantified by looking at just a few points of flourishing. Progress may be something with thousands of different components, cultures throughout the years ebbing and flowing, progressing and regressing in different ways based on what each

individual culture decided to focus their efforts on. The question Strauss would want to ask is: what has modernity focused its efforts upon...what areas are we great at, what areas are we lacking in...how did it get this way, and how might the cultures of the past help us understand ourselves better? This whole line of investigation that we're talking about...Strauss often refers to it as thinking of history in terms of a contrast between the different approaches utilized by the ancients...vs the moderns. Ancients vs. Moderns...OR another way of thinking of that same distinction that's going to be very useful to us is to think about the Ancients vs the Moderns as the IDEAL vs the REAL. Let me explain what Strauss means. When the project of modernity began...our scientific method ASSUMED value-neutrality. In other words, we assumed NOTHING about things like the origins of the universe...the purposes of things...you know, WHY a volcano is what it is doesn't really matter when conducting modern science...the job of modern science is to observe and describe WHAT there is...not why it's there...now contrast that with the ancient Greeks... who used the Aristotelean scientific method...a scientific method that assumes the existence of final causes. In other words when conducting science, and doing ANY sort of rational analysis for that matter...the ancient Greeks proceeded from the assumption that there ARE purposes to things in the universe, and that they must fit together in some sort of orderly way. Another way of putting this would be to say that the scientific method of modernity concerns itself with the REAL...it tries to assume no values and get to the bottom of the true nature of reality...whereas the scientific method of the Ancient Greeks concerns itself with accessing the IDEAL...or finding the different categories of existence and how they relate to teleologies that exist in a larger ordered universe. Moderns focused on the REAL the ancients on the IDEAL. Let's look at another example of the ancients moderns ideal real situation here... we'll start with the ancient Greeks this time. When the ancient Greeks apply their culture's version of rationality to the task of building a state...living in a universe that assumes the existence of final causes and teleologies...the RATIONAL thing to assume at that point becomes that there must be some sort of IDEAL version of a state that we can arrive at if only we reason about it long enough. From there, it's reasonable to assume,

there must be some sort of ideal STRUCTURE to that state. From there there's an ideal way to be a ruler...a government official, a warrior, an artisan...from there there's an ideal way to be a citizen of a state more generally...there's an ideal way to be a friend, to be a partner, to be a sister, there's an ideal way to be a person beyond that, if only we use rational analysis to look at it closely enough. Now, when someone is BORN into one of these societies...when they're growing up and learn about the way the universe is...they INSTANTLY have a couple dozen ideals of purpose that they can be striving towards...and by ideal the Greeks didn't mean some sort of transcendent thing where you'll start glowing once you finally reach it...no, you're NEVER going to reach these ideals...and that's not the point anyway...the point of these ideals was to serve as moral sages for people and societies to strive towards. So even though they talked about things like ideal societies, or rulers or even something like being an ideal friend...nobody REALLY thought they were ever going to achieve the IDEAL society one day....the point... was that society itself... was structured around virtue. We have these ideals that we will never actually reach, but we will nonetheless try our best every day to get as close as we possibly can to them. The point of these ideals, Strauss tells us, was the process...and this process was in many ways a governing influence for ancient Greece. Contrast this with the value-neutrality of modernity. When the project of modernity begins and the gauntlet of the Enlightenment is thrown down...we start structuring our societies around the idea of rational individual self-interest. In other words..once modernity comes around...we are no longer gonna be structuring our societies around virtue...we're no longer aiming for some ideal society or some ideal citizen OF that society. We don't believe in final causes anymore...so instead of trying to construct an ideal state...we decide we want to create what you could call a "REAL" state...REAL in the sense that it's something we can ACTUALLY design and implement...and then put systems in place that ensure it will stay that way. When you have people constantly striving to be the best ruler or citizen they possibly can...things can take care of themselves most of the time...but modernity didn't have that luxury...when you assume no values written into the universe and then build your

political system from there...you need to construct safeguards like the legal system and constitutions to ensure that even when you DON'T have a virtuous ruler or citizenry...the society still will exist at a certain standard. To create things like a legal system or a constitution without assuming any values written into the cosmos required modernity to base this new political tradition on the rational, self-interest of the individual. People no longer fall into a clear role or ideal within the structure of a society...no, people are individuals now...when I decide to participate as a citizen in a society... I'm not doing that because, you know, man is a political animal at the level of the universe..when I decide to be in coalition with other individuals I do so solely because it benefits me to, it is in my rational self-interest to be a part of society. Strauss would say that this political strategy of modernity has proven to be a giant mistake for western civilization. Because the problem with assuming value-neutrality...and then building an entire political tradition on top of it...is that the political realm NEEDS VALUES to be able to make decisions about things...things like how should our society be? How should we treat our citizens? Where is our society headed? Strauss thinks the Enlightenment leaves us with no real answers to these questions...and what eventually happens is we're left with no values and the entire project of modernity begins to consume itself. The modern political tradition cannot work the way it was designed to work if its left to play out long enough...left to play out to its natural ends...modernity will always, and unavoidably lead us to Strauss's collection of a bunch of really bad isms that we ultimately need to look to for our values.Modernity eventually always leads to either relativism...or meaning being something that is entirely relative, which doesn't give political institutions much guidance...historicism...or meaning being derived from whatever historical context we happen to be in...scientism or meaning being deferred to the sciences...economism or meaning coming from economic matters...or lastly Nihilism...which in casual conversation may look like someone drinking themselves to sleep every night...in THIS context it just goes one step further...if there is no intrinsic meaning to anything in the universe...then hings STILL seem to have meaning to us in the world...where does that meaning come from? Power dynamics for Nihilism...when you control the discourse

surrounding a topic you control the meaning that surrounds that topic. These five things: relativism, historicism, scientism, economism and nihilism are the endgame for modernity...every single time for Strauss. When you try to build a political tradition on top of a foundation where you've tried to be entirely value neutral...the Enlightenment political tradition eventually HAS TO consume itself. Which can make you wonder why this new political tradition has lasted as long as it has without devolving into relativism all the way back in the 1700s....Strauss would say the only reason it's lasted THIS long...is because we initially carried over an enormous amount of baggage from the days where we believed in teleologies and final causes, from the days when values were POSSIBLE in a political tradition...but if you leave modernity to it's own devices...given enough time to play out...these five isms and all of the political turmoil that spawned out of them in the early 20th century was ALWAYS going to be the outcome. See, to Strauss, even things that masquerade as enlightenment political values always lead to this outcome...take Enlightenment era Liberalism for instance....Strauss would say it is no coincidence...that modern liberalism has an ethos where it aims towards multiculturalism and acceptance of all ideas no matter how outside the box they are...and the fact that relativism was the ultimate destination for the modern political process. The liberalism of the Enlightenment, to Strauss, inextricably LEADS to relativism...which then leads to different forms of Nihilism...not the least of which may in some extreme cases lead to Tyranny. He makes a case that the agenda of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany in many ways is an expression of the thought of the Enlightenment...because similar TO the Enlightenment their chief aim was to do away with the existing traditions and values and replace them instead with a power structure under which the universe could be controlled...or at least SEEM to be controlled. The ultimate point is that political institutions NEED values in order to make decisions...and because of this fact...to Strauss, the relativism of modernity can not ever last for very long, or else that relativistic void where there are no values...will come to be replaced by something. Whether that something is Nazi Germany or a value system that WE decide to implement...is really up to us. This is WHY Strauss thinks the solution is to return to a political process that more

resembles the one devised by the ancient Greeks...a political process embedded with values that can actually inform us as to how society should be structured...and how citizens should fit into that society. This is an example, Strauss thinks, of how the rational approach of the ancients did something a LOT MORE EFFECTIVELY than the rational approach of the moderns. Maybe it's time we start looking at OTHER FORMS of rationality to find solutions to the problems OUR VERSION of rationality has caused. Strauss talks at one point about how in one reading of Plato...the Greeks seem to have been fully aware of the possibility of the experiment of the Enlightenment...and they seem to have been fully aware as to how it would all play out...he says at one point Plato seriously considers implementing something extremely similar to our modern scientific method...but ultimately decides against it because the end result would be that it would rob human beings of their identity and values. The trade off just wasn't worth it to Plato. The most important question we need to answer at the beginning of the 20th century...is what do we base the values of our political system upon....what Leo Strauss is ultimately saying is: when you pay attention to answers Modernity is ACTUALLY giving us to this question...the silence is deafening. We may have made tons of progress in Agricultural science so that far fewer people need to go hungry...but we shouldn't stand by satisfied with scientific progress... while the entire western world lives through the greatest famine to date when it comes to meaning and values. More generally than that though...what good is having all the bombs, tanks and artillery in the world if you have no values to direct how they should be used? You're just waiting for a third party to step in and impose it's values and use that destructive power however they deem fit. Strauss would say this political landscape at the beginning of the 20th century, the situation modernity has created for us...is primed for nationalism. We'll see how that plays out. But at the center of this whole discussion is this classic Strauss divide between the ancients and the moderns. Societies focused on the ideal...vs societies focused on the real. You may wonder why someone so interested in the political realm spent so much of his time engaging in philosophy. Well if you asked Strauss what the value of philosophy was...like a lot of his world view, he's wouldn't be satisfied by the answers that have been

given to us by modernity...and he thinks there is a lot of clarity to be found by going back and seeing how the ancients would have answered that same question. Philosophy, during the time of the ancients, was not seen as an academic institution. There were no multi-volume sets to be read...there were no terms to memorize...philosophy all the way back then...was a way of life. Philosophy was an attitude towards your disposition as a human being. Being a philosopher wasn't about the degrees hanging on your wall or sounding smart at parties...being a philosopher was about a quest that you were on. Strauss wants us to consider...what exactly was that quest that philosophers used to be on? What were they trying to accomplish by conducting philosophy? The answer Strauss gives is that during the time of the ancients philosophers used to be on a quest to discover knowledge...of the whole...as opposed to knowledge of individual particular things. Philosophers don't much care about particulars...they care about categories of things and how those categories relate to the whole. Now...as we talked about...the Greeks...were extremely skeptical of humanities ability to ever be able to arrive at knowledge of the whole. Knowledge of the whole is the ideal that they're striving towards that they're never going to get to...modern science...while nobody's saying that we're for sure ever going to get there...the AMBITION of modern science requires, and believes at least in theory...that knowledge of the whole is something we might just arrive at one day. This difference is in MANY WAYS THE DIFFERENCE between the ancient focus on the ideal and the modern focus on the real. The value of philosophy, to Strauss, is in the pursuit towards an ideal. In the same way other professions may strive for perfection, but have to come to accept that they will never actually reach it...philosophers live their lives in pursuit of knowledge of the whole, but to Strauss, what they will have to come to accept is that the understanding of the universe, the clarity that they want so badly...is just always going to elude them. But that shouldn't matter...says Strauss. The value of philosophy doesn't lie in the results it produces...but in the process you're engaging in. Philosophy is valuable as a way of life...because unlike every other way of life out there it requires you to resist that all too human tendency...to oversimplify, lie to yourself, make excuses, whatever you have to do to convince yourself that you've arrived at a solution

about things. Solutions...don't exist except in the minds of people that are hungry for them. Philosophy as a way of life...doesn't allow for this level of dishonesty...and to Strauss that is a big part of it's value. He says be a philosopher. Live philosophy as a way of life...but understand when it comes down to it all that really means, to live life as a philosopher, is to have a genuine awareness of the problems that surround you. But THEN what's gonna happen, he says, once you're aware of the problems...is you're naturally going to be inclined towards finding a SOLUTION to those problems. But beware of this place, he would say...because the moment you decide that your "solutions" to the problems become more real to you than your awareness of how problematic the idea of a solution REALLY IS...THAT is when you cease to be a philosopher...that's when THIS happens as he puts it: "Yet as long as there is no wisdom but only quest for wisdom, the evidence of all solutions is necessarily smaller than the evidence of the problems. Therefore the philosopher ceases to be a philosopher at the moment at which the 'subjective certainty' [quoting M. Alexandre Kojève] of a solution becomes stronger than his awareness of the problematic character of that solution. At that moment the sectarian is born. "

So picking up from where we left off last episode...there's a strong contingency of philosophers living in the early 20th century that have grown increasingly dissatisfied with rationality as a guide for arriving at certainty about things. They feel this way for a number of different reasons... but it should be emphasized that their critique of rationality was not the only side of the story here. Like any good philosophical critique... sometimes questioning something can't offer a sense of clarity for any real length of time...sometimes when the critique is good enough...when we ask questions...it just leads us to more questions.

This was definitely the case in the early 20th century...you know...speaking of strong contingencies there's ALSO gotta be a strong contingency of people listening to the last episode of the show...living as the beneficiaries of the last 100 years of human thought...who found themselves a little frustrated with the critique of rational analysis

overall. There must be some people out there who are willing to ask the extremely VALID question: what are we even supposed to DO with any of this information.

This person might say: Look, I hear all your criticisms of rationality, and lets SAY, for the sake of the conversation, let's say that EVERYTHING you're saying is an amazing point that needs to be taken into consideration...well don't we still need to have a working arrangement with the reality we live in? Don't we still need SOME METHOD of determining what's going on vs what's NOT going on? What's the plan? I mean, what are we supposed to do? Are we supposed to throw out rationalism now? Buy everyone a magic 8 ball and say "start shakin' everybody!" What's the plan here?

Not to mention, let's look at the entire basis of your critique of rationality for a second here...uh, Got a few problems...I mean, for one...you're USING rational analysis...to critique...rational analysis. How you gonna reconcile that?

Because that's the thing: maybe we DO run into problems the minute we try to use rationality as a tool to arrive at certainty, but none of these criticisms has adequately made a case that reason isn't the best thing we have going for us....and they CERTAINLY haven't made a case for some alternative that's better. See if rationality is a tool that we have in our toolbox, the early 20th century wants to show us that it's not the only tool we have and it's not a universal tool that you should use for every task you have. But none of that is to say that there aren't specific areas where rational analysis isn't the best type of analysis.

For example, some thinkers would come to say that maybe the most effective setting for the usage of rational analysis is at the sort of macro level of navigating the world. That in the same way in the quantum world there is a different set of rules that things seem to play by, and in response we need a different set of assumptions we proceed from in our analysis...maybe at a societal level or at points in our internal experience of things

rational analysis is less useful... but it is by far the best tool we have in the middle territory between those two extremes.

Here's the point: this is a baby bathwater situation here. We can't do away with reason entirely...it's proven far too effective at producing SOMETHING that's extremely useful to us. The question is what exactly is that SOMETHING it's producing and how does its production fit into discourse at large?

Another problem someone might have with this whole critique is that the unintended flip side of critiquing reason... is that the enemy of my enemy unintentionally becomes my friend. What I mean is: showing the limitations of reason was for these philosophers in the early 20th century an attempt to dispel dogma...but as you can imagine... these arguments can easily become ammunition for any extremist group to drum up support for their cause, all the while not having to conform to the bounds of reason.

When thinkers in the early 20th century were faced with all these questions...There were a lot of different responses. But it's important to note that virtually NONE of these responses had anything to do with throwing out reason in its entirety. When someone says something like, Rational analysis doesn't produce certainty...so let's throw it out and find something to replace it with...that person is making the SAME MISTAKE the thinkers did at the beginning of the Enlightenment when they replaced faith based certainty with rational certainty. Remember...these early 20th century thinkers weren't opponents of reason...they were opponents of dogma...and nothing showcases that fact better than considering how hard these thinkers worked to preserve reason moving forward...and there may be NO philosopher MORE emblematic of this approach...than the early 20th century thinker... Leo Strauss.

Leo Strauss was a huge fan of rational analysis...so it may seem contradictory to say that he also thought that the entire project of modernity was doomed to failure from the start.

This may SEEM contradictory...but let me explain why it's not...and the story begins with his response to one of those critiques of rational analysis that we talked about last episode: the cultural contingency of reason.

When people say that reason is relative to the culture that's doing the reasoning...limited to the cultural biases, limitations, the perspective of the observer, etc...when people are making that case: a common thing they'll say is, well, look at ancient Greece. What was "reasonable" in ancient Greece is MASSIVELY different than what we'd call reasonable today. Their point being that clearly rationality is not some ahistorical, acultural tool for arriving at the objective truth about things...what was rational in ancient Greece was relative to their own biases and limitations as a culture...the ultimate point being that: we're no different.

Now as a fan of rational analysis, Strauss doesn't REJECT that point...instead he accepts it and he asks the question: well then what, does, that, mean... for how we should be using reason in our societies moving forward?

So, a concise way to sum up Strauss's answer to this question is: the fact that reason is relative to the culture it was produced in...is not a WEAKNESS of reason at all...it's actually a strength in his eyes. Strauss thinks: Rationality is not a lost cause just because it doesn't produce certainty...what we should be doing...he thinks is using the limitations of reason to the benefit of our societies...because here's the thing, he would say: there are many...MANY different elements to building and maintaining a society, and a SINGLE approach to rationality.... may not be able to deal with all of them...different societies have different strengths and weaknesses...the rational approach of one society is going to be good at some things and bad at others...another society's approach might be good and bad at other things. He thinks our rationality...the rationality of the Enlightenment...did a lot of good... but it also has produced a lot of problems that are proving very difficult to solve simply with OUR VERSION of rationality...Here's his idea: what if we used the

societies of the past as a guide...and returned to a different TYPE of rationality that can help us solve the problems that Enlightenment rationality has produced?

To start building his case here...what he'd want us to do is consider the fact that there's a lot of people in our modern world that carry some pretty over-simplified views when it comes to the idea of progress, throughout history. There's this very popular idea...that the entire history of the western world has been some sort of linear, constant progression that all culminates in this moment, right here. Societies have all built on the mistakes of the societies before them... and we are currently living in the PINNACLE of what humanity has ever achieved, now...Strauss would say: that is absolutely TRUE... when you look at it in terms of a few specific, narrow markers. For instance, and for the sake of argument, modern medicine is just far more advanced than the medicine developed during the time of the ancient Greeks. The technology we have today...is just far more advanced...the level to which we can harness and manipulate the natural world to our benefit...is just more advanced than back then. But Strauss would say if you ONLY looked at the idea of progress based on these criteria...then you're putting a very charitable, modern bias on what the word PROGRESS really means. Progress...he's going to say...is a far more complex idea than just whether you have rocket ships and stem cells.

Strauss would ask do you think there are any areas of society where the rationality of Ancient Greece produced better results than our modern rationality? Well just to throw one out there to get the conversation started: how about the fact that ancient Greece produced a society... where there weren't masses of people desperately trying to find meaning? A society where it wasn't downright impossible for reasonable people to believe that their life had any sort of natural purpose that belonged to them? To feel any sort of connection to the universe or some grand design. Think of the tragic ways that people often cope with this alienation of modernity...and then Strauss would want us to consider that progress is not something that can be quantified by looking at just a few

points of flourishing. Progress may be something with thousands of different components, cultures throughout the years ebbing and flowing, progressing and regressing in different ways based on what each individual culture decided to focus their efforts on. The question Strauss would want to ask is: what has modernity focused its efforts upon...what areas are we great at, what areas are we lacking in...how did it get this way, and how might the cultures of the past help us understand ourselves better? This whole line of investigation that we're talking about...Strauss often refers to it as thinking of history in terms of a contrast between the different approaches utilized by the ancients...vs the moderns. Ancients vs. Moderns...OR another way of thinking of that same distinction that's going to be very useful to us is to think about the Ancients vs the Moderns as the IDEAL vs the REAL. Let me explain what Strauss means.

When the project of modernity began...our scientific method ASSUMED value-neutrality. In other words, we assumed NOTHING about things like the origins of the universe...the purposes of things...you know, WHY a volcano is what it is doesn't really matter when conducting modern science...the job of modern science is to observe and describe WHAT there is...not why it's there...now contrast that with the ancient Greeks... who used the Aristotelean scientific method...a scientific method that assumes the existence of final causes. In other words when conducting science, and doing ANY sort of rational analysis for that matter...the ancient Greeks proceeded from the assumption that there ARE purposes to things in the universe, and that they must fit together in some sort of orderly way. Another way of putting this would be to say that the scientific method of modernity concerns itself with the REAL...it tries to assume no values and get to the bottom of the true nature of reality...whereas the scientific method of the Ancient Greeks concerns itself with accessing the IDEAL...or finding the different categories of existence and how they relate to teleologies that exist in a larger ordered universe. Moderns focused on the REAL the ancients on the IDEAL.

Let's look at another example of the ancients moderns ideal real situation here... we'll

start with the ancient Greeks this time. When the ancient Greeks apply their culture's version of rationality to the task of building a state...living in a universe that assumes the existence of final causes and teleologies...the RATIONAL thing to assume at that point becomes that there must be some sort of IDEAL version of a state that we can arrive at if only we reason about it long enough. From there, it's reasonable to assume, there must be some sort of ideal STRUCTURE to that state. From there there's an ideal way to be a ruler...a government official, a warrior, an artisan...from there there's an ideal way to be a citizen of a state more generally...there's an ideal way to be a friend, to be a partner, to be a sister, there's an ideal way to be a person beyond that, if only we use rational analysis to look at it closely enough.

Now, when someone is BORN into one of these societies...when they're growing up and learn about the way the universe is...they INSTANTLY have a couple dozen ideals of purpose that they can be striving towards...and by ideal the Greeks didn't mean some sort of transcendent thing where you'll start glowing once you finally reach it...no, you're NEVER going to reach these ideals...and that's not the point anyway...the point of these ideals was to serve as moral sages for people and societies to strive towards. So even though they talked about things like ideal societies, or rulers or even something like being an ideal friend...nobody REALLY thought they were ever going to achieve the IDEAL society one day....the point... was that society itself... was structured around virtue. We have these ideals that we will never actually reach, but we will nonetheless try our best every day to get as close as we possibly can to them. The point of these ideals, Strauss tells us, was the process...and this process was in many ways a governing influence for ancient Greece.

Contrast this with the value-neutrality of modernity. When the project of modernity begins and the gauntlet of the Enlightenment is thrown down...we start structuring our societies around the idea of rational individual self-interest. In other words..once modernity comes around...we are no longer gonna be structuring our societies around

virtue...we're no longer aiming for some ideal society or some ideal citizen OF that society. We don't believe in final causes anymore...so instead of trying to construct an ideal state...we decide we want to create what you could call a "REAL" state...REAL in the sense that it's something we can ACTUALLY design and implement...and then put systems in place that ensure it will stay that way. When you have people constantly striving to be the best ruler or citizen they possibly can...things can take care of themselves most of the time...but modernity didn't have that luxury...when you assume no values written into the universe and then build your political system from there...you need to construct safeguards like the legal system and constitutions to ensure that even when you DON'T have a virtuous ruler or citizenry...the society still will exist at a certain standard.

To create things like a legal system or a constitution without assuming any values written into the cosmos required modernity to base this new political tradition on the rational, self-interest of the individual. People no longer fall into a clear role or ideal within the structure of a society...no, people are individuals now...when I decide to participate as a citizen in a society... I'm not doing that because, you know, man is a political animal at the level of the universe..when I decide to be in coalition with other individuals I do so solely because it benefits me to, it is in my rational self-interest to be a part of society.

Strauss would say that this political strategy of modernity has proven to be a giant mistake for western civilization. Because the problem with assuming value-neutrality...and then building an entire political tradition on top of it...is that the political realm NEEDS VALUES to be able to make decisions about things...things like how should our society be? How should we treat our citizens? Where is our society headed? Strauss thinks the Enlightenment leaves us with no real answers to these questions...and what eventually happens is we're left with no values and the entire project of modernity begins to consume itself. The modern political tradition cannot work the way it was designed to work if its left to play out long enough...left to play out to

its natural ends...modernity will always, and unavoidably lead us to Strauss's collection of a bunch of really bad isms that we ultimately need to look to for our values.

Modernity eventually always leads to either relativism...or meaning being something that is entirely relative, which doesn't give political institutions much guidance...historicism...or meaning being derived from whatever historical context we happen to be in...scientism or meaning being deferred to the sciences...economism or meaning coming from economic matters...or lastly Nihilism...which in casual conversation may look like someone drinking themselves to sleep every night...in THIS context it just goes one step further...if there is no intrinsic meaning to anything in the universe...then things STILL seem to have meaning to us in the world...where does that meaning come from? Power dynamics for Nihilism...when you control the discourse surrounding a topic you control the meaning that surrounds that topic.

These five things: relativism, historicism, scientism, economism and nihilism are the endgame for modernity...every single time for Strauss. When you try to build a political tradition on top of a foundation where you've tried to be entirely value neutral...the Enlightenment political tradition eventually HAS TO consume itself. Which can make you wonder why this new political tradition has lasted as long as it has without devolving into relativism all the way back in the 1700s....Strauss would say the only reason it's lasted THIS long...is because we initially carried over an enormous amount of baggage from the days where we believed in teleologies and final causes, from the days when values were POSSIBLE in a political tradition...but if you leave modernity to its own devices...given enough time to play out...these five isms and all of the political turmoil that spawned out of them in the early 20th century was ALWAYS going to be the outcome.

See, to Strauss, even things that masquerade as enlightenment political values always lead to this outcome...take Enlightenment era Liberalism for instance....Strauss would say it is no coincidence...that modern liberalism has an ethos where it aims towards

multiculturalism and acceptance of all ideas no matter how outside the box they are...and the fact that relativism was the ultimate destination for the modern political process. The liberalism of the Enlightenment, to Strauss, inextricably LEADS to relativism...which then leads to different forms of Nihilism...not the least of which may in some extreme cases lead to Tyranny. He makes a case that the agenda of the Third Reich in Nazi Germany in many ways is an expression of the thought of the Enlightenment...because similar TO the Enlightenment their chief aim was to do away with the existing traditions and values and replace them instead with a power structure under which the universe could be controlled...or at least SEEM to be controlled.

The ultimate point is that political institutions NEED values in order to make decisions...and because of this fact...to Strauss, the relativism of modernity can not ever last for very long, or else that relativistic void where there are no values...will come to be replaced by something. Whether that something is Nazi Germany or a value system that WE decide to implement...is really up to us. This is WHY Strauss thinks the solution is to return to a political process that more resembles the one devised by the ancient Greeks...a political process embedded with values that can actually inform us as to how society should be structured...and how citizens should fit into that society. This is an example, Strauss thinks, of how the rational approach of the ancients did something a LOT MORE EFFECTIVELY than the rational approach of the moderns. Maybe it's time we start looking at OTHER FORMS of rationality to find solutions to the problems OUR VERSION of rationality has caused.

Strauss talks at one point about how in one reading of Plato...the Greeks seem to have been fully aware of the possibility of the experiment of the Enlightenment...and they seem to have been fully aware as to how it would all play out...he says at one point Plato seriously considers implementing something extremely similar to our modern scientific method...but ultimately decides against it because the end result would be that it would rob human beings of their identity and values. The trade off just wasn't worth it to Plato.

The most important question we need to answer at the beginning of the 20th century...is what do we base the values of our political system upon....what Leo Strauss is ultimately saying is: when you pay attention to answers Modernity is ACTUALLY giving us to this question...the silence is deafening. We may have made tons of progress in Agricultural science so that far fewer people need to go hungry...but we shouldn't stand by satisfied with scientific progress... while the entire western world lives through the greatest famine to date when it comes to meaning and values.

More generally than that though...what good is having all the bombs, tanks and artillery in the world if you have no values to direct how they should be used? You're just waiting for a third party to step in and impose it's values and use that destructive power however they deem fit. Strauss would say this political landscape at the beginning of the 20th century, the situation modernity has created for us...is primed for nationalism. We'll see how that plays out.

But at the center of this whole discussion is this classic Strauss divide between the ancients and the moderns. Societies focused on the ideal...vs societies focused on the real. You may wonder why someone so interested in the political realm spent so much of his time engaging in philosophy. Well if you asked Strauss what the value of philosophy was...like a lot of his world view, he's wouldn't be satisfied by the answers that have been given to us by modernity...and he thinks there is a lot of clarity to be found by going back and seeing how the ancients would have answered that same question.

Philosophy, during the time of the ancients, was not seen as an academic institution. There were no multi-volume sets to be read...there were no terms to memorize...philosophy all the way back then...was a way of life. Philosophy was an attitude towards your disposition as a human being. Being a philosopher wasn't about

the degrees hanging on your wall or sounding smart at parties...being a philosopher was about a quest that you were on. Strauss wants us to consider...what exactly was that quest that philosophers used to be on? What were they trying to accomplish by conducting philosophy?

The answer Strauss gives is that during the time of the ancients philosophers used to be on a quest to discover knowledge...of the whole...as opposed to knowledge of individual particular things. Philosophers don't much care about particulars...they care about categories of things and how those categories relate to the whole. Now...as we talked about...the Greeks...were extremely skeptical of humanities ability to ever be able to arrive at knowledge of the whole. Knowledge of the whole is the ideal that they're striving towards that they're never going to get to...modern science...while nobody's saying that we're for sure ever going to get there...the AMBITION of modern science requires, and believes at least in theory...that knowledge of the whole is something we might just arrive at one day. This difference is in MANY WAYS THE DIFFERENCE between the ancient focus on the ideal and the modern focus on the real.

The value of philosophy, to Strauss, is in the pursuit towards an ideal. In the same way other professions may strive for perfection, but have to come to accept that they will never actually reach it...philosophers live their lives in pursuit of knowledge of the whole, but to Strauss, what they will have to come to accept is that the understanding of the universe, the clarity that they want so badly...is just always going to elude them. But that shouldn't matter...says Strauss. The value of philosophy doesn't lie in the results it produces...but in the process you're engaging in. Philosophy is valuable as a way of life...because unlike every other way of life out there it requires you to resist that all too human tendency...to oversimplify, lie to yourself, make excuses, whatever you have to do to convince yourself that you've arrived at a solution about things. Solutions...don't exist except in the minds of people that are hungry for them. Philosophy as a way of life...doesn't allow for this level of dishonesty...and to Strauss that is a big part of it's

value. He says be a philosopher. Live philosophy as a way of life...but understand when it comes down to it all that really means, to live life as a philosopher, is to have a genuine awareness of the problems that surround you. But THEN what's gonna happen, he says, once you're aware of the problems...is you're naturally going to be inclined towards finding a SOLUTION to those problems. But beware of this place, he would say...because the moment you decide that your "solutions" to the problems become more real to you than your awareness of how problematic the idea of a solution REALLY IS...THAT is when you cease to be a philosopher...that's when THIS happens as he puts it:

Hannah Arendt - The Banality of Evil

Episode #136

This is a transcript of episode #136 on Hannah Arendt. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So a long time ago on this podcast we told a story about a guy named Socrates who was sentenced to death in ancient Greece. Classic story from the history of philosophy...he was accused of corrupting the youth...denying the gods of the state...he was found guilty, forced to drink hemlock, died in around 399 BC...Now, one of the people who witnessed the trial of Socrates in first person...was his student Plato...and Plato, famously, right after Socrates is put to death...LEAVES the city of Athens for years and goes on a bit of a world tour...travels all over the place, maybe as far as North Africa on some accounts...see Plato had had enough at the time...he was ANGRY that Socrates had been put to death...he had grown disillusioned with the political climate in Athens, something he thought the Athenians took foolish pride in...and when you consider the fact that his friend and mentor was put to death under what he thought were false premises...you can start to understand why he felt this way. Well, Hannah Arendt would say that it was THIS MOMENT IN HISTORY...that may have single-handedly led to a mistake in the thinking of philosophers... for the next 2400 years. Because, she would say, when Plato leaves Athens and is so upset with the realm of the political, that event had MASSIVE effects on his thinking...he returns BACK to Athens years later, starts his school The Academy, and when he does there is a distinct turn in his philosophy inward towards the realm, of ideas. So for example, in the Allegory of the Cave...the external world, the thoughts of the public are compared to shadows on a cave wall...he talks about eventually, through the process of philosophy emerging from that cave and witnessing the sun which represented knowledge, in other words something introspective, an idea. THAT was paramount, to Plato. He talks about a WORLD of ideas. KNOWLEDGE of these higher forms can be arrived at introspectively, by philosophers THINKING about things. Now, in terms of the big three in ancient Greece...Socrates, Plato, Aristotle...Plato

is very unique in this regard. Plato is an advocate of what Hannah Arendt would eventually call the contemplative life. This is the archetype of a philosopher that we've seen time and time again on this show...a philosopher that resigns themselves from public life...and sits around thinking about stuff in solitude. They lock themselves away in a tower, or an academic institution, or even in a secluded shack by a pond...but the point is they sit around and think about stuff. THAT'S the way progress in thinking is going to be arrived at. Put in a very general way there's this feeling that if you want to think something that nobody's ever thought before...talking to a bunch of people in public is just going to be a contaminating influence. Just like if you surround yourself with toxic, negative people all the time and your thinking can't help but start to tilt in that direction...these thinkers were worried that if they had too many conversations with normal, every day thinking they might be at least, less capable of making some sort of huge breakthrough. This is the contemplative life. But Hannah Arendt would say this isn't the ONLY WAY philosophy has ever been done...in fact...the OTHER two of the big three in ancient greece...socrates and aristotle...they BOTH THOUGHT...that the life of a philosopher should be NOTHING like locking yourself away in some insular world. Socrates was the philosopher of the Athenian Agora...to him philosophy was engaging your fellow citizen...if philosophy was ever going to produce ANYTHING meaningful it was going to be through conversation with someone else. For Aristotle, philosophy and political engagement were two things that were inseparable. These two thinkers were fans of what Hannah Arendt would eventually call the active life. The active life vs. the contemplative life...this is a key distinction. When Hannah Arendt was a young woman living in germany just before the outbreak of WW2...she was engaging in a life very similar to the contemplative life of someone like Plato...she was a student of philosophy...she no doubt would've thought of herself as a philosopher...but when the political events of WW2 began to unfold...she looked at herself and started to feel like sitting around being a philosopher was a bit naive and silly. What good is locking yourself in a closet sitting around THINKING about stuff all day...when the world around you is crumbling? Philosophers of her time were sitting on their hands living this safe,

contemplative life of Plato...when what the world TRULY needed was a lot more people living the ACTIVE life of Socrates and Aristotle. This is why for the rest of her life she would whole-heartedly REJECT being labeled a political philosopher...and instead called herself a political theorist. Philosophy...practiced in the traditional, contemplative form... has failed to provide anything REMOTELY of value in the real world....because, she would say, it doesn't take place in the real world...it denies a fundamental aspect of living as a human being on this planet...the realm of the political.To begin making her point here...she would want to divide being a human being into three primary categories. Labor, Work and Action. Let's talk about each one of them respectively.Let's start with labor. The part of being a human being that she calls Labor...are the activities we all have to do every day simply to maintain our biological existence. The kinda things we gotta do everyday or else we die. Falling into this category would be things like eating, drinking, sleeping, going to the bathroom, etc...these kinds of activities make up a piece of what it is to be a human being... and she wants to bracket them all together and put them in this category she calls Labor.The next category of behaviors that makes up what it is to be a person...is what she calls work. Work for Arendt can be described in a number of different ways...but ONE WAY I've seen it described that is pretty good is that work is the production, of cultural artifacts. Now what's MEANT by that...is look, part of being a human being is having a place to live. We all gotta live somewhere...and as human beings we always have to live in the world....another way you could DESCRIBE that state of affairs is to say that we all ULTIMATELY have to exist within...a culture. Well somebody's gotta build that world and the cultural artifacts that make it up...the part of being a person that Hannah Arendt calls "work" is the stuff we all do every day to produce that set and setting that we all live in. Whether that's installing windows, making cars, building bridges or skyscrapers...writing a novel...that's a part of what makes up the world right? A symphony...mowing the grass...making a pair of sunglasses...the list goes on forever....the point is work, for Hannah Arendt, is the part of being a person that produces the world we live in.So we have Labor, then we have work, and the last one is what she calls Action. Now action, simply put, is the realm of the

political. The words and activities of equal citizens who are engaged in the public realm...that is action. This is the piece of human life that encompasses what Socrates and Aristotle found so crucial in "the active life". This is the part of human life where every war is started, every community is governed, every relationship between human beings and the world managed. To Hannah Arendt, this action in the political realm, is the thing that imbues our world and cultural artifacts within it with their meaning. What she means is: without the realm of the political, a building would just be a building. A tree would just be a tree. It's not until equal, free human beings decide their cultural significance in a public forum that their identity or meaning within that culture can be established. Now... let's not gloss over just how significant of a thing to say this is... Because it may seem innocent...but beneath the surface here this may be one of the most ruthless critiques of modernity in the 20th century. Because if a common critique of modernity is that it assumes value neutrality and doesn't adequately provide us with a way of determining the meanings or identities of things...you know as Strauss would say: if modernity always leads us to relativism, historicism...ways of thinking like post-modernism...to Hannah Arendt, post modernism exists as a critique of the Enlightenment ONLY BECAUSE the Enlightenment made so many mistakes to begin with. The chief one...in her eyes...is that the Enlightenment effectively did away with the realm of the political. To get to the bottom of how she thinks this happened...think of the spirit of the Enlightenment for a second. Think of a quintessential classical Enlightenment era philosopher...for the sake of the conversation let's just talk about John Locke. What is the role of the political realm within the philosophy of John Locke? We engage in the realm of politics...SO THAT we can ensure life, liberty and property. In other words...POLITICS...is a means to an end....in this case politics is a means to ensuring the economic end of private property rights. But this hasn't always been the way that we view politics...for example in the pre-Enlightenment era ACTIVE life of Socrates and Aristotle...politics wasn't a means to an end...politics was an end in itself. In fact it was the other way around then...you completed the activities required of you in the Labor and Work categories, you COMPLETED the necessary maintenance of your life, you

ENGAGED in the economic realm SO THAT you could go out and participate in the political realm. See economics was seen as a means of ensuring a political end back then, as opposed to in the Enlightenment when it's become the other way around. You know...this really is a hallmark of the enlightenment though, isn't it? Like we talked about last time...when you remove the ancient idea... that there are final causes for things written into the universe...you have to structure your societies in a way where even if there AREN'T intrinsic values or virtuous people around..society still functions well anyway...well, we have a long history of people being at each other's throats over political disputes...so these early Enlightenment thinkers proposed the idea that if you could get people to cooperate based on mutually beneficial economic exchange...they'd be much less likely to constantly be arguing about political matters. But Hannah Arendt would say arguing about political matters, ENGAGING in the public realm... is a fundamental piece of the human experience. See because when it comes to identity...you can live the contemplative life of traditional philosophy...you can sit around and THINK about who you are all day long, but the contemplative life will NEVER provide you with a satisfying answer to the question: who am I? The answer to THAT question...is only arrived at through action. Hannah Arendt thinks the same way active engagement in the public realm imbues our cultural relics with their meaning...it's only through our participation in the public realm that we can establish identities for ourselves. By taking action in the realm of the political you stake a claim to your own set of individual values and identity. This is her point: if it's a common criticism of the Enlightenment that people are experiencing a crisis of identity...that the tools of Enlightenment Rationalism cannot provide us with any answers to questions about values without devolving into relativism or historicism...that's because since the beginning of the Enlightenment there has been a systematic exclusion of the political...the only forum we've ever HAD for establishing our own personal identity and values. But the Enlightenment in its endless attempt to normativize, to create legalistic systems that run on mutual, rational self-interest...the Enlightenment subverted the political and made it a means to an end for the sake of economics. So think of Hannah Arendt's three parts of human life again Labor, Work and

Action...what the Enlightenment essentially has done then is remove the Action part of a person's life altogether. The Enlightenment has turned us into what she calls "Economic Man". The citizen of modernity is stuck in a perpetual loop between Labor and Work...and all the things like values and identity that are supposed to be established through participation in the public realm feel like they're desperately missing. Just to clarify what she's talking about here: think of how MANY people talk about their place in the world. When you ask someone in modernity who they are...often times they'll reply by telling you...what their job is. They'll say I'm a plumber...but what does plumbing have to do with MOST questions about your values and who YOU are? We ask our children WHAT do you want to be when you grow up...not WHO do you want to be...there's a sense in which the purest form of expression for someone in a post-Enlightenment world is what they do for a living...constantly cycling between the fields of Labor and Work...maintaining their biological existence during the evenings strictly so that they can go back to work the next day and engage in whatever menial level of expression their job provides. This...is what Hannah Arendt calls economic man. Think of other markers of identity in a Capitalist society...who you are...often times is only in relation to what you own. The kind of phone you use, the kind of clothes you wear...the trips you decide to go on...your transactions define your sense of identity...but the sense of identity it gives you in modernity is a cheapened version of what used to be available to people...the whole identity feels pixelated in a way. The same way Facebook gives you pixelated friends that mean just a little bit less...pixelated expressions of approval that mean less than a real thumbs up...pixelated videos that mediate your entire relationship with reality...the values of the Enlightenment were a harbinger for a world to come where people are fundamentally...a cog in an economic machine...rather than a person active in their communities. Politics...in modernity consists of turning on the TV and being spoon fed a picture of what's going on in the world and then taking to the streets of social media and screaming into the void about it. Hannah Arendt is going to say this SUBVERSION of people's ability to participate in politics BEGAN in the Enlightenment. The civic republicanism that existed within many cultures of the past...citizens ACTIVELY

engaging in something like the Greek Polis...this active engagement has been reduced to writing your congressperson a letter and if you get REALLY mad well then you can make a sign, wave it around in traffic, and engage in some really powerful, powerful symbolism. The Enlightenment has replaced the public realm of the political with merely a public economic game that's being played. This isn't JUST a criticism of Capitalism though...she is EQUALLY critical of Marxism as a system of thinking that emerged out of the Enlightenment... that views people fundamentally as things that fulfill an economic role, rather than political actors. One of the ultimate, ambitious endgames of Marxism is to create a society where engaging in things like politics being used as an instrument won't be necessary anymore...and this classless, de-politicized society is obviously not something Hannah Arendt is a fan of...in fact she thinks BOTH Capitalism AND Marxism, by aiming to reduce everything to economics, robs people of a crucial piece of their humanity. To put it bluntly...the Enlightenment, by doing away with political engagement...dehumanizes people....now, it's right here...that we can understand where she's coming from when she begins her exploration into one of her most famous books: The Origins of Totalitarianism. So if it wasn't entirely obvious by the title of the book...this is a period in Hannah Arendt's work where she's looking at the political situation around her in the world. Throughout WW2 and beyond she's seeing all these new forms of Totalitarianism on the rise...and she's trying to figure out two things 1. How do these systems ascend to power in the first place...and then 2. once they're in power...how do they maintain power despite doing unspeakable things to their citizens. The answer to these two questions begins with modernity's systematic exclusion of the political realm...and she'd say it is not a coincidence that when you look at the structure of these 20th century totalitarian regimes...free political discourse among equal citizens is never even close to one of their priorities...in fact it's the opposite. Political detractors will often mysteriously disappear...or be silenced. Things like the night of the long knives to name one example of many. The ultimate goal of these regimes being to turn entire populations of people into what she calls Animal Laborans... and what she's referencing is actually an older idea from Marx...Marx was responding to a common

question during his time, a period when Charles Darwin is ALSO doing his work...and the question is this: what is it that TRULY separates human beings from all the other animals in the animal kingdom? Well, there were a LOT of people that loved to answer that question with...human beings just THINK in a far superior way than all the other animals...but Marx with this concept of Animal Laborans is going to say that yes, there are differences in our brains, but what fundamentally separates us is not so much our ability to think better...but the roles we play within societies as laborers. In other words, we LABOR better than other animals. For all of the attempts by Karl Marx to remove people from what he saw as the chains of Capitalism, from the alienation of the self that's caused by Capitalism ...Hannah Arendt is going to say that even if he successfully removes the chains of Capitalism...he still leaves people and the rest of his thinking locked in the chains of the entire economic task of the Enlightenment. She takes the term Animal Laborans and repurposes it to point out what she sees as a flaw in Marx's thinking: "A mass society of laborers, such as Marx had in mind when he spoke of "socialized mankind" consists of worldless specimens of the species mankind, whether they are household slaves, driven into their predicament by the violence of others, or free, performing their functions willingly". What she's saying here is when you are a person living in modernity...and the primary function of your life is to fulfill some sort of economic role...when your life is reduced to work and labor and the ACTION of the political realm is taken out of the equation...you are left to feel like what she calls a "worldless specimen". She says the common criticism of the Enlightenment that it alienates the self is not going far enough. This is a case of WORLD alienation. By subverting the political...the Enlightenment has produced a world where we can no longer imbue our cultural artifacts or our world with meaning. What we're left with, she thinks, are mass societies of laborers that feel constantly, and utterly disconnected from the world that they live in. She goes on in her book *The Human Condition*: "This worldlessness of the animal laborans, to be sure, is entirely different from the active flight from the publicity of the world which we found inherent in the activity of "good works". The animal laborans does not flee the world, but is ejected from it in so far as he

is imprisoned in the privacy of his own body, caught in the fulfillment of needs in which nobody can share and which nobody can fully communicate."What she's saying is that modernity has produced a world where there is no actual public realm for people to engage in anymore. We are imprisoned in our own private lives of labor and work. We are ALIENATED from the public world in this regard. Through this long process of the emancipation of labor we have convinced the citizens of modernity that the ACTION portion of their life...where they get their sense of identity...is through their jobs or how they contribute to the most IMPORTANT thing: a public economy. We've traded a public realm of political engagement for a public economy and mistakenly concluded that they're producing the same thing for people. We don't have a public realm anymore...what we have, she says, are "private acts out in the open" and a mass society of laborers that see themselves in terms of a role they play in an economy...and she says when you do this...this inevitably leads us to this outcome:"The outcome is what is euphemistically called mass culture, and its deep-rooted trouble is a universal unhappiness, due on one side to the troubled balance between laboring and consumption and, on the other, to the persistent demands of the animal laborans to obtain a happiness which can be achieved only where life's processes of exhaustion and regeneration, of pain and release from pain, strike a perfect balance."This picture of the average citizen of modernity...a worldless, alienated economic cog immersed in a culture they have no real recourse to change...this is the type of rootless person that needs to exist en masse if you want to explain the rise of totalitarianism in the 20th century. People live their lives in a state of malaise...starving for a sense of identity or meaning beyond what they do for a living and how that contributes to a global economy...but then while they're starving for this identity, post treaty of Versailles feeling disenfranchised, this political group comes along in Germany and gives people something meaningful to feel a part of. This is the horror of what modernity can produce...a society of economic cogs that lack a political voice and are just dying to move on behalf of SOMETHING...and a political group with evil intentions pulling the levers of the machine. See after World War Two Hannah Arendt, like everyone else is trying to get to the bottom of what exactly happened in

Germany that allowed for the rise of the Third Reich. How could something like this happen? Again, how did this Totalitarian regime ascend to power and how did they maintain power once they got there? Well a common explanation that was being given by commentators during the time of Hannah Arendt is that the events in Germany were some sort of historical anomaly. That a bunch of the most evil people who ever lived got together, co-opted the national socialist party and carried out their evil plan of world domination. They commissioned the most evil people they could find to head up the different parts of their regime...the vindictive German people post WW1 were disproportionately filled with soldiers that were willing to do unspeakable things to innocent people. The Third Reich was an evil death cult that seized power and through some perfect confluence of events were able to carry out their plan. Hannah Arendt takes an extremely controversial position at the time and disagrees with this synopsis. First of all, she'd probably want to say: let's not give the Nazis credit where credit isn't due. The Third Reich wasn't the result of some evil genius formulating the perfect plan and executing it. What happened in Germany can be easily explained by the situation that modernity has produced in the world, and there probably isn't a more straightforward example of this than the scene she describes in her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Shortly after WW2 Nazis were being put on trial for war crimes. One such person was a man by the name of Adolf Eichmann. Now Eichmann's primary job during the war was behind a desk...his job has been described by many as a "desk murderer" because he would essentially sit behind a desk, look at names and numbers on a piece of paper, and then send people to Auschwitz, prisons or other horrible fates where they would often go on to die. When Adolf Eichmann was put on trial...he was presented to the public inside of a glass booth. When people showed up to see him testify...they were expecting to see evil incarnate, a DEMON encased in a glass booth justifying what he did for the Nazis. What they actually got, from the perspective of Hannah Arendt...was something much, much scarier than that. What they got...is what seemed like an ordinary guy. He wasn't an evil genius. In fact, as far as Hannah Arendt could tell, he wasn't really that smart at all. He often spoke using tired cliches. He wasn't original. He wasn't witty. He wasn't

charismatic. More relevant than anything else though: he wasn't filled with hate towards the people he was sending to their deaths. The scariest part of the trial of Adolf Eichmann was the realization that these unthinkable crimes against innocent people were committed by someone who was an average person, just following orders. This was not a man motivated to do what he did because of a racist ideology...this was a man motivated because he was trying to get a promotion. This is a concept Hannah Arendt would later call The Banality of Evil. When an evil act is committed it is RARELY carried out by some dastardly villain with bad intentions twirling his mustache like in the cartoons. TRUE EVIL...can be carried out by ordinary, non-hateful people who are just doing their jobs or abiding by the laws of their country... ALL THAT IT TAKES...to Hannah Arendt, for someone to go from an average citizen to a hatchetman for an evil regime...that transformation occurs when people decide they are going to stop thinking for themselves and get their identity and values from some other group that is handing them out. The subversion of the political realm, our inability to create our own identity and values, has created a world where this transformation is a much easier process to fall into. When people looked into the past of Adolf Eichmann...they didn't see some long list of evil causes he supported trying to find some way he could murder people...what they saw was a long list of him being what they called a "joiner"...someone who all throughout his life has joined group after group in the interest of SOMEONE TELLING HIM, who he should be. He says it in his own words at the trial: "I sensed I would have to live a leaderless and difficult individual life, I would receive no directives from anybody, no orders and commands would any longer be issued to me, no pertinent ordinances would be there to consult—in brief, a life never known before lay ahead of me." To Hannah Arendt, this is not an evil genius talking...this is a man who chose the path of not-thinking. This is how you can explain how a German population of people not filled with hate towards anybody can carry out the kinds of things they did. Hannah Arendt would say when looking for an answer to her first question of how totalitarian regimes ascend to power...it is absolutely CRUCIAL that we understand that the Nazis DID NOT seize power in Germany. They were elected. Because a worldless, alienated population of

economic cogs dying to move for something, devoid of a political realm where they could establish their own values...they were given something to move for. THAT is the banality of evil as it TRULY presents itself in the world. This is a good time to underscore just how important the realm of the political IS for Hannah Arendt. Because when it comes to answering her SECOND question of how regimes maintain power once they acquire it...modernity's exclusion of the political realm and the active life of the individual is a big part of it. See, Totalitarianism NEEDS a unified, homogeneous, simple message to ever get off the ground. Because of this...the GOAL of Totalitarianism is always to lump the entire population into one giant, terrified voice that lacks diversity. This is why they often don't allow for political dissent...this is why they don't like the idea of equal citizens engaging in an open forum of discussion...Hannah Arendt would say the enemy of Totalitarianism is plurality. The political realm...is the only place where a plurality of voices can be heard. Totalitarianism can only subsist by reducing people to what she calls "a bundle of reflexes". What she means is: merely a bundle of reflexes...because they've been dehumanized by their lack of a political voice...and constantly on edge because of the threat of violence from the group in power. Hannah Arendt calls this process systematic terrorism...and the scariest part about it is that in so many ways it resembles exactly what you'd expect to see if Enlightenment philosophy is left to play out to its endgame. To not be engaged in the active life...is a mistake to Hannah Arendt. But she'd want us to understand that not living the active life can take on many forms. You could surrender your responsibility to think...fall into an identity given to you by someone else...the mistake made by people like Adolf Eichmann. But you could JUST AS EASILY become an accessory to evil being carried out in the world by sitting around, thinking about stuff all day like so many traditional philosophers have done. This is why she doesn't want to be thought of as a political philosopher...because so many philosophers SHE'S seen lead by the example of sitting quietly in an academic institution theorizing about abstract concepts all day long...but never taking action on anything. She'd want us to realize that this contemplative lifestyle has REAL consequences in the world, you can't innocently and benignly theorize about things by yourself and expect things to end there.

The sad reality of living the contemplative life is that this passive, inactive approach almost always leads to your ideas being coopted and used by people that are ACTUALLY engaging in the active life. Philosophy and politics will always be closely connected to each other, and to deny that fact is to be willfully complacent so that you can sit in a tower alone where it is safe. Safe at least for now. Friedrich Nietzsche is a great example of someone whose work was misinterpreted, misappropriated and then used as a philosophical justification of the Third Reich. Hannah Arendt would want us to realize that when you resign yourself from public life...you resign yourself from the process of determining the cultural significance of things in the world...and if you're a philosopher...that includes every piece of philosophy that you will ever write. Because if there's ANYTHING the banality of evil can show us...it's that it only takes an ABSENCE of active, equal citizens engaged in the public realm for Totalitarianism to flourish. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

John Rawls - A Theory of Justice

Episode #137

This is a transcript of episode #137 on John Rawls. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So if you looked at every philosopher that we've covered so far on this show it'd be very easy to describe the DIFFERENCES between each of their works...but a much more difficult and illuminating question to ask is whether or not the works of all these very different philosophers have among them any root similarities. Now...of course you could say things like they all made some sort of contribution to human thought. You could say they all used language to express their big ideas. But another way to think about the answer to this question is to say that every, great philosopher in their own way...QUESTIONED the fundamental assumptions that were present in the thinking of their time. THAT is a hallmark of a great philosopher...because when seeking solutions to philosophical problems...casting aside the cultural or linguistic assumptions of a particular snapshot in time...very often leads philosophers of the next generation to understand how those assumptions have been limiting our ways of thinking about things. The philosopher we're going to talk about today falls into this category...and he's going to question an assumption that seemed to others as radical as it was dangerous. His name was John Rawls...and this was the assumption that he questioned: Can human beings ACTUALLY LIVE and flourish for any extended period of time in liberal democratic societies? The political paradigm of the Enlightenment...liberal democratic societies. A government BY the many. Democracy. Liberal in the sense that there is a STRONG focus on rational discourse, the acceptance of outside ideas... the legitimacy of political ideas being decided by having conversations between competing ideas, let the best ideas rise to the top and direct the future of society for the time being, and if those prevailing ideas don't happen to be the ones you believe in, you're supposed to ACCEPT those ideas as part of the greater political process and work to defend your positions better the NEXT time we're having a conversation. This was a brand new way of conducting politics when it was

proposed in the Enlightenment, and the assumption over the years by so MANY in the west has been...that NOT ONLY is this one of our greatest inheritances from the Enlightenment, but not to mention they would say: this is the absolute GREATEST, political system, that has EVER been devised. John Rawls is going to question those assumptions. He's going to ask whether or not liberal democratic societies might ONLY be the greatest political system ever devised ON PAPER. You might think of OTHER political or economic theories that SOUND GREAT on paper, but when actually put into practice, when you consider the nature of how human beings REALLY behave...they fail time and time again. Well are liberal democratic societies just another example of a delusional, naive Enlightenment era ideal that can never actually work for any real length of time? What Rawls is referencing is the long history of this type of society descending into various types of chaos. Civil wars, Fascism, class warfare, extreme violence between different groups, extreme wealth inequality, dozens of more examples and the ultimate question Rawls is getting to is this: When you consider the track record of liberal democratic societies, no matter HOW GOOD they sound on paper, maybe there is something about our nature as human beings that makes us EFFECTIVELY incapable of existing in this type of society for any real length of time...we can play nice for a while. We can shake hands and disagree up to a point. But are we just temporarily kidding ourselves? Will there always be a point of disagreement where human beings are willing to subvert the rational conversation in favor of using FORCE to implement their ideas? Maybe this is just HOW human beings engage with each other politically. Maybe the last few hundred years has consisted of us having a bunch of mostly pointless conversations, punctuated by moments of chaos whenever a truly important political issue comes up where human beings have to actually act, and THAT is how they choose to act. Generations from now will people look back on the way we're conducting politics today and think of us all as naive? Look at them believing they can just talk things through. Clinging to this ideal from the Enlightenment that makes us feel really good, but doesn't ever actually work in practice. Can human beings only exist for any real length of time in a more tribal, most of the time, Nationalist political setting? So it should

be said that John Rawls' answer to whether we can actually live for any length of time in these societies...is yes. He is EXTREMELY optimistic about the future of liberal democratic society, he does NOT think that we're all being naive, but despite him ultimately defending liberal democracy, as we'll see... his willingness... to ask these tough questions about the assumptions we're making politically...like so many OTHER great philosophers...will cement his place in history. So this becomes the first MAJOR problem Rawls is faced with in his work...he's presented with the long history of failures in liberal democratic society, and yet he remains extremely OPTIMISTIC about liberal democratic society. Well the next question any reasonable person has to ask is, why has there been such a history of failure if liberal democracy is so great? Rawls' answer to this question is that it's largely been a misplacement of priorities. We CLAIM to be creating societies that are just, ones that won't lead to outcomes like these extreme tensions between groups... but we've never really had a truly substantive conversation about what we really mean when we say that, you know we say things like "liberty and justice for all"...but what EXACTLY do we mean when we say society should be ensuring justice? This is not just an IMPORTANT question to Rawls, this is THE question...he has a very famous quote where he says: "Justice...is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is to systems of thought." What he means there is that in the same way you would judge the legitimacy of a system of ideas based on how TRUE it is...we should judge the legitimacy of our social institutions based on how JUST they are, now...what is Rawls talking about when he references justice? Well in a lesser sense he's certainly talking about things like the criminal justice system, or the balancing of the scales within a society, but if you wanted to understand the scope of Rawls' work the far more CRUCIAL version of justice that he's talking about is what he calls "Distributive Justice". The idea is this: we as individuals gather together and form groups that we call societies. We do this because it benefits us to...when we work together in groups we are just far more efficient than as mere individuals...and BECAUSE of this there's a lot of surplus VALUE created that really, ONLY exists because we're working together. The question becomes how does this surplus value get allocated, or how should it be DISTRIBUTED, as in distributive

justice. Another name for this surplus value is what Rawls calls "Primary Social Goods"...and these social goods certainly include obvious things like income, power and wealth...but Rawls would want to point out that our teamwork as a society produces value in other areas that are a lot less intuitive, and yet these areas STILL need to be considered in this discussion. Things like rights, liberties, opportunities, etc. These things, these primary social goods, are the building blocks that Rawls is going use to make his case in his 1971 work A Theory of Justice. Kind of right there in the title. He's constructing a theory of how a we should distribute these trappings of society in the most just manner possible. Rawls thinks that justice can be created by making sure that we have just institutions, in other words, if the STRUCTURE of our society is just, including our constitution and laws, then we will have a just society. So a bit of important context to understand where Rawls is coming from with all this is that he's doing his work in the modern United States. Rawls is a statistician and he's looking at the numbers and he sees a huge disparity in the United States in terms of income inequality. To him this is a failure of the liberal democratic societies of the past and their silence on the topic of distributive justice. He wants to actually start HAVING this conversation...and he wants to begin at one of the most simple questions you could possibly ask about justice...the question is: should inequalities exist within a just society? and...sure...there are people out there that would say everyone should have the exact same thing no matter how hard they work or what choices they make...equality of outcome is often a desirable end to a person that holds this position. But Rawls would say no. The fact is these inequalities DO exist within societies, in fact their existence is inevitable. The REAL interesting philosophical discussion begins when we ask ourselves, what type of inequality is just, what makes these inequalities just, and what criteria do we use to determine that? Rawls is looking at the numbers in the late 60's United States and what he sees is that there are actual billionaires and multi- millionaires simultaneously existing in a society with people who are homeless or in extreme poverty. Again he wants to ask how JUST is this society...the same way someone else might want to ask how TRUE is a particular system of ideas? Can we say this is a just society with these two very different outcomes being

possible? What's immediately evident when you start thinking about this question is that there are a lot of different ways you could answer it. For example somebody more on the Libertarian side of things could look at the homeless person next to the billionaire and they might say, "Yes, this IS a just state of affairs...because these two people have made very different choices to get to where they are in life...and ultimately... that's a GOOD thing for society." They may say look it's not the government's JOB to tell you how to live your life...that you need to be making THIS much money per year or working THIS many hours or else the world is an unjust place...the government's job is to set the rules of the game and enforce them...your job is to learn how to play the game and then figure out how you want to play it...if someone wants to be a street drifter more power to them...if someone wants to sacrifice every second of their life otherwise so they can see one billion dollars in the bank more power to them. We can't use INCOME as a direct measurement of equality, because the more relevant difference here is in how these two are using their liberty. Rawls might ask this person: what if the billionaire got all their money by going door to door with an army and saying give me all your money or I'll kill you, until they got a billion dollars. Certainly we wouldn't see THAT as an example of justice just because it hinged on free choice...and what Rawls would want to do here is just call for a more nuanced definition of what exactly justifies this inequality? Remember...his biggest concern is that he doesn't want to stop short here. To Rawls, Liberal democracy IS the best system and CAN work, but for it to work we NEED an exhaustive answer to this question, and maybe a good clarification to start with is to say that perhaps an inequality is just as long as its based on some sort of work or effort that somebody has put in. Rawls would agree with this. The question now becomes how do we identify the instances where the inequality is based on effort...and the ones where it's made possible only by some sort of unfair advantage? This becomes a major question in A Theory of Justice. There's an interesting metaphor for unfair advantages in the modern world that one of Rawls' colleagues named Cohen offers and it goes like this: Say humanity reaches a point where we have a level of technology where we can travel vast distances through space and colonize other planets. One day an astronaut lands on one of these earth like

planets, plants a flag in the ground and says this one's mine. Now let's say a couple years later astronaut 2 comes along and their ship breaks down, they need to find a way to survive on the planet...the planet's completely empty except for astronaut one and their little house...for astronaut two to ever be able to carve off even a SLIVER of an existence on this planet...they will ALWAYS be at the mercy of astronaut one. The first astronaut will dictate all the terms of the agreements, the deals will almost certainly always favor the first astronaut, SIMPLY BECAUSE the first astronaut happened to get there first. Well this is a metaphor for how everybody enters into the world who wasn't born into inherited wealth, power or opportunity. By complete chance... their lives are at the mercy of someone else who was born into THEIR place by complete chance. So you can see why it's important to Rawls to further delineate between inequalities that were arrived at because of work or effort and those made possible by essentially winning the lottery...and that winning the lottery...that moral arbitrariness...is what makes it unfair to Rawls. See, to Rawls you're not entitled to things that are morally arbitrary. Best way to explain WHY he feels this way is to give the opposite example. Let's say you're driving down the road obeying all the traffic laws. There's a cafe coming up on your right and through some random confluence of events some guy trips over a dog and spills a glass of water on the floor at which point a woman slips on the water and bumps into a chair that trips a server and they go flying into the street at the exact wrong time and tragically, you hit the server and they die. Now as a society...we would NEVER think of you as a bad person if that sort of thing happened. The justice system would NEVER TAKE a consequentialist route there and throw you in prison for the rest of your life, technically somebody died! Bad luck! In other words it would be wrong for ANYONE to think it was just for you to OWN the consequences of something that is in your life solely because of a horrible stroke of luck. Rawls would say that when you're born into an estate worth a billion dollars...you are equally not in complete ownership of things that are only in your life because of a good stroke of luck. But as we'll see later that DOESN'T mean it's necessarily the job of the government to TAKE it from you for Rawls. To be clear: you're not a BAD person for having the billion dollars...just as you're not a BAD person because a waiter

fell in front of your car. The point is when things are morally arbitrary you can't have all the good and none of the bad, or in other words what this MEANS for Rawls' philosophy is that we need to decide on further criteria that determine how much of that inequality is just and why. Probably a good point to state for the record that these inequalities extend far beyond just money that you're born into. People are born with all sorts of inequalities. You could be born really smart. You could be born into a family that doesn't care about you. You could be born a really attractive person. You could be born into an area that has horrible resources for public schools and you have virtually no chance of excelling. You could be born into a family business where you're the heir apparent to taking over when mom retires. You could have so much crime in the area you live that leaving the house and trying to do ANYTHING with your life is terrifying. We are born holding the Rstubs to this genetic and cultural lottery that will dictate the parameters of our existence...and Rawls would say that if we TRULY want the inequalities of our society to be based solely on a difference in work or effort, we need to be willing to not ask people to own the bad or good circumstances they happened to be born into. Now the problem with actually implementing anything along these lines should be obvious: Nobody that was born into a great situation is going to vote for a policy that makes them give up the fruits of their advantages...and nobody born into a bad situation is going to vote for a policy that makes them live out the rest of their life accepting the consequences of what is essentially a server falling into the road in front of their car. This touches on a larger problem of passing ANY kind of meaningful social reform: most of the time...people are going to vote for what benefits THEIR particular demographic. Rich people vote the interests of the rich, poor the interests of the poor...and again this fact extends to every advantage someone might have been born with as it is reflected in the political process. So Rawls is faced with another problem in his work: even if we could figure out which of these birthright advantages are just or unjust...how would we ever pass something like this in a Liberal Democracy? To solve this problem Rawls creates one of the most influential thought experiments of the 20th century. His goal with the experiment is to show that the massive levels of inequality exist in the modern United

States simply, and for no better reason than because the society already exists in that way, powerful interests are already invested in the way that things are, and meaningful social change is very difficult to actually carry out with the system being the way that it is...BUT, he would ask, what would society look like if we had to start all over again? Would we structure society in the exact same way? Would things play out exactly in the same way that they are now? What if our position when formulating this new society was not that of Astronaut two, from our example before...but instead what if we were all simultaneously designing a society from the position of Astronaut one that first day they landed on the planet? This is what Rawls refers to as the Original Position...basically it's HIS version of the state of nature...now imagine we're all standing around on this new planet, formulating how a society should be structured. Rawls wants us to imagine a few other things as part of this thought experiment: imagine you are structuring this society through what he calls a "veil of ignorance". You are asked to decide HOW THIS SOCIETY will be structured without knowing ANYTHING ABOUT your POSITION in that society once it's founded. You can't know whether you're going to be living in Beverley Hills or the projects in New York City. You can't know your age, gender, race, sexual orientation...you can't know your IQ, your athletic ability, your charisma...you can't know the family you will be born into or whether you'll have some mental illness that makes every day miserable. Human beings have the capacity to be rational...Rawls wants to ask: how would rational beings WITHOUT a vested interest in one group or another create a society? Well one thing's for sure, Rawls thinks, it wouldn't look ANTHING LIKE the modern United States. No rational being would look at the statistics and choose that structure...because it is much more likely for you to be born one of the many millions that struggle vs one of the handful of people with power and resources. In fact, Rawls thinks that when people consider the lives that some people in the inner cities are forced to live in parts of the United States, the very fact you could POSSIBLY get unlucky and be living one of those lives is enough to make rational people want to restructure society. So how would rational beings structure it? They would follow what is known as the "Maximin Rule" or the idea that we would pick the structure of a society that provides the

best situation for the least advantaged WITHIN that society in comparison to all other potential societies. Put another way: we pick the structure where the worst case scenario for a person is the best out of all the other possible worst case scenarios in other strategies. Rational beings would do this because they don't know whether they're going to be the ONE...the ACTUAL LEAST ADVANTAGED person in the entire society. There's a lot of metaphors about this but there's a particularly common one and I guess I'll just lay it out here...imagine you're having a pizza party...and you're ASKED by the people at the party to cut up the pizza however you want. The catch is...you can't know which piece of pizza is going to be yours until AFTER you cut the pizza. Now you may cut up the pizza into bigger pieces and smaller pieces if that's what you chose to do...but one thing for sure here: you're going to cut the pizza in a way where if you were to get the smallest piece...it's still something you'd be satisfied receiving. Somebody might ask at this point: well why isn't the obvious choice here to just cut every piece of pizza to be the exact same size, a type of socialist pizza cutting. Rawls is not a fan of Socialism. He respects what it's trying to do...but he thinks it achieves equality at the expense of everyone. Yeah, sure we're all equal under Socialism...but we're all equal at a lower standard of living than is possible in a restructured Capitalist system. Remember this is adhering to the Maximin Rule...what system produces a worst case scenario for a citizen that is the best? To Rawls the SMALLEST piece of pizza in a revised capitalist structure is BIGGER than the equal pieces provided by Socialism...it's just a bigger pizza. But on the other hand, to Rawls, we can't just have laissez faire free market Capitalism because THAT doesn't take into account the moral arbitrariness of unfair inherited advantages like intelligence, status or wealth. The question for Rawls is this: how do we structure Capitalism in a way where it is TRULY a rising tide that is raising all the ships, as opposed to just a few of them. Well we can start by laying out the criteria John Rawls prescribes for determining which of these inherited inequalities are just or "fair". In fact, that's the way he describes it...flying in the face of thousands of years of moral philosophy: Justice is not an eye for an eye, justice is not total equality...Justice is fairness, to Rawls. What's an example of an inequality that exists that is fair? Well first it must adhere to two strict rules: Social and

economic inequalities must first be to everyone's advantage. Such social and economic inequalities must be attached to positions that are equally open to all. So with this second rule Rawls is trying to protect against any sort of system with different classes people are born into, or even figurative classes...no positions in society reserved for a specific person or type of person even if you're the least advantaged person you can still apply for the position...doesn't mean you're gonna get it...just means that if there is an unequal position available, if we're going to ACCEPT that inequality as part of the structure of our society, it should be open to everyone to apply. What Rawls is referencing is that...historically there have been three primary ways people are blocked from prestigious positions in a society: one is legal, where there are actual legal barriers precluding a person from holding a position. One is by your birth status, which would make you disqualified from holding a position because of something about how you were born. And the third roadblock is having the talent or effort to be able to excel at the position. Rawls thinks a just society will stick to this third one and he says only one that DOES can be said to have true equality of opportunity. Now, the FIRST rule...that these inequalities must first be to everyone's advantage...this really is the cornerstone of what Rawls would eventually call his "system of liberal equality". Let's go back to our person that inherited a billion dollars to illustrate what he means. Let's say this person inherits a billion dollars...and then spends their life investing and reinvesting that money to improve the world around them. They create tons of jobs for the less advantaged, they innovate technologies that improve the lives of the rest of the world, they may offer scholarships to people that couldn't otherwise afford school to recruit them to work for their companies, they build storefronts that improve communities...this is an example of an inequality that may exist that truly is to everyone's advantage. So it is possible to inherit vast sums of money and still use it in a way that benefits others and makes it fair or just. Now on the other hand if this same person...took that billion dollars and just let it sit under a very large mattress for their whole life...well that WOULDN'T be to everyone's advantage...and at this point Rawls would be a fan of some type of heavy tax to penalize the inaction, probably followed by some type of government redistribution to the lesser

advantaged. But this extends beyond just inherited money...when Lebron James wins the genetic lottery and is born with athleticism and talent that warrants him making 10's of millions of dollars a year...he uses his athleticism to achieve an exalted status as a cultural icon...that inequality is an example of justice... because his abilities go on display and provide entertainment for millions of people. When someone's born with extreme intelligence and they go on to graduate from a prestigious school and become the tip of the spear in some new research program...their unequal position within society as a thought leader is justified... because their research will likely go on to improve the lives of the aggregate. This way of thinking about inequalities in society is known more broadly as "the difference principle"...or that we should remove inequalities within society as much as we can until the REMOVAL of further inequalities would cause harm to the least advantaged. Now, this is in contrast to the way we've often thought about things before, sometimes called part of the "efficiency principle", the idea that we should find people in society that need help...and help them as much as we can until HELPING them would cause harm to someone else. This is a completely different area of focus, the focus for Rawls is always on ensuring the most we can for the least advantaged person among us, as long as that insurance doesn't prevent US from contributing to society. Based on that last sentence it shouldn't be too far of a leap to reveal that what Rawls is ultimately doing with all this is providing a philosophical justification for a modern progressive income tax. We all have different talents and abilities. Take an example...the people who were lucky enough to be born with extreme intelligence...who were also lucky enough to be born into a family that nurtured that intelligence...who were also lucky enough to be born into an area where they had low crime and decent public schools, who also had the money and freedom to go to college, who were also healthy enough to not be in and out of the hospital their whole life...this person...who would be without a doubt an extremely impressive individual, is standing on the shoulders of giants. The contribution of EVERYONE in society has made anything that they ever accomplish... possible. Think of how much LESS this person could've accomplished if they had to grow all their own food, or didn't have roads to efficiently travel on, or had constantly keep watch to fend of

criminals. Through our own individual skillsets...we all look after each other in a way. This is why we WANT to incentivize people to become as talented as they possibly can...to Rawls we want to ALLOW for unequal positions of pay or status, but the difference in money or status is ONLY justifiable if that difference is used to BENEFIT the least advantaged among us or people like them. The Difference Principle. So these two rules that we talked about for what makes an inequality just...that it must be to everyone's advantage and be available in a position open to all...what these two things ultimately boil down to is equality of opportunity...and the difference principle. These two things combined make up the test that we have to run inequalities through to make sure the inequality is just...and Rawls thinks the actionable way to apply this is simply to start looking around at society, find examples of inequalities, and put them to the test. The FEELING I get from reading A Theory of Justice is that we shouldn't be thinking of the least advantaged within society as this annoying, faceless pest that's just sucking out a disproportionate amount of resources. The sense that I get from reading Rawls is that he wants us to be thinking about members of our society more like we'd think about members of our family. Because maybe in your family you have some variation of a tradition...where the whole family gets together and goes over to grandma Beatrice's house for the holidays. Now, grandma's getting older these days....she's 127 years old...she doesn't get around as well as she used to. She can't spend 15 hours toiling over a hot stove anymore...so the kids all get together and cook the meal for her these days. And when it comes time for dinner and everyone's sitting at the table there's an unspoken agreement that everybody in the family gets firsts before anyone gets seconds. You wouldn't give grandma table scraps that she could barely survive on, and why? Well, i'd imagine it has something to do with the fact that...she had one of my parents...my parents had me...in a strange way nothing that I have ever done in my life would be even POSSIBLE without this woman and the contribution she has made. Rawls might say so too, with every member of our society...even the least advantaged. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Robert Nozick - The Minimal State

Episode #138

This is a transcript of episode #138 on Robert Nozick. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So obviously there are a lot of different problems political philosophers were faced with throughout the twentieth century...and we've talked about several of them so far, but one of the BIGGEST ones that we HAVEN'T talked about yet...specifically for political philosophers in the mid to late 20th century... one of the biggest questions facing these thinkers was this: when we are hit with problems, big problems, that we need to solve collectively as a society...should the state or the government be the primary tool that we use to solve those problems? How much responsibility is wise to give to the government? Does the government solve the problems of a society in the best manner possible...or does giving the government more responsibilities to deal with CREATE more problems than it's worth? Another important question to consider about all this when it comes to THIS episode in particular: when you progressively give the government more jobs to do and more outcomes to guarantee for people, when you have a big, powerful government with a democracy behind it feeding it tasks to complete...does a big government plus a democracy always equal a tyranny of the majority? And do citizens that don't necessarily agree with the majority or the people currently holding political office, do those citizens just need to resign themselves to paying into a tax pool that FUNDS all the things they don't agree with? Maybe an over-sized government makes slaves of people whose views don't HAPPEN to align with the current majority. To me these are some of the most important and FUN questions to think about in all of political philosophy. But let's take these questions on one at a time. Should the GOVERNMENT be the tool that we use to solve our problems as a society...now as you can imagine when you ask a question like this, one that's THIS wide in scope...the ANSWERS you're gonna get are going to vary widely as well. Last time we talked about John Rawls and his work A Theory of Justice...and Rawls would be a good

example of a later 20th century thinker who is more on the side of government BEING a good solution to our problems. We saw this in his work: he lays out what he thinks is a fair and just distribution of social goods and then suggests that it's the GOVERNMENT'S job to tax and redistribute accordingly to ensure that distribution remains JUST and is not too imbalanced in one direction or another. But there are of course thinkers that disagree with Rawls. Maybe one of the most extreme examples of someone on the other side would be some variation of Anarchy. The exact OPPOSITE of believing that government is the best way to solve our problems. Human beings BEGAN in the state of nature...why should we believe that centralizing power into a single body we call "the government" is going to produce any better results than what we could otherwise produce with private enterprise? But we'll save that conversation for later when we do our episodes on the Anarchist thought of the 90's...today's episode is on a philosopher who falls somewhere in between John Rawls and an Anarchist. His name is Robert Nozick and the book of his we're going to be talking about today is titled Anarchy, State and Utopia. Now, just to give the following conversation a little preliminary structure...that title, Anarchy, State and Utopia is referencing the three major sections that the book is divided into. The first section would be Anarchy...where Nozick spends a considerable portion of time being understanding of the Anarchist's aversion to government, but ultimately making a case that they go too far. The middle portion of the book, State, has Nozick laying out the TYPE of state that HE thinks is best...and in the Utopia section is where he describes WHY his version of a state is the best...Utopia is a sort of tongue in cheek musing by Nozick..he by NO MEANS thinks his system is an actual Utopia...but he thinks it's FAR BETTER than other systems that have been tried and he argues for why he thinks that is. See, Nozick is not a fan of there being a BIG state, with a lot of responsibilities...he's not a fan of there being no state...so what is he a fan of? How big should the government be and what exactly should it do? Nozick is a fan of what he would call "the minimal state". The best way to start understanding what he means by this is probably to contrast him with both the work of Rawls and the Anarchists of his time...and to get us into this mindset of Nozick let's start with some general criticisms of

Rawls and these bigger government approaches which will then LEAD us to the criticisms of Rawls detailed by Nozick himself. The first place someone might take issue with Rawls is with his use of the maximin principle. That word maximin, as you might remember from last time, is a mixture of the words maximum and minimum. Rawls holds that rational agents... when choosing the structure of society would reliably choose the option that provided the maximum for the minimum, or the best case scenario for the least advantaged within a society. But some people would reply back to that and say, sure that sounds great. But when you REALLY look at the studies and what human beings TRULY seem to value when it comes to the role of government, they don't want the best situation for the least advantaged...they want certain basic services guaranteed, with a satisfactory quality of life ensured...and then beyond that...they just want the government to leave them alone and let them live their life. People don't want the government telling them what things they should care about or how they should be living, and the larger the government gets the more they're asked to do that. We're going to be touching on this at multiple points in the next couple episodes, but let this be the first instance of saying... that one of the main criticisms people have here is that Rawls wants to do away with markets and instead rely on a predetermined fixed distribution of the social goods which leads some people to think that the maximin principle is not "obviously what rational agents would choose in the original position" as Rawls suggests, but instead maybe Rawls NEEDS the maximin principle for other parts of his theory to work at all, and that there are actually MANY different options we might see rational agents choose while structuring society. Another common criticism of Rawls: he talks about the people in the original position structuring a society through a veil of ignorance, how would people structure a society if they couldn't know their age, gender, race, income level, family, level of intelligence, etc...and there are people out there that would reply BACK to this and say once again, that SOUNDS really nice, but doesn't that take away practically everything about what makes a person...a person? These aspects of our identity MATTER...they're part of the composite that makes us a human being...and political institutions need to be structured to deal with the problems of human

beings...not these nameless, faceless, rational agents of Rawls that don't actually resemble a human at all. But maybe the biggest point of departure between Nozick and Rawls comes down to the way they see rights. Nozick opens *Anarchy, State and Utopia* with this famous line, "Individuals have rights and there are things no person or group may do to them." Nozick wants to focus heavily on our rights as citizens...and the reason he wants to pay such close attention to them is because he wants to get away from what he thought was a huge misstep in the work of John Rawls. Rawls talks a lot in his work about fairness. Justice IS fairness to Rawls. When you're born into an estate worth a billion dollars...you don't DESERVE that billion dollars any more than you deserve the negative consequences of somebody falling in front of your car by chance. Both outcomes are morally arbitrary. But Nozick's going to say that none of this stuff matters when it comes to the state...because Rawls is asking the wrong questions. The job of the state is not to determine what people deserve or what things are fair or not. The job of the state is to determine what people are entitled to and then to enforce that. Let's say your great grandma Beatrice tragically passes away. Let's also say that throughout the last five years of her life her daughter took care of her and made sure she was safe. Grandma Beatrice in her will tries to leave everything she owns to her daughter, but makes some sort of error on the legal form and through some random sequence of events her possessions get passed on to her son, who for the sake of the example has always HATED grandma Beatrice and hasn't spoken to her for years. The role of the state... is not to be an episode of Judge Judy where they sit there and reprimand Grandma Beatrice's son for not being in her life...the role of the state is not to tell him that it's not fair or that he doesn't DESERVE what was left for him. The job of the state is to determine what he is entitled to and then to make sure that he gets it. Nozick thinks there are certain rights that all human beings would agree upon whether they are in a state of nature or in the most advanced society on the planet. He calls the values that ground these rights moral side constraints and in short, they set the parameters for what can be done to a person without violating their rights. One of the most important ones for Nozick is this: that no person should be harmed without their consent. Seems pretty reasonable...but as we'll

see it's THIS moral side constraint in particular, it's TRULY taking the rights of people seriously that will eventually lead Nozick to unavoidable problems with the work of both the Anarchists and John Rawls. Let's start with the problems this leads to with the work of the Anarchists, laid out in the Anarchy section of the book. So if one thing we can all agree upon is that no human being wants to be harmed against their will...then Nozick says when you consider the hostile, dangerous environment of the state of nature, and you THINK about how human beings would behave in that scenario...what would naturally emerge are private services that provide people with protection from other people that want to hurt them. At the most basic level you'd pay a fee...and then you'd have your own personal security guard whose job it is to make sure nobody tries to hurt you or your family or take any of your stuff. But feasibly not everybody can have their own private security guard...so these guards would have to take on multiple clients, probably people that are in a similar proximity to each other. But then another problem comes up, Nozick says. The whole thing becomes a convoluted mess. When you have hundreds or thousands of competing security guard factions all trying to enforce the rules of the people who happen to be paying for them...there's no codified set of rules that all the security guards are enforcing...it's going to be a nightmare for these guards to have to figure out in real time... who's a client of theirs vs who isn't, which set of rules they're enforcing today vs tomorrow, which rules correspond with which client... what happens when there's a conflict between what two different clients want? Not to mention, Nozick says, what's going to happen when to settle a dispute one person's security guard has to fight another person's security guard? Well, one of them is going to win and then everybody from the losing security guard's detail is going to want to be protected by the OTHER security guard now. This may seem like a weird hypothetical for Nozick to spending so much time on, but the argument that he's ultimately making here is that what NATURALLY emerges in the state of nature is a local monopoly over the protection services of a region. Another way of putting that would be to say that what naturally emerges is a very basic kind of state that allows people to pay a fee in exchange for basic protection and the enforcement of contracts. This is one of the reasons WHY he

thinks the Anarchist takes their aversion to government too far...because even WITHOUT any sort of formally organized state...this inevitable monopoly over protection services effectively creates the same thing. This version of an extremely minimal state...one that provides basic protection for people and makes sure that contracts are enforced: this is the standard, from which any conversations about the role of government need to proceed from. So if you have any ambitions about fun or creative services that you think it's the government's job to provide...you're going to have to do some major convincing to Nozick if you want to make a case for the government being the appropriate thing to carry those services out. NOT ONLY is this not what the government is GOOD at doing...because it has a complete monopoly over the services and thus can be embarrassingly inefficient with no consequences...but this also isn't what the government SHOULD be doing to Nozick. The more stuff we ask the government to do...the more money they're going to need from you to inefficiently execute that plan...why is it the GOVERNMENT'S job to tell people how to live their lives outside of following the laws? Nozick thinks we need to take answering this question seriously and be very cautious of commissioning the government to solve our problems, because giving a centralized body like the government more and more power and more and more stuff to do comes with very real consequences. This is clearly a point of disagreement between the different views of Nozick and Rawls...because Nozick thinks whenever you advocate for a state, that's supposed to redistribute wealth from one group of people to another, you are fundamentally going against that moral side constraint, you are doing harm to someone who has not consented to be harmed. Let me explain what he means. Nozick understands where Rawls is coming from here...he gets it...the idea is that you are part of a group... you have benefited in some way from that group...so therefore you now owe a debt TO that group that you're obligated to pay through higher taxes. Well Nozick gives a counter example in Anarchy, State and Utopia...bit of paraphrasing here but he would say imagine you're at home one day...you're cleaning your house...and it's a nice day outside so you open up the window and from down the street you can hear your neighbor playing instruments practicing music with their band in their garage. So you sit there

taking a break from cleaning and listen to the music for a while. Now imagine the next day...the person from down the street comes to your door and demands payment because you listened to their music. Would you say that you OWE this person money? Of course not, Nozick says...the only way you'd owe them money is if you CONSENTED to pay them for the music before they started playing. Forcing somebody to pay into a system... that will then redistribute their income to whatever cause it wants regardless of whether or not the person consents to support that cause...to Nozick, is a backhanded, covert way of implementing forced labor on your citizens. For somebody paying 40% of their income in taxes...you are asking them to go to work everyday and produce value for the state for 40% of their time...for almost 3 and a half hours out of an 8 hour shift they are not working towards improving their life...they are raising funds for the government to spend on whatever vision for society they have today. The fact that this money sometimes goes towards people who are in need REALLY has nothing to do with it to Nozick, because when you truly take people's rights seriously and don't harm them without their consent then you realize that doing something wrong is never okay just because you think it will lead to good results. To Nozick, you can't just conveniently ignore one person's rights because you think doing so will make things better for other people. This is of course in direct contrast to the long tradition of political philosophy being centered around Utilitarianism. To illustrate his point further Nozick gives one of the most famous examples from his work. Just imagine for a second if you were a slave under the control of a brutal slave master that abuses you and treats you like dirt. Now, we would all agree this is not a way ANYBODY should be treated and we would CERTAINLY not say that this slave is a free person. But then Nozick says imagine another scenario, imagine you're still a slave, but your slave master doesn't abuse you. You work long hours but you're allowed to have a family and your own modest place to live. Would THAT be an okay way to treat someone? Would we consider THAT person free? No. Well how about if you're still a slave but your slave master doesn't really need your help all that much? You can live on a farm out in the country, raise your kids, go to the store and buy stuff, but nonetheless you were still the property of the slave master.

We would say clearly this is still wrong...this person is still OWNED by someone else, they are not a free human being in any real sense. Nozick walks this example all the way back to living a modern life under a government that taxes and redistributes...and a culture behind it that tells you what sort of job you're going to have, what causes your tax dollars are going to go towards, how much you need to work, how many vacations you go on, what you buy...Nozick's question here is when you are living in a society where the government has SO MANY tasks that aim at ensuring specific outcomes for people...do we really own ourselves fully? As the size of the government increases does our ability to be truly free decrease in a similar proportion? The question Nozick wants answered is at what point in his example does the slave truly experience self ownership? This is the reason Nozick is an advocate of the minimal state...Rawls had GREAT intentions with his work. But one of his biggest problems for Nozick was that he aimed for what he called a patterned distribution of social goods. The distribution of goods MUST follow a particular PATTERN that we've decided is good beforehand. Philosophers of this time typically called for a patterned distribution if they were trying to get away from markets, usually because they're trying to get away from the inequalities that are often PRODUCED by market systems. But Nozick thinks aiming for things like EQUALITY across the board...or the best for the least advantaged across the board is wrong on many different levels. Not the least of which is that let's say that you have a certain patterned distribution that you want to achieve...TOTAL equality for the sake of the example...let's say one day you achieve that goal...well what happens the SECOND AFTER that goal is achieved? Well, somebody sells something or gives a gift to someone or someone gets sick and can't work...in other words...things aren't equal across the board anymore...so what necessarily NEEDS to happen is the government has to step in and RESTORE the balance of that pattern. What you are signing yourself up for, to Nozick, is an endless spree of government coercion...where they constantly have their fingers inside your life...constantly trying to produce certain outcomes and a TYPE of citizen. To Nozick the bigger the government the more Utilitarianism starts to creep in...the more we start ignoring the rights of the few under the assumption that it is good for the rest of the

population. But Nozick wants to respect people's rights on a level most political philosophers weren't willing to. This is why Nozick thinks it's none of the government's BUSINESS what people deserve...the question they should be asking is what is legal and what are people entitled to. So when Rawls talks about the moral arbitrariness of being born into a billion dollar estate...how if you aren't putting that towards the least advantaged within society then we can't consider you having that money as justice...Nozick is going to say that the only question the government should be concerned with is did you get that money in a legal way? There is a JUST way to get that money and there is a JUST way for it to be transferred from its previous owner...as long as it follows these two criteria...then the ownership of that billion dollars is just...we need to respect people's rights and we need to respect our legal system. When someone finds a way to make a billion dollars while following all the legal parameters set up to protect people along the way...Nozick would ask how can we say that outcome is not just, when every step taken to get there WAS just under our legal system? Nozick thinks Rawls' big mistake here is that he's thinking about people's property as though when they die it enters some sort of purgatory where it's not owned by anyone and then falls into someone else's lap. But these things were already legally acquired and owned by people...and then given to someone else through a legal process. Nozick compares the way Rawls is looking at society to the way people would look at being stranded on a desert island. How do you treat the limited resources that you have once you're stranded? You take an inventory of what you have, you distribute it the best you can...and when Tom Hanks finds a volleyball...smears his blood all over it and names it his good pal Wilson...there is NOBODY out there that is saying, well technically that belongs to the Wilson volleyball factory that's not your property Tom Hanks...no, nobody would say that...but here's the thing Nozick would say: we don't live stranded on a desert island. This is NOT a state of emergency. People inherit things that are already owned for having produced extreme value in former societies. Say all you want as an individual about whether that's FAIR or whether they DESERVE it...but when it comes to the state they should only go as far as asking what people are entitled to and whether they achieved it through legal

means..when the path to get there was just...the outcome is just.To Nozick the beauty of his system lies in the fact that there ISN'T some patterned distribution that the government is guaranteeing through coercion. There AREN'T a handful of specific outcomes the government is nurturing more than others with everyone's tax dollars. The minimal state allows for a level of freedom and self ownership that a big government system can't offer. When you don't have a busy, powerful government with a tyranny of the majority directing it...Nozick thinks that leaves room for types of lifestyles that are incompatible with big government approaches. Because while the big government approaches have very specific outcomes they're trying to ensure, the minimal state allows you to run any experiment you want as long as you're not harming the people around you. So under the minimal state if you wanted to buy some land, band together with a bunch of friends and start a communist compound because it's just the type of society you want to live in...you can do it! Think the liberals are ruining the world? Think the conservatives are ruining the world? Start a community where you cut either of them out completely and see how it goes for you! The beauty of Nozicks minimal state is that it allows the world to act as a laboratory where we can run any kind of experiment that we want...and then LEARN from the successes and failures of other strategies. This is far from a perfect system, but AT THE VERY LEAST it is a system that truly respects people's rights...and this leads Nozick to reference Leibniz and jokingly refer to this system as "the best of all possible worlds". From Leibniz's Theodicy that we talked about on this show.The book Anarchy, State and Utopia offers a unique argument in favor of Libertarianism, which at the time was in many ways a different solution to 20th century political problems that were going on. Next episode we're going to be talking about the philosopher Friedrich Hayek...and it's been said that while Nozick offers a defense of Libertarianism from the perspective of rights, Hayek offers a defense of Libertarianism from the perspective of markets. But BOTH of them it should be said take issue with the idea that we should be PLANNING what our society is going to look like before hand and then using the government as a tool to coerce that into existence. Whether that is a planned distribution of social goods, whether that's a planned economic system with

specific outcomes like socialism, whether that's a planned idea of what a citizen of a particular society is going to be like (how much they're going to work, how much they're going to make, etc) Whatever plan you may have beforehand of how society should look, when the enforcer of that plan is a centralized monopoly of concentrated power like the government...you may be creating more problems than you're solving. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Friedrich Von Hayek - The Road to Serfdom

Episode #139

So, all the way back in the late 19th century -- shortly after the work of Marx, shortly after the economic changes associated with the Industrial Revolution -- there were several groups of thinkers that began to create what would eventually become an all-out movement towards centralization, the central planning of economies. Let me explain what central planning is by explaining why the thinkers felt compelled to start a movement in the first place.

So, in the late 19th century, the Western world was primarily made up by market economies. People like Marx and several others come along and start throwing around critiques of capitalist market economies: they create enormous inequality; they lead to the alienation of the worker; they fragment economic efforts and create waste because people can be engaged in so many different incompatible tasks at once. But not the least of these criticisms was the claim that these market economies, based on a flaw in design, inexorably lead to massive ebbs and flows within the market, booms and crashes, crashes that end up negatively affecting the lives of potential billions. The late 19th century was rife with thinkers looking for replacements for market economies and waiting for their inevitable demise.

Well, time went by. And along came August of 1929, the beginning of the Great Depression, global economic collapse. And it seemed to many of these thinkers that this was the day of reckoning for capitalist, market-based systems. This was Marx's prophecy finally coming true. When trying to figure out what caused this global meltdown, there were many theories, but one of the more common ones was that the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution produced so many more goods at such a more efficient rate that market economies couldn't handle it and became flooded. There was a real feeling at the time that our market economies of the past were an outdated way of doing things that just can't keep up with the sort of economies that are going to have to

exist in a post-Industrial-Revolution world.

The solution for so many of these countries affected by the Great Depression was to have the government step in and try to prop up the economy in various ways until it was functional again. This is where central planning comes into the picture. The idea is that we would remove markets from the equation altogether and instead rely on a central body, like the government, to come up with a plan for how they want the economy to look. And then they control aspects of the economy and do their best to ensure that plan is executed. Markets weren't getting the job we wanted done, so let's call upon the government to make sure it gets done. This was the logic behind central planning or centrally planned economies.

So World War II comes along during the Great Depression, and on display are multiple world powers that have moved towards central planning. By the way, certainly not the only kind, but the most popular version of central planning at this time was socialism. But, during World War II, there were all types of centralization on display. You had Soviet Russia. You had National Socialism in Germany. You had more marginal versions of socialization in the United States through FDR's New Deal or in the UK stemming from the Fabian Society. You had what was going on in Italy. Once again, major world powers were turning towards central planning. And, especially during the war effort, you saw that governments of these countries controlled giant sections of the economy in an effort to make sure things kept going. Not to mention, even prior to the extreme cases of the war, you had labor cartels emerging in socialist countries, where they would set up arrangements between the government, businesses, and labor unions, and they'd use price fixing; they'd determine how many products would be made, determine how many people could work, who could work, and more.

During the war, central planning had staked the claim to the world, which brings us to one of the most significant economic events of the 20th century, the end of World War II. Because now that nations weren't facing an existential threat where they needed the government to step in and ensure economic order, what do they do? Do they return back to the market economies that were so popular before all this chaos broke out? Do they

take this as a sign and stick with central planning? Many nations did stick with central planning.

So it was right at this snapshot in time, right after World War II, that the philosopher we're going to talk about today wrote one of the most influential books of 20th-century economics. He is Nobel Prize-winning economist Friedrich von Hayek. And, to put it very simply, Hayek thought that all these societies that were using the government to control aspects of their economy were making a huge mistake and that economists and philosophers of his time didn't even realize just how much market systems were accomplishing for the world until they weren't there anymore.

Hayek was a fan of the Austrian School of economics which, if you remember from our episode, set their sights on refuting many of the ideas that were core to socialism. So it's impossible to divorce a critique of socialism from his work entirely. But it would be equally impossible to understand the scope of Hayek's work without also considering that he was ultimately critical of the primary idea behind socialism, which is the central planning of economies. It should also be said, in a clarification later on in his life, he said that he defined socialism as any system where the government exercises significant control over the economy.

Hayek would probably want to start out by talking about this movement towards centralization that began in the late 19th century. These people were, no doubt, trying to solve problems they saw with market economies. But let's really take a look at what their solution was. We have a way that we want the economy to be, so let's make a plan and then use this really powerful tool we have called the government to execute that plan. Which was essentially to say let's have a meeting, get all the smartest people we can find, put them in a room, and plan what our entire economy is going to look like. Now, on one hand, that sounds like one of the most arrogant things you've ever heard. But, then again, we do have this long tradition within philosophy of optimism towards this idea of being able to come together, have rational discussions about things, and come up with the best solution. Why shouldn't we be able to come up with a plan or design for the entire economy?

Hayek once said, “The curious task of economics is to demonstrate to men how little they really know about what they imagine they can design.” Hayek is known as an anti-rationalist in this regard. Now, I get it, philosophically loaded term, but the best way to describe it in this context is to say that Hayek believes that a total understanding of how the economy should be structured is unknowable. And, even if it were knowable, it certainly wouldn’t be something we could arrive at by assembling a handful of thought leaders in a room just talking about stuff. The economy, to Hayek, is the sum total of billions of transactions, each one of them giving us crucial information.

The best comparison to understand how Hayek sees the functions of the economy is to think about how similar it is to language. You can’t sit in a room, come up with a bunch of new words, chisel them into stone, and say, “Here’s a new language, everybody.” No, that’s not how language or words work. You know, as we talked about on our Wittgenstein episodes, language is a living, breathing organism. Words derive their meaning from the way they are used by people within a particular linguistic community. So, in this way, language is a collective agreement between people that is constantly moving, constantly evolving based on the sum total of the choices of sometimes millions of people.

The economy, to Hayek, is a similar sort of collective agreement between people that can’t be planned, predicted, or ever fully known. The government should never be in the business of coercing the economy because the government can never have an exhaustive understanding of the billions of transactions that are going on. To Hayek, the only people you could say kind of have a sort of fragmented version of total knowledge of the economy is the aggregate of people that make up the economy and their local knowledge of their respective fields.

Let me explain. Say Grandma Beatrice owns a flower shop in the suburbs of Seattle, Washington. No matter how smart the people are that you could ever gather into a room, there is no way the government, or any centralized body for that matter, can ever know as much as Grandma Beatrice knows about her customers -- what flowers they’re going

to buy, what prices they're willing to pay for things, what decorations they like on their flowers, how many flowers they're going to buy in a particular circumstance. The list goes on forever. Grandma Beatrice has what Hayek would call "localized knowledge" of her little section of the economy. By the way, in the same way, she has local knowledge of the way words are used around her in Seattle, Washington.

Markets allow for societies to have a decentralized approach to the way the economy evolves based on the choices of consumers and suppliers rather than on some plan a few people thought sounded good at the time. One of the big problems with having a centralized group that makes all the plans for the direction of society is that, whenever new problems come up, it always requires you to give more power to the state to be able to solve those problems. See, when you remove markets from the equation and instead say, "We're going to plan everything," you miss out on so much "localized knowledge" that actually makes understanding the economy even possible.

Take an example used in the work of Eric Mack. Let's say you have a centrally planned economy. What is to stop any central planner from deciding one day that we should take all of our titanium resources and dedicate them to the production of license plates? What he's getting at here is that when you remove markets, when you remove the "localized knowledge" of people like Grandma Beatrice and everything she knows about the supply and demand of her business, the price of something within a market system relays so much information to people about how much supply there is for something versus how much demand there is for something. How is the central planner to ever know what the true value is of anything? What, we're just supposed to just trust they know everything and will keep things ordered like they're God or something? Sounds a lot like God.

That idea that if we don't have a designated group of people planning the economy that the alternative is that society's going to collapse into complete disorder -- No, order within an economy emerges spontaneously, for Hayek, just as words derive a new meaning spontaneously. We don't need a centralized body planning language. And we don't need one for the economy either. Both are self-ordering systems. More than that, the knowledge we need if we want anything to work -- be it language or the economy or

any other example; there are many kinds of these self-ordering systems all around us if you look for them -- the knowledge we need for those to work is fragmented across all individuals.

And this is probably where Hayek would want to introduce how important the concept of freedom is to him. Sometimes he also uses the word “liberty,” but his point is that we need everyone to be able to act freely if we can ever hope to have all the information their choices provide. Each person’s individual, varying choices embody yet another crucial perspective of “localized knowledge.” For example, apply the concept of central planning to the idea of social order. This is the equivalent of looking at everyone’s individual skill sets and then allocating them as resources that a cabal of people have chosen will best benefit the plan of society. Does that remind you of any examples of centrally planned societies in the 20th century?

Not only should we not want to live like we’re an ant colony, Hayek would say self-ordering systems like the economy have lesser potential when you limit a person’s liberty and, as such, one of our primary goals we should have is to maximize people’s liberty to choose. Once again, government should not be deciding the ends for people. It should be protecting our liberty so that we can choose the ends for ourselves. Society should not be thought of as an organization; society should be a spontaneous, self-ordering system.

That said, Hayek isn’t against all organizations. He doesn’t think there’s zero room for planning, just not at the government level. He’s all for people starting businesses or synagogues or charities or sports teams or whatever you want. These things have specific, planned objectives they’re trying to bring about. The difference is, the people involved in those organizations volunteered to be a part of them. You can’t run a country like it’s a lemonade stand.

The role of government, to Hayek, is to enforce the rule of law -- this is an absolutely crucial thing to have if you’re going to have a market economy -- but then it’s also to do two other things. One, it should execute the projects the public needs that voluntary transactions don’t provide and, two, give assistance to “some unfortunate minorities, the

weak, or those unable to provide for themselves.” Hayek strongly opposes the idea of equality of outcome because it is utterly incompatible with a society of free people. See, if you’re going to treat people fairly across the board when it comes to the legal system, you can never aspire to any sort of real equality of outcome, to Hayek, because, if for no other reason, people are different. People make different choices. They care about different things. People want different things out of their life, and that’s ultimately a good thing for us because giving people the freedom to choose gives society access to their unique set of “localized knowledge.” You either have to sacrifice equality of outcome or equality under the law. You can’t ever have both, to Hayek, so take your pick.

“But, Hayek, I live in a socialist society, and things are great here. I mean, you say socialism’s so bad. Shouldn’t the whole society have burnt to the ground by this point?” Socialism can work for long, long periods of time but only through the use of government coercion, sometimes extreme government coercion. You can be very happy living in a socialist country, but only as long as what you want to do with your freedom corresponds well with certain pre-planned aspects of your life that the government has already chosen. As long as you never want to stray from the pack too far, you’re going to be golden in a socialist country.

See, under a market-based economy people can agree and disagree and dedicate resources to things that are completely incompatible with each other. But under central planning the resources have to be used in a way that is planned by the government. The choices people make about the preferences of their lives so often need to be approved by the government. And, oftentimes, what both of these things require is the use of propaganda by the government -- to Hayek, sometimes incredibly subtle propaganda to keep people’s subjectivity and desires aligned with the goals of the central plan.

The use of central planning within economic systems puts the citizens of that country on what Hayek calls “the road to serfdom,” which is also the title of the book he wrote in that context immediately after World War II. What’s meant when he says “the road to serfdom” is, quite simply, that movement towards central planning or a socialist society is the first step for citizens on the road towards totalitarianism. He gives a ton of

different reasons for this throughout *The Road to Serfdom*. Some of them are obvious just because of what we've already talked about so far. But let's talk about a couple other ones.

One has to do with the nature of power structures within these socialist societies. Central planning requires that we give an extraordinary amount of power to a small handful of people that'll be making decisions for planning society. How this has panned out historically is that sometimes this responsibility even ends up falling into the hands of a single person, be it some sort of dictator or even just a single person that dominates that group that's making the decisions. Well, not only is this a dangerously narrow point of view to run a society from that in itself may run the risk of totalitarianism, consider additionally what Hayek says in a famous chapter from *The Road to Serfdom* titled "Why the Worst Get on Top."

Hayek asks the question "What sort of person would be drawn towards one of those positions of power in a society with a centrally planned economy?" What sort of person, when you tell them at the job interview, "You're going to be one of the very few that decide the plan for society," what kind of person not only nods enthusiastically and is excited about that prospect but then is also willing to run an elaborate campaign just for the luxury to have that position of power? You're campaigning to be in the business of government coercion. Hayek thinks all the people you'd ever want to be in a position like this -- the tolerant, the measured, the wise, the empathetic, etc. -- wouldn't ever want a job like "central planner" where there's such a disparity of power. And that's probably healthy. The type of people that are attracted to positions like this, seemingly, are always the ones that stand to gain the most from the position, which also makes them the person motivated to campaign the hardest, most willing to exploit the office once they get it, most likely to use any means necessary to maintain that position, which for Hayek means that they're often the politicians willing to take advantage of the uneducated, the gullible, and will even use hatred towards other groups as a way of generating support. Hayek describes this person in *The Road to Serfdom* here: "He will be able to obtain the support of all the docile and gullible, who have no strong convictions of their own but are

prepared to accept a ready-made system of values if it is only drummed into their ears sufficiently loudly and frequently.” Because these are effective tactics for getting elected, you’re always going to end up with the people willing to use those tactics in office. This person will always be able to beat the tolerant, measured, and wise person. To Hayek, the person that’s willing to act differently in the public sphere than they do in the private sphere will always have an advantage and, thus, that is “why the worst get on top.” But also consider, even if you were to get a decently well-meaning person in office for a period of time, that whenever you give someone a position of power in the world -- whether it’s the dictator of a country or the assistant manager at Dairy Queen -- whenever there’s power involved, there’s a sort of self-reinforcing nature about it. People tend to think, “If I’m not using this power that’s been given to me, can I really say that I’m doing my job?” Not to mention the need to justify your position of power to the people that gave it to you so often resulting in making pointless choices mistaking movement for progress. This is just one reason of many why otherwise perfectly well-meaning people, whose intentions were just to come up with a plan for how we want society to look and then get busy on executing it -- this is one way totalitarianism can take hold. But this is just one “road to serfdom.” There are many others. Sometimes it happens gradually over the course of hundreds of years.

You know, the famous economist Milton Friedman, who was a friend and colleague of Hayek’s and knew his work very well, was asked once to do an interview in part talking about Hayek’s book, *The Road to Serfdom*, and what he was trying to convey with it. During the interview, he gives an anecdote describing the effects of this type of gradual centralization in the United States throughout the course of his life.

This is taken from the interview:

“I’m a very old man. And I was graduated from high school in 1928. That’s a long time ago. Now, if you looked at the situation in 1928, we were much poorer in terms of physical goods. We didn’t have microwaves; we didn’t have washing machines. You can go down the line. There’s no question that we’re enormously wealthier today, in that sense, and enormously have a higher standard of living from that point of view. On the

other hand, we were safer, more secure, freer in 1928 than we are now. As of that time, government was spending something like 10 to 15 percent of the national income, the private sector 85 to 90. Today, government controls over half the national income, and private enterprise controls only the rest. Where have all these good things come from? Can you name any of those additions to our well-being that have come from government? It wasn't the government that produced the microwave. It wasn't the government that produced improved automobiles. It wasn't the government that produced computers that led to the information age.

"Now, on the other hand, consider our problems. Our major problems are not economic. Our major problems are social. Our major problems are the underclass in the center cities, the development of crime so that today we're much less safe than we were when I graduated high school. We have much less feeling of security, much less optimism about what the future's going to be like. And all the problems have been produced by government.

"Consider the schools: the quality of schooling I got in a public school in 1928 was almost surely a great deal higher than you can get in any but a small number of schools now. You have the dropouts; you have the decline in scores of the SAT and the like. Why? Because education is the most socialized industry in the United States. Ninety percent of our kids are in public schools, ten percent in private. And education is a completely centralized, socialized system. And it behaves just the way every other socialized system does. It produces a low-quality output, benefits a small number of people -- currently, mostly those who are associated with the National Education Association -- and harms, does a great deal of harm to other people."

You know, a few episodes ago I gave the example of it maybe being possible that instead of treating other members of society as though we're in competition with them, maybe we could start thinking about them more like members of one giant family. Well, Hayek is a great example of someone who would have heard me say that and smacked me right in the mouth because one of the bigger ideas that Hayek offers up in his work is the idea that society is not a family, nor can it ever be like a family, or it would completely

collapse. Hayek says that life in this modern world forces us to live two very distinct, parallel lives. On one hand, we are members of a family, a group of friends. And, when we're in that setting, we think of those people and treat them in a very specific way. The example from the episode was that everybody goes over to Grandma Beatrice's house for the holidays and, because she's getting older, all the kids cook the holiday meal for her. But Hayek would ask, just imagine if we really did extend that way of treating Grandma Beatrice to the rest of society. Because the other life we're constantly living in parallel is our life as an economic agent, a person trying to provide value to people in exchange for a living. Let's say you're a chef. Do you cook thanksgiving dinner free of charge for every Grandma Beatrice that decides to walk through your doors? Of course not. You'd be out of business almost instantly. But it's not just you; we all would be out of business. Society would be out of business.

The same way it may sound ridiculous for someone to go to their grandma's house and not give her any food because she didn't pay for it, Hayek would say it's equally ridiculous for people engaged in markets to treat customers like members of their family. Living in the modern world requires you to play both roles, and things would not be good if either of these spheres tried to act like the other.

The work of Friedrich von Hayek went on to become some of the most influential work in economics in all of the 20th century. But, even if you're not convinced, even if you're totally unconvinced by the economic arguments -- forget the rule of law, couldn't care less about markets -- Hayek, after listening to his case, at the very least would want you to remember one thing. It's something he saw as one of the sharpest differences between what we call a free society and a centrally planned society. He says it in a famous quote. "While the last resort of a competitive economy is the bailiff, the ultimate sanction of a planned economy is the hangman."

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Isaiah Berlin pt. 1 - Pluralism

Episode #140

So we've talked multiple times on this show about this ongoing debate between 20th-century political philosophers, this specter that always seems to be looming of nature versus culture, Socrates versus Protagoras, rationalism versus relativism. These thinkers so often seem to be faced with a choice between the essentialism of the Enlightenment or the nihilism of later modernity. But, nonetheless, even after having this conversation so many times, there always still seems to be hope for us because something no doubt every person listening to this has already considered by this point is, why does it got to be one or the other? I mean, this seems like a really easy problem to solve. Why can't it be a little bit of both? Why can't it be nature and culture? Now, something it's important to understand is that it's one thing just to say that, you know, to offer up that theory when you're having coffee with your friends and to get nods of approval because it sounds so delightfully tolerant. But it's quite another to be a philosopher staking your entire career and reputation on it and then, beyond that, trying to find a way to justify where exactly we should draw the lines between nature and culture. What is it about human experience that's determined by the intrinsic structure of the universe, nature; and what can we say is a cultural construction? What criteria do we even use to determine that?

See, over the years it's been hard enough for a philosopher to make a case for even one side of this, let alone both sides for different reasons. But, that said, the philosopher we're going to talk about today tried to do just that. His name was Isaiah Berlin. And to understand how he tried to find a middle ground between nature and culture will take the rest of the next two episodes to explain. And I highly recommend sticking with his ideas for both episodes because, even more so than some other thinkers we've discussed in this series, he had some hauntingly relevant insights about the way we treat each other

in the recent political landscape. And, like any nuanced idea, these insights require a bit of setup because they build off his other ideas that I just couldn't get to them until episode two.

But, anyway, Isaiah Berlin began his career as an academic philosopher, then transformed into more of a historian of ideas, and then finished out his career making contributions to 20th-century political philosophy that ended up changing the world. And one of these subject matters within 20th-century political philosophy that needs some serious reevaluation to Berlin was the typical way that philosophers casually throw around the concept of freedom or liberty without ever really clearly defining what it is they're even talking about.

Berlin would say that practically every moral philosopher that's ever produced anything of significance in Western philosophy has talked about freedom in these glowing terms as though it's some sort of universal good and an unquestionably valuable thing that we should strive to have as much of as possible. They've talked about freedom in this way and, yet, no one has seriously tried to get to the bottom of what really is meant when philosophers talk about this stuff. We just assume we know what they mean when they say "freedom," at a certain level. But, in reality, Berlin would say, when you actually look at the history of ideas, there are over 200 different definitions of freedom that have been laid out by thinkers over the years. Maybe it's time we consolidate these into an understanding of freedom that deals with what's common among all these individual takes.

When Isaiah Berlin sets out to describe his concepts of negative and positive freedom, he's not looking to provide the end-all-be-all definition of freedom. He's trying to simplify thousands of years of philosophical discourse about freedom into something that's a little bit more manageable and useful to us.

Now, these thinkers throughout history and all of their 200-plus definitions have described 2 very distinct types of freedom. Berlin calls these, once again, “negative freedom” and “positive freedom.” And the most basic, short-hand way that these concepts are sometimes described is to say that “negative freedom” is freedom from, and “positive freedom” is freedom to. It should be said, this is without a doubt an oversimplification of both concepts. But thinking about it as “freedom from” and “freedom to” can be useful when it comes to remembering the actual line in the sand Isaiah Berlin was trying to draw between these two types of freedom. “Negative freedom” or “negative liberty” is, simply put, freedom from interference by outside entities, whether that’s the government, whether that’s a hateful group, whether that’s a bully at school. “Negative liberty” is described by Berlin as, “simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others.” When philosophers over the years have talked about freedom, one common thread among them has been freedom from outside entities controlling aspects of a person’s life.

Now, “positive freedom,” on the other hand, was a bit more difficult to classify for Berlin because, while “negative freedom” can be seen as the possibilities that are open for you to explore -- freedom from obstruction by outside entities -- you still need the freedom to actually be able to act on any one of those options. “Positive freedom” is that freedom to. And the important distinction to make here is that it doesn’t just mean you have the opportunity to do something; true “positive freedom” means you have the ability to do it. For example, to Berlin, if you’re addicted to a substance or a behavior that prevents you from being able to function, then effectively it doesn’t really matter how many options are available to you within “negative freedom.” Your freedom to act on any one of them is nonexistent. And you could say the same thing about procrastination or a lack of motivation, chronic injury, disease. The point is, regardless of how many options we have at our disposal, sometimes we become slaves to our mental or physical shortcomings.

This is why in another part of his work Berlin offers a clarification of “positive freedom” and refers to it as a sort of “self-rule.” But what does it really mean to be autonomous like that or to “self-rule?” And to what end exactly are we supposed to be “self-ruling” towards? These questions and more instantly bothered Isaiah Berlin because he knew right away just how ambiguous the idea of “positive liberty” was and how, because of that fact, it could easily become coopted by governments narrowing the definition of freedom, trying to control people.

See, Berlin was worried about this because it was something he thought he had already seen play out historically. Jean-Jacques Rousseau had already defined freedom as a type of “self-rule.” But then he defined “self-rule” as adherence to the “general will,” or whatever was best for all the citizens. The significance of this is that it doesn’t matter what the individual citizen thinks they want because they’re often enslaved to their passions or mental shortcomings. True freedom and “self-rule,” to Rousseau, was to act in your own best interest. And it just so happens, your best interest is to act in accordance with what’s best for everyone because, after all, you are just one member of a society that needs everyone else’s cooperation.

So, based on this type of “positive freedom,” it really doesn’t matter if you think you want to take the week off and just watch TV all day. That’s not in your best interest. That’s not in the best interest of society. And, ultimately to Rousseau, you’re not “self-ruling” or free because you are enslaved to a lower version of yourself. But this leads to another question. Who or what decides what’s best for all the citizens? Well, in the time of Rousseau, we could use rationality and the political process to determine that; in later totalitarian societies, maybe a dictator.

And this is ultimately why Berlin thinks Rousseau is setting a dangerous precedent here. He’s promoting the idea that not only is there a single best way for a citizen to act that’s

best for everyone but also that anything you want to do that runs contrary to this single standard that we've come up with really is just you not controlling your ability to "self-rule" vigilantly enough. So, as you can see, this is just one example of how "positive freedom" can become hijacked and used for the purpose of controlling people. And, to Berlin, it was particularly dangerous in the hands of thinkers from the Enlightenment. Reason being is that, like many other thinkers from this time, he thought the Enlightenment was characterized by an overall attitude of monolithic thinking that can lead to totalitarianism.

Berlin lays out three primary assumptions that thinkers from the Enlightenment brought to practically every theory they ever produced. When asking questions about human experience or the world we live in, the first assumption the thinkers of the Enlightenment made is that every question has a single correct answer that can be arrived at. We may have no idea what the answer even looks like. There are, of course, many different wrong answers thinkers may arrive at. But every question we can ask ultimately has a single correct answer.

The second assumption is that, when looking for that single correct answer, there is a clear methodology that we can use to be able to get to that answer. The question may be enormously difficult. Finding the answer to the question may take years. But, no matter how long it takes, we have a clear method we can use to get to that answer. During the Enlightenment this method was known as "reason."

The third and final assumption that Enlightenment thinkers brought to bear was that, when we use this method to arrive at these single answers that we've come up with, that these answers will inevitably fit into a neat, cohesive picture of the universe and will correspond well with all the other single correct answers we've arrived at so far. Berlin says that these thinkers came to work every day with the assumption that these answers would give us the "solution to the cosmic jigsaw puzzle."

So these three Enlightenment assumptions -- that there's a single answer to every question, that there's a clear method to get to those answers, and that those answers will all fit together into a neat, cohesive worldview -- Berlin thought that all three of these things were totally false. And he thought that people assuming they were true was emblematic of the pro-science, pro-mathematics attitude that dominated Enlightenment thought because these assumptions, if you think about it, are exactly the way it works in things like math and science. When you're a mathematician and somebody gives you a difficult problem to solve that's within the realm of known mathematics, you can proceed with the same level of confidence about these three assumptions as these Enlightenment thinkers. There is a single correct answer to this math problem. This problem may take you years to solve but, rest assured, there is a clear method you can use that you know is getting you closer and closer to solving that problem. When you finally arrive at the solution, you can feel confident that this answer is going to be consistent with answers from other mathematicians.

But Isaiah Berlin's going to say that philosophy is different. Not only do we not know if there is a single correct answer to the questions that are asked, we don't even know the proper methodology to use to arrive at that correct answer if there was one. Not to mention, once we arrive at an answer, there's no guarantee it's going to fit together well with all the other answers like a cosmic jigsaw puzzle. Finding answers to the questions that philosophers ask, specifically the questions of moral and political philosophy like we've been talking about on this show for a while, is a much different process than solving a math problem.

Political philosophy, to Isaiah Berlin, was a type of moral philosophy applied to the public realm. This was the part of society where your answers to these questions about human values would actually go on to affect large groups of people. The problem with the

Enlightenment was that so many philosophers thought they could use rationality to arrive at a single correct answer to these questions of moral and political philosophy. See, to Berlin, because these specific types of questions have to take into account the complexity of the experience of billions of individuals, the absolute best answers philosophers can ever come up with are what he calls “blurry.” They’re layered, multifaceted. They overlap in weird places; they conflict with each other. But the thinkers of the Enlightenment believed they could solve these questions like math problems.

Berlin writes about this monolithic attitude of many Enlightenment thinkers here: “Despite profound differences of outlook, there was a wide area of agreement about fundamental points, the reality of natural law, of eternal principles by following which alone men could become wise, happy, virtuous, and free. Thinkers might differ about what these laws were or how to discover them or who were qualified to expound them. That these laws were real and could be known, whether with certainty or only probability, remained the central dogma of the entire Enlightenment.”

This dogma of the Enlightenment, and previously a dogma of much of the philosophical and scientific thinking that came before the Enlightenment, Berlin sometimes refers to it as “monism.” The reference there being to the type of thinking of people like the pre-Socratics who sometimes believed in everything being reducible to a single substance, monism. But the reference to monism is actually making a much larger claim here because, so often within the history of thought when talking about moral or political philosophy, thinkers will try to find some sort of ultimate virtue that all other virtues ultimately rely on.

Take the virtue of temperance, for example. We’ll call it general abstinence from things that are bad for you. The move that’s sometimes done by thinkers throughout history is that -- yes, you can name a bunch of different virtues that philosophers have talked

about, dozens of them, but couldn't someone make a case that another virtue, like patience, is really just temperance? It's really just abstinence from something that's bad for you in a particular, isolated setting. Courage is a virtue. Could that be just another specific set of circumstances where you're exercising a slightly different type of temperance? Justice, wisdom, you name it. See, if you wanted badly enough to make a case that there was a hierarchy of values that all lesser virtues fall out of, you could do it. This type of "moral monism," if we want to call it that, has been undeniably present in the work of earlier thinkers trying to make sense of reality.

Now, even these two things might be enough for us to take a closer look at monism throughout history but, it just so happens, Berlin is making an even bigger claim here. Think of how this monism applies to that dogma of the Enlightenment within moral or political philosophy that he referenced. The idea that rationality -- that if only we think about things clearly and distinctly enough, we can come up with a single correct answer for how to live as human beings, and that answer is going to fit perfectly into a single cohesive worldview, completing the cosmic jigsaw puzzle -- this is just another example of this monism that's existed all throughout the history of thought. And it is monolithic; it's overly ambitious, given what we know about human existence, and ultimately leads to the totalitarianism of the political landscape in the early 20th century. Because if you can believe that rationality will provide us with scientific-like certainty or probability when answering questions about what it's like to live for people with numbers in the billions, then you end up with things like Marxism. You end up with National Socialism. You end up with late-stage capitalism. This attempt to use reason to arrive at something that's supposed to work well for everyone in the world is an outdated concept.

So, what happens is, Berlin realizes this and then transforms into more of a historian of ideas. He wants to go back and figure out whether there were any thinkers during the beginning of the Enlightenment that saw something like this coming. What he comes across is a group of thinkers that are often referred to as the Counter-Enlightenment.

And, simply put, Isaiah Berlin thinks this group of thinkers were some of the most underrated thinkers in the history of the world.

See, when the Enlightenment started to get into full swing and there were these dramatic changes in the way that people were thinking about stuff, what it was to live your life as a human being was also undergoing some pretty dramatic changes. For example, during the Enlightenment there was a new level of enthusiasm towards framing the world in terms of universals, meaning there is a real effort by thinkers of the time to use reason to arrive at conclusions that give us universal answers to things that can be applied generally: a universal view of the way that things are, to use reason to arrive at things like an understanding of human nature across the board, a common humanity that exists regardless of culture. But that's not all. At the time, there was so much optimism towards reason and science and all the good it was doing, people were super excited to try to apply it to moral and political philosophy. As Berlin puts it, they wanted to arrive at a "scientific" approach to things like a universal good or a universal best way that society should be structured.

During this same time period, people started thinking of themselves much more in terms of being an individual rather than as part of the community that they're just one aspect of, this focus on the individual being one of the most classic examples of Enlightenment thought. The Enlightenment also used reason to analyze the efficiency of our economic systems, giving rise to things like the Industrial Revolution and with it the real possibility that much of your life as a human being could be spent working in a factory. This was a new type of modern existence that people would have to come to terms with.

So the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment represent the initial opposition to all these new ways of looking at the world and human life. They were the thinkers that looked at all these dramatic changes that were going on and thought, no matter how excited and optimistic thinkers are about this brave new world we're about to create with reason,

maybe these changes are going to lead to some real problems down the road. So it's no wonder why Isaiah Berlin -- living 200 years in the future, the thinkers of his time looking around them trying to solve the problems they think are largely related to Enlightenment thought -- no wonder why he would see the Counter-Enlightenment as a potential source of real foresight and wisdom. When the Enlightenment focused on universals and an eternal understanding of things, the Counter-Enlightenment called for a focus on particular examples and the historical or cultural influence on our understanding of things. When the Enlightenment focused on the individual, the Counter-Enlightenment focused on community and our identities as members of a tribe. When the Enlightenment produces the possibility of modern factory life, there's a Counter-Enlightenment revival of romanticism and a call for us to return to an earlier time when human life was more connected to nature.

So Isaiah Berlin, living in the middle of the 20th century, looks around him and sees totalitarianism in mass claiming to have a universal understanding of human nature or how to structure a society. He sees people viewing themselves as total individuals, completely alienated from people around them, starving for a sense of community. He sees the reality of modern work and how only the most privileged can ever go outside and try to connect with the natural world around them. Most of all though, he sees within the politics of his time the ever-presence of this moral monism that was so popular in our thinking for 2,500 years -- the idea that, when it comes to my moral or political views, there is one single answer to be arrived at, that I've discovered that right answer, and that my political views deeply inform a single cohesive worldview that I have that is correct.

The thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment represent to Berlin an incredible missed opportunity. We were in such a state of delirium thinking about how great science and reason were that we ignored one of the biggest breakthroughs in the history of human thought, the call by these thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment for us to move away

from monism and towards what Isaiah Berlin called “pluralism.”

There’s a famous essay by Isaiah Berlin titled “The Hedgehog and the Fox.” Now, in this essay he provides a sort of spirit animal for these two very different kinds of thinking. The classic line from the essay is that the hedgehog sees one big thing while the fox sees many things: the hedgehog obviously representing the thinking of a typical monist, the fox representing the approach of a pluralist. To Isaiah Berlin, the hedgehog, or the monist, is operating from a very limited vantage point where they can really only see in one single direction, and they’re assuming that’s all there is. They think about understanding the world always in relation to how it fits into some sort of overarching structure, seemingly just for the sake of having a cohesive worldview which they assume is possible.

So what happens whenever you do this is that the value of anything in the world becomes its position within that organizing structure and how it relates to everything else. Quick example to illustrate this. Let’s say you wanted to come up with one of these systems of monism. And, from your limited vantage point, it seems clear to you that the government’s out to get you and is constantly trying to get more and more control and eventually turn you into a slave. Well, from that single limited vantage point, it’s not crazy to think that the paramount virtue you would want to strive for is freedom. You might want as small of a government as possible. You may be in favor of sacrificing a pretty large amount of security for the sake of freedom. In other words, the value that freedom and security both have in that particular, cohesive, singular worldview was determined by their position within that overarching structure, that single historical narrative that gives value to everything the hedgehog sees.

But the fox, on the other hand, doesn’t look at the world in the same way as the hedgehog. Berlin says the fox understands that the range and complexity of everyone’s human experience is so massive -- the way different languages orient people with the

world, the way our different personalities orient us, the different preferences, feelings, experiences -- what it is to be a human being is far too complex to ever have a single spokesperson.

Now, your first question here may be, “Well, why doesn’t that just make the fox, or the pluralist, a covert relativist, I mean, if you’re just citing everyone’s individual preferences about things as what gives their views value?” So we’re going to talk a lot more next episode about why Berlin is not a relativist. Remember, he ultimately wants to find a middle ground between nature and culture. But, to the initial charge that the pluralist is actually just a relativist, Isaiah Berlin might reply with the famous quote from his work, “I prefer coffee; you prefer champaign. We have different tastes. There’s nothing more to be said. That is relativism. But Herder’s view and Vico’s,” two thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment, “is not that. It is what I should describe as pluralism, that is the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational.”

Two different people using the exact same process of rationality could arrive at very different conclusions about moral or political values simply because of the complexity of human experience. And, here’s the kicker that will make this have such an impact on political thought, both of those conclusions are intelligible and rational. There’s no ultimate organizing principle. There’s no logical conclusion we’re going to arrive at. There’s no mathematical or scientific answer to questions about values. There’s only human rationality and the vast array of experiences and tools that we have to pull from that will determine these “blurry answers” we’re capable of coming up with. Well, that and, to Berlin, everything that’s common among all human beings regardless of culture.

But that, I would say, is for next episode and, along with it, the answers to so many other questions. How does a pluralist ever determine which values should matter? How should we behave in the political realm if all this is true? What would Isaiah Berlin say to

someone like Carl Schmitt? Seriously, is Berlin just a relativist?

Check out episode two to find out. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Isaiah Berlin pt. 2 - Pluralism and Culture

Episode #141

This is a transcript of episode #141 on Isaiah Berlin. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So if there's a way to sum up the END of last episode... that can get us started in the right direction this episode... it's to say that to the philosopher Isaiah Berlin: these attempts ALL throughout history... to create systems of values based on a single criteria... to synthesize multiple different systems of values into one UNIVERSAL system... these have all been grounded in an assumption spanning across the entire history of human thought... that there is a single, correct answer to any question you can ask... that there is a clear methodology we can use to get us there, usually reason or revelation... and that once we find these answers they are going to fit neatly into a single overarching system, a cohesive worldview that fits together like some sort of cosmic jigsaw puzzle. Now ALL of this is to say that Isaiah Berlin wants to set his sights on the long tradition we have in the west of using Monism, to develop systems of thought that use a SINGLE, ULTIMATE criteria for determining the TRUTH, about political or moral values. Let me say it again because it's important: The use of these systems to determine the truth about moral or political values is one of his primary concerns. This is a dangerous game we've been playing and it's had bloody consequences in the 20th century... and his response to Monism comes from the thinkers of the Counter-Enlightenment... something he calls Pluralism, or the idea... that when it comes to values... there are multiple different ends that people can arrive at... using the EXACT SAME process of rationality... and that BOTH conclusions, can nonetheless be intelligible and rational, simultaneously. The complexity of human experience makes questions of political or moral values destined to have blurry answers. The values of a person or culture are extremely complicated, they overlap, they contradict each other, they're situational, inconsistent... the values of people are often what he calls incommensurable. Now... let's talk about that big word incommensurable and give some real examples for

why he thinks this is the way things are. Classic example that's used here to introduce this concept is the relationship between mercy and justice and how it can seem deceptively simple when we think about it. Now, there being a sense of MERCY in the world and there being a sense of JUSTICE in the world are both important values that a person or culture can prioritize...but consider the fact that in practice...these two values of mercy and justice can often butt heads competing, when trying to be considered at the same time. Consider for a second a real world example where these values interact. The easiest is to think about a hypothetical criminal justice system. Now, there are examples out there of people that find themselves in trouble... who are otherwise good citizens... who made a fleeting poor decision in a moment...and as people we might value there being some sort of mercy exercised in this case...we don't want the book thrown at everyone, we don't want to bury every person under the jail that makes a mistake, and here's the important part: for a person to come to this conclusion would be ENTIRELY rational. Now on the OTHER hand... there are examples of people out there that are CLEARLY hurting the people around them...these are the people the criminal justice system is designed to rehabilitate...and you could EASILY find people who have a strong set of values... that think these sorts of people should be punished to the full extent of the law. There are people out there that value a strong implementation of the virtue of justice, and once again it's important to note...this would be an entirely RATIONAL conclusion for someone to arrive at. Well Isaiah Berlin might ask: which approach is better? Say we're creating a hypothetical criminal justice system...should that system go for mercy at all costs? Or justice at all costs? No doubt it's a combination of both...OK, well what criteria do we use to determine how much mercy we should use and how much justice we should use? His whole point here is that you can never answer this question clearly with some single criterion or single maxim. The fact is the true complexity of human experience makes this impossible. Monism CANNOT EVER adequately mediate the relationship between complex human values like mercy and justice. The mistake of the thinkers of the past has been to try to try to come up with some SINGLE STANDARD that addresses all the complexities of billions of people living together...the goal of the

justice system should be to MAXIMIZE FREEDOM...or BALANCE THE SCALES...these overly-ambitious GOLDEN RULES are utterly useless.. when it comes to truly sifting through the blurry, complex relationship between human values like mercy and justice. But it should be said this applies to so many other examples of human values that butt heads...for example, liberty and total equality. Because if men were wholly free, he says, then the wolves would be free to eat the sheep. How about Spontaneity vs planning and organization, we want both of those in our lives. Knowledge and freedom. Peace and excitement. The examples he provides are endless. But regardless of which one you're talking about though there is no SINGLE blueprint that can ever tell us how much mercy and how much justice....to Isaiah Berlin the fact is people and cultures often have to hold two, what he calls incommensurable values, like mercy and justice, simultaneously. These values are sometimes totally incompatible. They sometimes overlap in weird ways. When you abandon the strategy of trying to find a way that billions of human beings can be fit into a neat little package governed by a SINGLE maxim...then you encounter what Isaiah Berlin sees as the true Pluralism that lies at the foundation of human values. But just to be clear this incommensurability of values doesn't JUST exist at a political or social level where we have to deal with lots of different people...THIS IS THE WAY our values work at an INDIVIDUAL level as well. We know this...because when was the last time you met someone who talks about themselves like, "I am a totally MERCILESS human being towards EVERYONE." But you'd be EQUALLY hard pressed to find someone that describes themselves like, "Well schucks I don't care about justice at all...I think everybody should just get away with everything ALL THE TIME!" To hold the values of mercy AND justice at some level simultaneously SEEMS to be where most people live their lives. You NEED to if you're going to have any level of nuance to your thinking at all, and the most under nuanced approach to thinking in the history of the world is Monism. So this is why any attempt to distill the true plurality of human values down into a single maxim always fails miserably in the long run. Some ultimate RULE that everyone should follow: Do not unto others as you wouldn't like done unto you. Or some overarching theory of billions of people...there's winners and losers in this world.

Human values, ESPECIALLY when it comes to our values in action in the political realm...are never that simple. There is ALWAYS a balance we are finding with our values between certain polarities. And it's important to clarify here that this is NOT JUST a problem that Isaiah Berlin had with the Enlightenment. If that were the case he might be lumped into a group with the MANY anti-Enlightenment thinkers throughout the 20th century, several of which we've talked about on this show. What makes Isaiah Berlin TRULY special is that his more fundamental problem was with Monism, and that was a legacy of our thought that he STILL saw all around him in the thinkers of his time...interestingly...even the ones that were railing against the Enlightenment. Perfect example of this was his early work where he took extreme issue with the Logical Positivists. So if you remember from our episode the Logical Positivists were an early twentieth century group practically DEFINED by their opposition to Metaphysics. They were critical of the Enlightenment in the sense that they were trying to correct what they saw as the primary MISTAKE of the Enlightenment...philosophers using REASON to arrive at all sorts of conclusions in the realm of metaphysics that ultimately amounted to unverifiable speculation. To them this is how rationality could've ever gotten us so off track. So their solution to this was to triple down on verificationism, or the principle of verification, or the idea: that something is meaningful or can reasonably contribute to knowledge ONLY if it is verifiable. This took the form of A priori and A posteriori propositions and we've explained them so many times I'm not going to waste time with an explanation here, just go back and listen to the episode if you need it. But the larger point is this is yet another example to Isaiah Berlin of trying to come up with a single strategy for determining the validity of human thoughts or affairs. And he gives many different examples of this in his critiques of the Logical Positivists. One of the more famous ones is... let's say that it rained yesterday. Well the fact that it rained yesterday is NOT something that is verifiable. There's no a priori deduction we can do to prove it...and there is no way we can go outside and immediately experience the fact it rained yesterday empirically. Switch the example to it rained ten years ago if it helps. But nonetheless the fact that it rained yesterday...is TRUE. And that information could be

extremely meaningful to our lives as people and informing our decisions. The problem was Monism...the problem was the Logical Positivists trying to reduce humanity to a single principle. Had they taken a more Pluralistic approach who knows what they could have done. Now a common rebuttal to Berlin has always been...that Pluralism...is really just relativism in disguise. Remember thinkers like Leo Strauss who talked about how because modernity focuses so hard on being value-neutral when trying to understand the world the end game every single time was going to be some form of relativism, historicism, nihilism, scientism...some way to remove values from the equation altogether or give ultimate authority to some area of society, science or economics to DETERMINE our values for us. So something people have said about Berlin is that pluralism is not anything new...just the classic, well-known rebuttal to the Enlightenment naively trying to use reason to arrive at values. But remember how we began this two parter! Berlin was setting out to find a bridge between nature and culture...BETWEEN as it were the strategy of the Enlightenment and the strategy of these early 20th century thinkers...to be able to clearly define the lines of which aspects of our values are human nature and which of them can be explained by culture or the place we happen to be living in within history. This is why Isaiah Berlin is NOT a relativist. He believes that there are certain values that are common among all people regardless of culture. He lays out his basic argument here in his book "The Crooked Timber of Humanity", and he begins by referencing a couple of common passages from the history of philosophy that have been used to JUSTIFY arguments for a PURE relativism or PURE historicism...then he goes on to give a clarification that explains his position: "It is true that a Sophist quoted by Aristotle thought that fire burns both here and in Persia, but what is thought just changes before our very eyes; and that Montesquieu thinks that one should wear warm clothes in cold climates and thin garments in hot ones, and that Persian customs would not suit the inhabitants of Paris. But what this kind of plea for variety comes to is that different means are most effective in different circumstances towards the realization of similar ends. This is true even of the notorious skeptic David Hume. None of these doubters wish to deny that the central

human goals are universal and uniform, even though they may not be necessarily established a priori: all men seek food and drink, shelter and security; all men want to procreate; all men seek social intercourse, justice, a degree of liberty, means of self-expression and the like. The means towards these ends may differ from country to country, and age to age, but the ends whether alterable in principle or not, remain unaltered" So what is he saying here? He's saying that there may be a LOT of stuff out there that is culturally or historically determined...the specific MEANS, a particular culture might use, to get to THEIR desired ends. The way these customs look to us from culture to culture might vary enormously...but nonetheless it's almost impossible to make a case for the fact that our cultures, aren't, ALL AIMING for VERY similar ends. Human beings seem to generally want very similar things...we've just found different creative ways to get there, and those specific ways, will vary, based on the culture that you happen to be born into. Now you may hear that and think he's making the very basic statement that all cultures are different, and we all want to eat, sleep and have a sense of freedom in our life...but there's actually multiple layers to what he's saying here. This is Pluralism... applied to the relationships that exist between different cultures. The TRUE significance of what he's saying here is that... there's no way you can use rationality to arrive at some SUPER-CULTURE, that's better than all the other cultures, but this is so often the subtext that's present when people have conversations between cultures... and WITHIN cultures. The subtext is that as long as we all appeal to rationality and have enough discussions with each other...that eventually it's not crazy to think that we will all agree about everything...or at least every RATIONAL person will have the same opinion. Consider a few examples to compliment this point and then we'll expand on this a lot more. Now on one hand this is not a very controversial statement to make. Most people understand that people arrive at different sets of values when it comes to their personal lives and nobodies going on a crusade to say that one is inherently less rational than another. For example, imagine one lifestyle...imagine a person that looks out at the world and thinks of it as a very dangerous place. Well, in many ways the world IS a very dangerous place...lotta buses to get hit by...lotta diseases to contract...lotta meteors to

dodge as they fall out of the sky...so this person that sees all that danger decides...that the rational conclusion they should live by is to stay inside most of the time. They enjoy their life inside...they practice enjoying a level of peace most people never get to experience that are out in the dangers of the world...they have a level of privacy to their life that is just far greater than someone who immerses themselves in the public realm. People may disagree...but hard to make a REAL case that this isn't an intelligible, rational conclusion someone could arrive at. Now consider another person who's one of those energy drink wing suit people...flying through a canyon like a squirrel...puts on a go pro when they go to the gas station...this person might look out at that same dangerous world and think look...the world I was born into IS danger. What am I going to hide from it my entire life? No, I'm not going to live my life... viewing other people around me as merely catalysts of danger. Something to avoid. There is more to life than spending my life cooped up inside feeling safe just because I happen to be alive. I'm going to go out and live, and if it's my time to go at least I can die knowing I had a good run. Now again...people may disagree...but even the extreme recluse from the previous example could look at this person...be TOLERANT of the fact that they have come to different conclusions and even have a level of respect for them accepting they just value different things. But Isaiah Berlin would want us to juxtapose this entire line of thinking over into the political realm. How often do people engaging in a political discussion look at their political opposition...hear an argument that disagrees with them...and then act tolerant of that disagreement...respectful of the person because they see them as an intelligible, rational human being that, just has a different set of values because they come from a different set of experiences...how often does that happen, vs how often do people adopt this attitude of Monism where there is a single correct answer, a methodology they've arrived at to attain it, and a cohesive, sweeping worldview informed by those correct answers? How often when someone sees their political opposition do they just assume the other person can't POSSIBLY be rational...they must be delusional, or stupid, or indoctrinated, or evil...they must be one of these things because if they were rational...they would agree with me. Well, come on Berlin that's obviously different. Someone wants to sit inside all

day or jump out of an airplane they're not hurting anyone but themselves...when it comes to political issues there are innocent people potentially getting hurt in the balance! NONE of this is to say that we should all be holding hands singing campfire songs together all the time. Isaiah Berlin makes it VERY CLEAR...we're GOING to have political disagreements. Heated ones. We're GOING to embark on political campaigns to try to win the hearts and minds of people towards OUR OWN set of values. The question is not whether or not we should disagree...the question is whether or not WHEN you disagree you wouldn't feel all that bad about putting a bike lock in a sock and beating someone over the head with it at a political rally because they're part of some evil herd of sheep that disagrees with you. See the change from Monism to Pluralism is subtle...it changes the way you view people who disagree with you. Because when you recognize the pluralistic nature of human values you realize that there is no single correct answer and even if there was rationality is not the tool that is going to get us there. The idea...that if only we have more rational discussions about things eventually everybody rational will agree on the same values...is a misunderstanding of what rationality is producing for us. Rationality is just utterly incapable of SOLVING ALL THE PROBLEMS that can exist between cultures that value different things. One example Isaiah Berlin gives of this has to do with religious differences. Just imagine a devout believer in Orphism and a devout believer in Celtic Reconstructionist Paganism going out to coffee together...and they're going to sit down and have a rational discussion about their values and the goal of either of them is to try to convince the other of the TRUE political reality of the world. Do you think rational discussion is going to be the thing to change either of their minds about values? Isaiah Berlin might say good on them both for trying. He wouldn't be surprised if rational discussion wasn't the tool that was going to convince someone that someone ELSE had the truth about things. But most of all he'd want to say that any sort of violence that may have come out of that discussion...any sort of hatred of the other...would ALWAYS COME from some attitude associated with Monism. Political violence rises proportional to the level of intolerance within a society. See tolerance and empathy are very HUMAN characteristics. Berlin goes so far as to say the people that LACK the ability

to be empathetic, serial killers and the like, seem to lack something crucial about what it is to be human. We should make it a priority. And JUST as we would do well...to look at other cultures that disagree with us, have a bit of tolerance and try to relate to the common humanity that exists between us, try to understand WHY they believe what they do based on their own unique past...we would do just as well to treat fellow members of our society with that same respect...even if they disagree. So often what SEEMS on the surface like a totally different set of rituals between cultures ends up being the same, very human, moral intuition manifesting itself in two different ways...and this even happens all the time between people of the SAME culture who claim to hold very different values. There's a TED talk that was done by Johnathan Haidt in 2008 where he gives an example of this. Take the very human value of purity. For some reason purity seems to matter across the board to human beings. But even within the same culture you might see one type of person that deeply values purity in a religious sense...chastity before marriage, purity from the hedonistic behaviors that might pollute your spiritual well being. But you may see another type of person that values purity by eating only organic, locally sourced, ethically produced ingredients...or purity when it comes to the environment. This is just one example of how the SAME moral intuition can manifest itself in two VERY DIFFERENT WAYS, and yet...there seems to be some common humanity underlying this value and its possible these two very different people could find some level of tolerance for the other if they took the time to try to understand. They could understand BOTH PARTS of a human being...those values determined by nature...and the ones determined by their culture. This is the TRUE ROLE, of rationality for Isaiah Berlin. When it comes to moral and political values...we're never going to agree on everything. Rationality cannot give us that...but what it CAN do is mediate the differences BETWEEN different moral systems and allow us to be tolerant of each other. You don't go to war with another culture just because they value something you don't...you can disagree, try to understand the best you can...but you don't think they're stupid or evil just because they don't do everything the way you do. The same way rationality can regulate the relationships between cultures it can regulate the

relationships between people. Carl Schmitt...political philosopher and member of the third Reich from earlier in this 20th century political arc...he was famously critical of Liberalism as a massively failed experiment that leads to weak societies. For all the tolerance, multi-culturalism, and limits on government power...he saw all of these things instantly get thrown out the minute a TRUE political disagreement came to pass. People can be tolerant of insignificant things, but the minute it becomes something that they really care about even Liberal societies descend into bloodshed and violence. Well here is Isaiah Berlin years later presenting an entirely new TYPE of Liberal thought. That is, Liberal Pluralism. Maybe it's NOT a fundamental part of human nature to descend into violence whenever political differences get really serious. Maybe this is a TYPE of thinking that we've inherited that has been so ingrained into every theory that's come before that even a doctrine of tolerance and multiculturalism like Liberalism was created with it in mind. Maybe Monism...and the monolithic type of thinking that comes along with it...maybe the belief that there is a single answer to every question out there has allowed people to treat their fellow human beings as the other, simply because they come from a different part of the city where different values keep them alive, or a different part of the country or a different part of the world...sometimes ideas come up at points throughout the history of human thought...ideas that practically everyone at the time is downright enamored with. THIS NEW INSIGHT is the solution to all our problems as a species. Sometimes just five, ten years later there's a NEW set of ideas that comes along rebuking it...and as quickly as it came the idea everyone was crazy about is never heard from again. Well the Enlightenment was no doubt one of the times people were excited about an idea and it was left to play out. But what if Isaiah Berlin, as a historian of ideas, what if he was right? What if the Pluralism of the counter Enlightenment could have been a moment when we realized a HUGE ASSUMPTION we'd all been making in our thinking? What might the 20th century have looked like...if we had listened to, and been tolerant of ideas ALL THE WAY BACK THEN...that made us uneasy. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Richard Rorty

Episode #142

This is a transcript of episode #142 on Richard Rorty. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So if you were having a political discussion with someone...and the conversation took a turn and all of a sudden you're talking about human rights...there's certainly, a lot of angles you could approach that discussion from, but one of the most common ones might be what, philosophical grounding can we give to something like human rights? I mean we all think human beings have rights, but where exactly do those rights come from? Who or what out there, GUARANTEES these rights for people? Well a common answer to this question might be that human rights are inherited...by birthright. Simply by virtue of being born every human being is entitled to certain, natural rights or inalienable rights. Rights, that protect the dignity of a human life at such a basic level...that to go against them starts to seem like you'd be going against nature. Now as far as the philosophical grounding is concerned this is an attitude MUCH more common during the beginning of the Enlightenment than it is today...and the two MAIN thinkers that took ON this position are often cited to be John Locke and Immanuel Kant. When it comes to answering the question who or what guarantees these human rights...John Locke goes in the direction of God, you know...we are endowed by our CREATOR with certain inalienable rights...and Kant goes more in the direction of A priori facts derived from reason. But either way both these thinkers are in their own way trying to use REASON to arrive at a universal that GUARANTEES human beings are BORN with natural rights. Little did EITHER of these thinkers know that just 140 years later we would be immersed in two world wars that would make the argument for the natural rights of human beings seem about as important as neck ruffles were to them. See as we've talked about on this show the early 20th century was full of thinkers dissatisfied with what the Enlightenment had produced. They even went so far as to say that the entire PROJECT of the Enlightenment...was destined to consume itself from the start.

Yeah, sure at the beginning REASON calls into question much of the religious dogma of the middle ages...but what inevitably has to happen once it gets done with THAT job...is REASON has to start questioning the NEW foundations for things...reason has to start questioning...itself. Which, then leads to philosophers USING the process of rationality...to find out that rationality is not some unbiased, ahistorical measuring tool...it's not some "neutral point" from which we can make unambiguous claims about the TRUTH about human rights or more importantly, THE UNIVERSE. To the thinker we're going to be covering today, Richard Rorty...people like Locke and Kant were NO MORE discovering a Truth about what grounds human rights than Hammurabi was before them. But UNLIKE many of the thinkers of the early 20th century...who may have felt a bit disenfranchised by the rational process...Richard Rorty felt optimistic about rationality. Some people called Rorty a postmodernist...which would USUALLY place him in staunch opposition to anything that even SOUNDS like the word Enlightenment. Like EXCITEMENT! But let me tell ya...Rorty was a VERY exciting man. He REJECTED the title of postmodernist and most titles for that matter. He operated in a very unique realm for a thinker where like a TYPICAL post-structuralist he didn't believe in any sort of grand narrative that could explain away the universe...but yet he was STILL...a die hard, card carrying fan...of the PROJECT of the Enlightenment overall. See in a world where there are so many 20th century thinkers hating on the Enlightenment...here is a guy some viewed as a post-structuralist, coming to its defense. Let me explain WHY he would DO something like this. When Immanuel Kant in his famous essay describes the Enlightenment as "man's removal of his self-incurred tutelage"...yeah, he's talking about the tutelage of the religious dogma of the past...but Rorty would EXTEND that tutelage to the RATIONAL dogma that was to come in the future because of how over-ambitious we were at the BEGINNING of the Enlightenment about what rationality could produce. The spirit of the Enlightenment, to Rorty, was not to use reason to arrive at the TRUTH about the universe...it was ultimately a call to subvert traditional forms of authority. The significance of the Enlightenment was NOT to land on new answers...it was to question old assumptions. So in that sense...yeah, the INITIAL project of the

Enlightenment ultimately consumed itself, but to Richard Rorty the initial project of the Enlightenment was MEANT to consume itself. Thinkers like Isaiah Berlin that would come along and suggest a Pluralistic vision of things...this wasn't an anti-enlightenment idea at all...to Rorty...this WAS the project of the Enlightenment left to play itself out...thinkers like Berlin were ALWAYS going to eventually come along. See the project of the Enlightenment MATURING through people like Isaiah Berlin, taught us a couple of EXTREMELY valuable insights. One of which, was that we don't need to try to use reason to appeal to some ultimate authority or universal to GROUND our ideas. Rationality, is not a tool that gets us to objectivity about things...but it MAY get us to a VERY EFFECTIVE mix of inter-subjectivity between cultures. Rorty wants to offer an alternative way to look at the legacy of the Enlightenment. Maybe it IS pointless to try to do our best impressions of Locke and Kant and try to access the universe through reason...but when it comes to strictly HUMAN institutions...for example, the political realm, where we're not trying to access "things in themselves"...we're just trying to figure out how we can live together the best...maybe THAT is where rationality thrives as a method. What ALL of this is alluding to is the fact that human rights are not the only things philosophers have tried to GROUND in universals in the past. The very structure of some political systems, Liberalism, has ALSO historically been grounded in universals. Once again, I just want to clarify because there are some people out there that get angry VERY QUICKLY...and they also must be part of some sort of email club...when we're talking about Liberalism as a foundation for society we're talking about government with a focus on individual rights, consent of the governed and an aversion to any sort of collectivist system or systems that were more popular at other points in history, maybe a caste system for example. Now, you can imagine if you're a philosopher...and you're trying to make a case for Liberalism being BETTER than a caste system...might be tempting to start to make an argument that human beings at the level of the universe are all equal...and therefore should not be relegated to different ranks within a society. But to Rorty, this would be making the same mistake that Locke and Kant made in our example from before about human rights. The fact is to Rorty: we don't need that sort of

ULTIMATE FOUNDATION to be able to make a case for the fact that Liberalism is how we should be running things. For many different reasons, one as has been said, we can't actually ACCESS the universe at that level through rationality. Two, society is just far better off when it can base public policy on the rational consensus of individual citizens rather than some philosophical theory arrived at by some guy in a tower that people might not even be able to relate to. Think of the limitations you INSTANTLY place on yourself if you decide that every public policy or VALUE of a society needs to be grounded in some philosophical justification that tells you how human beings are AT LARGE. First of all, let's say you decided to structure your society around the political philosophy of Plato...you're soon going to find yourself on a constant PR campaign trying to continually SELL these ideas to a population just crossing your fingers that they go along with it. Second of all, almost always these philosophical ideas that you might structure your society around were created in an ENTIRELY different culture that emerged out of an ENTIRELY different history, which means these theories can bring a lot of baggage along with them that you may not WANT in the present culture. Thirdly, you are ALWAYS going to be fighting a sort of losing battle to Rorty, because you will ALWAYS be trying to cram ONE interpretation of how human life should be structured into the enormously complex, pluralistic maelstrom of people coexisting together. Rorty is essentially saying maybe we don't need the philosopher up in the tower thinking all day...telling us how to structure our societies because welp I've decided it shores up with how the universe is. Maybe we don't have ACCESS to the way the universe is, but maybe that doesn't matter. Maybe we don't need some elaborate philosophical theory to structure our society for us...maybe a strategy is legitimate...Liberalism for instance...if the citizens of a particular culture, positioned in history at a particular time and place, all the citizens facing a very specific set of common problems that they need to solve as a society...maybe a strategy is legitimate if the people of that society decide that they have confidence in it. One ultimate theory is not good enough. Rorty, who was a HUGE fan of Isaiah Berlin, sometimes talks in his work about the "fact of Pluralism". This is WHAT a society is, to Rorty. We are WORSE OFF as a society if we try to use a single religious or

philosophical theory to justify our political strategy. You will ALWAYS be fighting a losing battle...people will ALWAYS arrive at a BUNCH of different conclusions...so instead of embarking on a never ending sales campaign for an idea...Rorty suggests that we allow our political strategy to reflect the common values of the people that make up the culture. He writes about how if we do this, and we're careful, eventually if you were having that same conversation at the beginning of the episode and you asked someone what GROUNDS human rights...the common tendency WON'T be to try to appeal to something written into the universe or to cite some religious or philosophical justification you read in a book...the NEW standard will be for people to see social policy as legitimate if it was approved by the people actually LIVING in the culture. When asked the question what GROUNDS this piece of social policy...the answer won't involve pointing to some philosopher from 300 years ago...Descartes famous work: A treatise concerning why DRUGS SHOULD BE LEGALIZED and why you should be able to use your cellphone on an airplane, for instance. No, the authority lies in the hands... of the set of people positioned in history... with a very specific set of problems to solve that they care about...and once again, to Rorty, not only do we not NEED any more authority than that...we don't have ACCESS to any authority other than that, and we're better off this way anyway.Should be said this is yet another way we can access an answer to the question of how we can find a bridge between nature and culture. Rorty obviously is not appealing to a single theory, but he ALSO is not appealing to pure relativism or historicism. His answers to these questions about how we can justify our political strategy place him in what I think is the most accurate category to describe some of his biggest ideas...Rorty is often thought of as a Pragmatist, and I think we can understand Rorty's OVERALL position a little bit better if we take a second to talk about the concept of Truth...more specifically...the key differences between the traditional ways people have viewed the concept of TRUTH...and the way a Pragmatist like Rorty would've viewed the concept of Truth.So let's talk first about one of the most COMMON theories of what constitutes truth from the history of philosophy...one that Richard Rorty thought has been dominant since the very beginning of the Enlightenment...what he sometimes

calls the representationalist paradigm...sometimes called by others the correspondence theory of truth...but let ME take a second to tell you what it actually is. The most basic idea is that suppose somebody says a statement about the way that things are in the world. How do we tell if that statement is true? Well that statement is true if it REPRESENTS the way things really ARE in the world. If there is a CORRESPONDENCE between the description and reality, then we can say it's true. Now...there is of course mountains of detail that we could talk about here but Richard Rorty disagrees with the entire PREMISE of the correspondence theory even at this basic, rudimentary level. Whenever you try to create a bridge...between a description you have in your head...and the reality of the world that you're looking at...the only way you can ever describe ANYTHING...is through language. Language MEDIATES our relationship with reality. You can't access reality WITHOUT language. But to Rorty it goes even one step further than this. Not only is language a medium between us and reality...but language actually CONSTITUTES reality. Meaning that the language we use and the way we use it CHANGES the way we THINK about reality. This could be an entire series on its own...but the point is that certain languages and the cultures that use them favor certain habits of interpreting events. These interpretations greatly determine the entire way we see reality and the WAY human beings perceive reality varies greatly from culture to culture, language to language. So the idea...that there is some sort of correspondence or representation going on... that the world out there is somehow helping us verify whether statements are true or false...that's just wrong...because Rorty thinks it would be impossible for us to ever step outside of the parameters of language and access the world of things in themselves, things independent of this language that we use to categorize them. He has a very famous quote that will be EXTREMELY useful for us for the remainder of the episode. He said: "The world does not speak. only we do. the world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak. Only human beings can do that." So it should be said, Rorty's not talking about ordinary language when he writes that...he's talking about something else that we're going to get deep into here in a minute. But I want to

point out that this comparison that he's making here...between accessing "the world" vs some sort of human created tool that is deeply affected by the bonds of history and culture...this is a classic move that Rorty makes that, if you were NEW to Rorty, might help you understand an outline of some of the topics he wants to cover. For example, language is EXTREMELY useful in human affairs...it's just not capable of describing the world of things in themselves outside of language. Consider how this compares to the beginning of the episode. We have Locke and Kant trying to use reason to access some sort of ultimate TRUTH about the universe...but here's Rorty saying that rationality is the MOST useful in HUMAN affairs like the realm of the political. The WORLD does not speak, only we do. Here's another one from the Enlightenment...people like Rousseau...who believe in some sort of underlying human nature, Noble Savages as he would say...or really beyond that ANYONE that wants to take up the mantle of the common attitude that human beings at their very core DREAD seeing other human beings suffer. That's a common one for people to hold...that NATURALLY as human beings we don't want to see other people in pain, so we can RELY on the fact that if things ever got bad enough one culture would always come to the aid of another culture. Rorty actually responds to this position directly in an interaction with Simon Critchley in the 90's. So right here he is referencing the idea that there is some sort of default altruism embedded into human nature...he says: "Maybe there is such a sentient disposition, but it is so malleable – so capable of being combined with indifference to the suffering of people of the wrong sorts – that it gives us precious little to rely on. We should just thank our lucky stars that there are quite a lot of people nowadays who are pretty consistently appalled by human beings suffering unnecessarily." So he's saying MAYBE THERE IS some aspect of human nature that makes people not want to see others suffer, but if there is it's incredibly malleable. Thank your lucky stars that there happen to be a lot of people living today who don't want to see unnecessary suffering. But ALSO...if you're a fan of Liberalism...there is nothing written into nature like a God or A Priori facts that say LIBERALISM is the way...but thank your lucky stars for the last couple hundred years there have been a lot of people that believe in it as a strategy. So

while we can understand the MOVE that Rorty's making here, placing a lot of authority in the hands of the people actually immersed in the culture...this may start to bring up a whole NEW set of questions. One of the most pressing might be this: So if the authority of whether a social policy is good or not lies in the hands of the citizens...and not even a PHILOSOPHER can arrive at absolute foundations for even something as simple as human rights...don't those criticisms just instantly extend to my beliefs as an individual? Like, how am I supposed to ground my worldview in ANYTHING that is enduring enough that I can feel confident about it? The short answer to this question is that: you can't. And that shouldn't bother you. The longer answer can be found in Rorty's lengthy exploration of the concept of irony. Let's talk about it right now. So a common email I get is from a person who says something to the effect of this: Hi, I've been listening to the show for a while, I've heard about a bunch of different philosophers...and I've gotten to a place where I feel the complexity of things makes me feel pretty uncertain about choosing a worldview...sometimes I feel agnostic about almost every issue of substance I can think of...but this creates a problem for me because I still need to operate in day to day life. How is it possible to live a life where you're RADICALLY uncertain about things, but still capable of functioning on an every day level? There are many answers to this question but Richard Rorty offers one of them through his discussion about living a life as an "ironist". Now by ironist he doesn't mean that you're smelting metal down at the Home Depot everyday...the term ironist is a reference to irony. To fully understand the life of an ironist, though, we first need to understand the much more common almost ubiquitous way that people approach figuring things out about the world...a way of thinking deeply embedded in the history of philosophy. Most people view their intellectual development as a person as a linear progression of moving PAST appearances...and getting to the REALITY of the world. This goes all the way back to Plato's allegory of the Cave...shadows on a cave wall, we do the work of a philosopher and eventually can ascend OUT of the cave and see the sun, or TRUE knowledge, for what it actually is. Well this way of viewing ourselves has been a fixture in our cultures for so long that it is the way that MANY people see their process of growth when learning about

the world. There's this intuitive sense that we're born, we're young, dumb, naive...we get information from our teachers, parents, basic news sources and there's a sense in which we are living in a world of appearances at that point. See it's not until we've done the work of reading five newspapers a day, 1000 books, traveled to 100 countries...not until we've done THAT can we say that we've arrived at a worldview that sees reality on reality's terms. But just as there's no SINGLE THEORY embedded into the universe about human rights, or political strategy or ANYTHING for that matter...there's no single, correct view of existence that you're somehow accessing through life experiences and reading a bunch of stuff. You may THINK that you have a rational justification for every view that you hold...you may think it's the greatest worldview that has ever been created...but it was created...by you...BY a human being...and Rorty would say that although we often DECEIVE ourselves into THINKING it's the truth...really what we've created here is what he calls a final vocabulary. More on final vocabularies in one second but first I think it would be helpful to hear Rorty talk about a key distinction between someone saying "the world is out there" and saying "the truth is out there" and how these statements ultimately relate to language. "we need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that the truth is out there. To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations. Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot." This is one of Rorty's most famous concepts. What many refer to as the distinction between making and finding. Locke and Kant are not FINDING the truth about human rights...they are using a very human process called REASON to MAKE a truth about human rights that we'd then use to structure our societies. Liberalism was

not FOUND to be the best political strategy...historical circumstances and common values among people MADE it the best political strategy for a time. When you read a thousand books you are not FINDING the truth about existence, you are MAKING a final vocabulary that allows you to interface with reality during the specific time that you happen to be living. By final vocabulary Rorty means a collection of stories, metaphors, narratives, discourses, tons of different tools of rhetoric... that you use to make sense of the world and see your place in it. This is called a FINAL vocabulary because the things that make it up are very final...they're probably not going to develop any further because when it comes down to it...if you were pressed hard enough to explain your worldview by somebody skilled enough at arguing, with enough time on their hands...Rorty says eventually there would be no way for you to explain why YOUR worldview is better anyone else's in a non-circular way. It is a courageous thing to fight and die for your country...because look, fighting for your country and dying is one of the most courageous things you can do! The Bible is true, so you should trust the word of God. When pressed hard enough to justify your worldview in a conversation these are the sorts of stories and metaphors that ground the values of someone who thinks they've got it all figured out. Many people spend their entire lives thinking they've arrived at the truth...when the more accurate description is that they've set up camp in an echo chamber of people that don't call them on their mistakes...either because they only talk to people who mostly agree with them, or because the people that disagree with them lack the ability to press them further, maybe they want to just be polite, maybe they just don't CARE enough about changing someone into a LITTLE version of them to spend their time doing it. Rorty prescribes an antidote to this way of thinking about getting past appearances to the reality of the world. Here is a pretty famous passage from his work that describes his three criteria for living a life as an ironist: "I shall define an ironist as someone who fulfills three conditions: 1 She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; 2 She realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these

doubts. 3 insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal meta-vocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old."So imagine living life as an ironist as opposed to this other type of person we were just talking about. You'd live your day to day life not like Phyrro in ancient athens walking in front of cars because you're doubting whether or not they're actually there...you'd HAVE a sort of working theory, a final vocabulary that you use to function...the DIFFERENCE would be that you would have seen OTHER final vocabularies, seen their weaknesses, and you would realize that yours is probably EQUALLY as flawed as there's in some way. Because you don't have SPECIAL access to the truth...you don't have a diety backing your worldview...you don't have some neutral point outside of culture and history that you're doing your thinking from. You are JUST as fallible as they are and your conclusions rely on history and culture JUST as much as there's do. You would have continuing radical doubt about your relationship with reality. You'd ALSO realize...that any attempt by you to argue that your final vocabulary is superior to others...is a pointless exercise that is ACTUALLY just an example of that circular reasoning we talked about before...because you're arguing FOR a set of stories and narratives as being superior...but all the while you're USING that set of stories and narratives as the premise that you're starting your arguments from. This is why Rorty thinks that when it comes to our final vocabularies...ARGUING in the traditional sense is not a very effective way of making any progress. Rorty says that an ironist always realizes "that anything can be made to look good or bad by being re-described". Because it's not like there is some SINGLE, argumentative standard out there...winning an argument in the times of Napoleon is just different than winning an argument today...because the values of the people judging have changed, the historical circumstances have changed, the story about how the world fits together has changed...different arguments are more effective in different final vocabularies. So ARGUING is ALWAYS relying on your points fitting well into the final

vocabulary of whoever it is you're talking to--- which is FAR from a guarantee...and the OTHER side of that is that you may find yourself CONSTANTLY arguing against a particular, COMMON final vocabulary that happens to dominate the culture you were born into. Better to instead LEAD by example through irony. When someone thinks they've lassoed the truth with their vocabulary...the far more effective method will ALWAYS be to do what Rorty calls: ironic disruption...which doesn't mean pull out your Richard Rorty handbook and argue them down point by point until they see the world the way you do...the goal is through one method or another, usually rhetorical devices...you try to allow this person to see on their own...the perspective from OUTSIDE their single worldview...the hope being that once they're in this place they will realize how limiting their basic way of viewing the world is because it COMPLETELY closes them off from new ways of connecting with people, ideas, and the world that is out there, once again the WORLD that is out there...not the TRUTH that is out there. To be in this place stepping outside of your worldview and seeing a COMPLETELY different way the world can be rationally justified...can be transformative. Should be said this process also benefits the ironist because they need AS MUCH experience with final vocabularies as they can get. They need to be able to spot them from a mile away. Rorty says in a passage that an ironist is "never quite able to take themselves seriously". Because they live their life acknowledging how much of their final vocabulary wasn't even a choice that THEY consciously made...and that at any point some of the issues that they believe in most strongly today... might tomorrow, change in a single conversation. This is a very different approach to your intellectual development, and a VERY different way of approaching conversations with people that disagree with you politically. This person would seem like an ALIEN in the current political landscape, but this is ultimately the TYPE of person that emerges in a Pluralistic landscape of ideas...rather than one that believes in a single, correct answer to every political question. See you may wonder why bother? Why even spend a SECOND of my life trying to talk to someone and show them how they're limiting themselves to a single answer? Let them do whatever it is they're gonna do. But Rorty would say that these people that truly believe they are reading books and getting

past the world of appearances to the TRUE reality of things...this outdated, oversimplified attitude is responsible for SO MUCH of the CRUELTY that goes on in this world. Liberal society, in his eyes, has a constant obligation to remind ourselves of the ways that the current order of things might be hurting the people around us. Much more effective with a Pluralistic outlook. You know, there are relativists that will try to make an argument for people to stop fighting over their petty disagreements because ultimately everything is arbitrary...there are Rationalists that will say that everyone should stop fighting because well I've come up with the RIGHT ANSWER, no more work to be done! The way that Richard Rorty walks the line of nature and culture is partially through his beautiful use of Pragmatism. Rorty wouldn't say you should care less. He wouldn't say you should care more. What he would say I think is that the substance of what we care about...LIES in solidarity amongst fellow human beings. That solidarity is what keeps us in line, not a cosmic law. That solidarity is what determines our values, not some philosopher in a tower. To understand the historical and cultural environment that you live in is only the FIRST STEP towards understanding the solidarity that holds society together. He said it well when describing his book here in one of the most famous passages from his work: "the fundamental premise of this book is that a belief can still regulate action, can still be worth dying for among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing more than contingent historical circumstances" Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Jürgen Habermas - The Public Sphere

Episode #143

This is a transcript of episode #143 on Jurgen Habermas. Check out the episode page [HERE](#). So for a long, long time the Enlightenment has been the whipping child paying for all the mistakes and all the transgressions of philosophers and leaders alike...and this child has taken a LOT of ABUSE over the years! First we had the counter-Enlightenment, then we had the Existentialists, then we had the beginning of the 20th century, then we had the Postmodernists...but for ALL these thinkers and ALL the different ways they thought the Enlightenment had produced practically EVERY problem we faced as a species...there were JUST as many IF NOT MORE thinkers that came back at them with a very nuanced philosophical argument that's been used since the BEGINNING OF TIME, and the argument was this: Yeah...but still. Yeah, turns out in retrospect we aren't using rationality to arrive at the intrinsic structure of the Universe...but still...who really wants to throw out the entirety of what the Enlightenment has produced in the mean time? Do you really want to throw out all of the technical understanding of the universe that science has produced? Do you really want to throw out all the economic progress? Do you want to just sit here vacationing in France deconstructing grand narratives for the rest of our lives? The thinker we're going to be talking about today: Jurgen Habermas...said no. Habermas thought sure...the Enlightenment HAD some problems. And yes, maybe we're not arriving at the capital T truth about anything. But maybe a better plan would be for us to take a closer look at the project of the Enlightenment, figure out what went wrong...and then try to re-work and re-imagine it so that we can PRESERVE all of the things that were so GREAT about it. Habermas called the problems produced by the Enlightenment the "pathologies of modernity"...and he thought these pathologies were not a sign that the project of modernity was a total failure...he thought they were evidence that the project was incomplete. Reason...had been looked at in such a narrow and uncharitable way by the critics of modernity that it was never given a

chance to realize it's full potential...which by the end of the episode we will understand, could be the emancipation of the entire human species. So let's get started anyone looking to defend the Enlightenment PROBABLY has to begin by addressing some of the most notable works criticizing the Enlightenment..and one of the most SCATHING investigations into what went wrong we talked about all the way back in our series on the Frankfurt School...one of the most famous books in the history of philosophy: The Dialectic of Enlightenment by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Should be said Habermas is ALSO a member of the Frankfurt School, ALBEIT the newly formed Frankfurt School back in Germany after the war..and while many of his ideas overlap with OTHER thinkers in the Frankfurt School... he nonetheless HAS to take this early 20th century book to task to be able to move forward adequately with HIS work. Like we talked about last episode Adorno and Horkheimer thought that the project of the Enlightenment was destined to consume itself from the beginning, because by using reason to question the foundationalism of religion...there would be an immediate need for reason to in turn question ITSELF as a foundation, at which point we'd HAVE no clear foundations for our values and we'd open up the floodgates of totalitarianism...among many other things they thought might go wrong. Check out the series on the Frankfurt School if you want to hear more, but right now we have to move on with THIS episode. To skip ahead, they believed one of the major problems that faced modernity was that the project of the Enlightenment put FAR TOO MUCH faith in reason. But Habermas is going to say that Adorno and Horkheimer made a huge mistake. They defined reason in a very narrow way that only included two TYPES of reason and ignored other important examples of how reason presents itself in human life. Reason during the Enlightenment was two things to Adorno and Horkheimer, one had to do with making reasonable STATEMENTS about the world...reason on one hand was the unbiased measuring tool that can supposedly get us to the truth about the universe...which...hopefully by THIS point on the show we've talked about enough. But number two had to do with determining which human ACTIONS were reasonable...THIS type of reason was known as Instrumental Reason, or put another way...the type of

reason that helps us rationally progress from a starting point...to a conclusion. This is the type of reason that is instrumental...when it comes to providing the rational means...that can get us to certain ENDS we want to achieve. Means to an end...keep that in mind because it's going to be important...but first let's give some examples of why this type of reason is a PROBLEM for Adorno and Horkheimer and before them the sociologist Max Weber. Think of how this type of reason impacts many of these Enlightenment thinkers that spend their lives trying to create ELABORATE systems that explained the way the universe is. How easy would it be...to come up with a conclusion for how you think reality is...and then use rational analysis to prove, step by step, that YOUR conclusion is correct. The very fact that so many thinkers seemingly proved things that were mutually exclusive...just goes to show WHY this could be a problem...now to show how this instrumental reason can be downright DANGEROUS...let's consider a more extreme, everyday example. Let's say I have some CRAZY goal I want to achieve. Let's say I want to stab myself in the eye with a fork...then I want to run outside and take out a pack of predatory buffalo in my front yard and THEN I'm going to take an entire pallet of Aquanet and spray it into the sky so that it rips a hole in the ozone layer, now...ridiculous goal without a doubt...but nonetheless there are completely rational steps we could plan out that would provide us the means to get closer and closer to this END we're trying to achieve. First I go into the kitchen, open the drawer, grab a fork. Then I go out into the front yard and start tackling buffalos one by one...the DANGER of instrumental reason is that it is completely possible to mistake a process...that is ENTIRELY RATIONAL for it being something humanity should EVER want to implement. See instrumental reason can only get us from point A to point B...but who out there gets to decide what point B should consist of? Left in the hands of the Enlightenment... many critics believed it led to the chaos of the 20th century. So this raises the question, how do we ever ensure that the ENDS we're trying to achieve never become co-opted, as Habermas feared, by a single thinker or group that happens to captivate a particular culture with a compelling argument during their time? History has shown us this is very possible...and it should be said in THIS sense the postmodernists feared a very real threat that was looming out

there. The defensive strategy of some was to deconstruct and fragment these grand narratives that SPOKE about having conclusions we should be aiming for...the goal being to show that human knowledge is ALWAYS from a particular, individual perspective...not from some privileged position. So right now we should pause and understand that THIS is the climate that Habermas finds himself doing his work in. He wants to on one hand...acknowledge the fact that knowledge ALWAYS NEEDS to go through the filter of an individual, human perspective...but he thinks it's possible...through inter-subjectivity...through ALL of these individual human perspectives coming together...maybe it's possible for us to arrive at useful information ABOUT reality...that doesn't RELY on any one, single person's perspective. This is why near the end of the 20th century there is a resurgence in the philosophical approach of Pragmatism. Habermas being one of the greats. See it's from this Pragmatic perspective that Habermas sees where Adorno and Horkheimer went wrong. Reason is NOT JUST instrumental and strategic reason...one of the biggest ways reason presented itself in the world that changed the game ALL THE WAY BACK in the Enlightenment...was through the process of what he calls: Communicative Rationality . Let me explain what he means by that. See like many philosophers throughout the 20th century Habermas was interested in linguistic analysis...but UNLIKE many philosophers Habermas developed a healthy obsession with the specific topic of communication. Language MAY shape our reality to a certain degree...but HOW WE communicate that language has a considerable effect as well. Signs and symbols may be the raw building materials, but the way they're communicated is the construction team that puts the building together. So while on this journey where he's fascinated by how people communicate with each other Habermas realizes a few things. Whenever someone successfully communicates ANYTHING to another person... and that person understands what was said...that communication will NEED to have possessed four VERY important qualities. One, it needs to be intelligible. Needs to use actual words, needs to follow the rules of grammar, etc. Two, both people must accept beforehand that whatever they're talking about is a legitimate conversation to have at all. Three, there has to be an understanding that both people BELIEVE

whatever it is that they're saying, not just trying to manipulate each other. And four, whatever REASONING is used in the conversation needs to correspond with certain values or norms that both people agree upon and understand. Now, the exciting philosophical point that all FOUR of these criteria are basically saying here is that language is not this disinterested set of building blocks where we just describe raw, states of affairs. I'm going to deliver you the news in an unbiased way! I'm going to tell you what I think about your uncle Lou in an unbiased way. To communicate ANYTHING and for the OTHER PERSON to understand it...we have to embed our speech in normative constraints. The way that we view the world morally or otherwise HAS to be present in any successful communication we have with someone else. Now, some of you out there might be saying, okay...Habermas. That's all well and good...I love learning about language...but what does ANY of this have to do with political philosophy or rescuing reason from all those evil Postmodernists? Habermas is going to say that Instrumental Reason...that means to an end that we talked about...is not the only way that reason manifests in the world that's capable of governing human actions. There is ANOTHER type of reason... grounded in our communication with other human beings... that can not only inform our political strategy, but can also provide a justification for liberal democracy that doesn't rely on a God or appeal to anything supposedly written into the universe. In fact, from the unique vantage point of being BOTH a sociologist AND a Pragmatic philosopher Habermas talks about how different TYPES of reason actually MIRROR the different methods of coordinating human action...hence the connection to political philosophy. Let me give you a few examples. So one way of governing human action is to give people a set of rules or norms to live by. This is just one way, human beings, could figure out what to do next. This could be actual rules posted on a wall...this could be moral standards...this could even just be societal norms that are unspoken...for example you don't just walk into the bank and cut in front of everybody in line...unless if you're that one guy in crocs that actually wears a straw hat to the bank that I go to. But we don't talk about that guy...point is you can govern human action pretty effectively by holding people to a code of conduct. Now, COMPARE this...to one TYPE of rationality

that follows a set of pre-ordained rules. Think of syllogisms in formal logic...All cats are mean. Snowball is a cat. Therefore, Snowball is mean...you can have a string of propositions just as you can have a string of human actions and if any one of those propositions doesn't follow the necessary rules, the entire string becomes invalid. This way of reason presenting in the world MIRRORS a particular method of governing human action. Let's talk about the one Adorno and Horkheimer were so concerned with: Instrumental Reason. The same way we can decide on a conclusion we'd like to rationally justify...and then come up with a series of actions that rationally move us closer and closer to that end...GROUP human action can ALSO be mediated by turning PEOPLE into a means to an end. We see this kind of thing in the military, or a company, or a sports team...the Army, for example, has a mission that it needs to carry out. A final goal, or an end...and each and every soldier down to the lowest rank plays a small but necessary role in accomplishing that greater overall mission. The soldiers in this case BECOME a means to an end. We can govern human action...in other words...by turning individuals into a means that is working towards some END that we've decided is worth pursuing. Well Habermas is going to say a third way that human action can be coordinated and a third way that reason presents itself in human life...the type of reason Adorno and Horkheimer mistakenly left OUT and the type of reason grounded in our communication...is what he calls Communicative Rationality. Simply put...there is ANOTHER way that human beings can coordinate what they should do moving forward...and that is by coming together and having genuine, intelligible conversations starting from a premise of similar values...in other words, following those four criteria for proper communication we talked about before...people get together, communicate effectively, and rationally come to a collective agreement about how they should move forward. So again this is not holding people to a set of rules or norms, this is NOT making people a means to an end...Communicative Rationality is a particular way of communicating that carries with it the express intent of delivering your perspective, hearing the perspectives of other people, and ultimately coming to an agreement about things. Now, Habermas would INSTANTLY want to mark a contrast between this

Communicative Rationality and Strategic Rationality. Because a very important piece of these conversations where everyone is speaking their piece, debating, trying to come to an agreement is that everyone speaking actually, genuinely believes in whatever case it is that they're trying to make. That is the ESSENCE of Communicative Rationality...but what happens when someone DOESN'T really believe in what they're saying? Maybe they're just arguing a particular position because they BENEFIT from people HOLDING that position. Maybe they're just trolling. These are examples of what Habermas calls Strategic Rationality... and the best example of this is probably a classic salesman. Picture someone at one of those kiosks at the mall trying to sell you a smartphone case. There's a sense in which when you're talking to that person... the entire interaction is clouded by the fact... that it's not really a genuine conversation that you're having. Does this person REALLY care this much about phones being protected? Do they REALLY care about your own personal level of phone safety? No, there's a sense in which everything that they say can be taken with a grain of salt...there's a sense in which everything they say to you about how great their phone cases are is driven by the fact that they're going to get paid a commission if they sell you one. Having a conversation with this person is uncomfortable and if you were the kind of person genuinely trying to develop your understanding of the world of phone cases...this would DEFINITELY not be the person you'd want to talk to. Well imagine this same kind of interaction speaking to someone about politics... where they have a similar incentive to sell you a particular idea. More on that in a second, but I want to plant a flag in the ground here and mark this as a BIG reason why it is EXTREMELY important... for everyone to genuinely believe in what it is they're debating when engaging in Communicative Rationality within a group. Because remember...embedded into our communication is a common set of premises and a common set of values for the people who are having the conversation. Now couple this with the fact that Habermas is a huge fan of Liberal Democracy and the Enlightenment's attempt to try to ground its legitimacy in something GREATER than just pure relativism...and you can start to see the direction Habermas is going here. Communicative Rationality is essentially...democracy. People come together, they have

conversations with each other about the best course of action and then they decide which way to go moving forward. But let's consider something important about democracy for a second. Democracy is just a word...its a word that denotes a particular political strategy that we're all very familiar with. And while we should USE the word democracy so that we have something specific to reference and while the political strategy is NO DOUBT the most neatly packaged VERSION of what it is we're talking about here...we should NEVER forget... that the PROCESS that underlies the system of democracy has applications FAR BEYOND the realm of politics. To Habermas, Communicative Rationality IS that process, and people use it all the time. They use it to have conversations trying to figure out which political candidate to choose. They use it when deciding where their group of friends should meet for dinner. They use it at their church to decide where the funds should be allocated. The process of two or more people coming together, telling each other about their own experiences, trading insights, and then using all the information at their disposal to try to come to an agreement about how to move forward...trading recipes is included in THAT process...how much butter to put in your chocolate chip cookies! The point is: this is a PROCESS that human beings generally engage in even if it's purest expression is in the realm of politics in something we call democracy...and to Habermas as modernity has progressed over the years...gradual changes in people's lives have made participating in this process progressively rare. There is less and less participation, BY CITIZENS, in one of the greatest things Habermas thinks the Enlightenment EVER produced to improve the lives of individuals...something he calls: The Public Sphere. Now, to understand WHY he thinks this is happening we have to understand what the public sphere is and how it even came into existence in the first place. Let's start with a bit of historical context. Say you were an average citizen living in pre-Enlightenment France, which would of course be prior to the French Revolution. That would place you right in the middle of the feudal system organized by the three estates of government. First estate was the church...second estate was the nobility and the third estate was the peasantry. The peasantry...meaning EVERYBODY ELSE. When there's political turmoil...or there is a serious situation that

needs to be handled by government...the deliberation ABOUT that decision...the burden of choosing which direction to go, FALLS on the shoulders of the king or queen...MAYBE there's consultation between the first TWO estates...maybe the church is considered in the decision making but one thing is for sure: the peasantry was NOT part of the political process at all. France would, for example, go to war with Spain...and throughout the entire process of deciding whether or not to GO to war the peasantry would never even be asked for an opinion. So when it comes to being a politically informed member of your society up on current events...when you're a peasant in the middle ages, not only can you probably not read, but even if you could read you probably speak a language DIFFERENT than the information is being written in at the time. When you're having conversations with friends...you're not having a political debate...you're talking about famine and harvests and events happening in your local community and much of the time probably your relationship with the church. But then the Enlightenment comes along. Governments are restructured. Economies are restructured. But maybe the BIGGEST change when it comes to political involvement is that mass print is becoming more common. There is a rapid rise of what we now know as the bourgeoisie, or the middle class...not ONLY in terms of spending power but ALSO in terms of formulating their own set of values and political attitude. So these changes at the beginning of the Enlightenment allow for an entirely NEW kind of space to emerge, the classic coffee houses or salons of early Enlightenment France. For the first time in the history of the world a person could go down to one of these communal gathering places, pick up a mass printed journal that they were capable of reading, READ about what the king or queen was doing, the political goings on of the day...and then DISCUSS and DEBATE what was going on with their fellow citizens. These gathering places became the forum where the political VOICE of the middle class could finally be developed...and the EXISTENCE of these forums led to MASSIVE changes when it comes to how the governments of the future had to interact with the public. These public forums of discussion and the greater political VOICE that surrounded them became known to Habermas as the public sphere. Now, the public sphere is based in the process of communicative rationality. This

is a democracy of ideas. The process of coming together, giving your own individual experiences you've had in life and trying to discuss towards arriving at an agreement was just PART of it. But as modernity has gone on, Habermas says, people have been engaging in the public sphere less and less. More generally, with the progression of technology, people have been engaging in communicative rationality less frequently...they're having fewer of these conversations with each other where they learn about the world around them through other human beings. But WHY is this happening? Habermas thinks this trajectory began at the beginning of the Enlightenment. Prior to the Enlightenment major elements of society were largely determined by inherited tradition...we structured things like the economy or the government to resemble the way that things had worked for us before. But post-Enlightenment, once we've thrown OUT these classical traditions and are instead trying to build these systems from scratch...what happens is EACH ONE of these systems has to rebuild itself and come up with its own self reinforcing rationality that keeps it alive and moves it forward. When it comes to the economy and the government in particular...Habermas thinks what emerged at their base was a very OBVIOUS form of Instrumental Rationality. Means to an end thinking. Makes total sense too...the government has certain ends it needs to accomplish for the maintenance of society. The economy...has certain benchmarks it needs to meet...PROFIT is almost always an end worth going for. Habermas thinks what has happened as the years have gone on is that the lines between the economy and the government have blurred beyond recognition. The two have fused together into a sort of super system...he just calls it "the system"...but the point is the two have combined into a massive, powerful means to an end machine. We live our lives as modern people immersed in two competing worlds, to Habermas. See certain aspects of our lives are determined for us...we are given a socio-economic role to play within society by this economic/governmental system that exists...whatever person we want to be HAS to take into consideration those parameters handed down to us. But on the other hand there are MANY aspects of who we are that are determined by what he calls the "lifeworld"...or the piece of our lives that resembles the public sphere and communicative rationality...this is

the portion of our lives where we exchange experiences and have discussions...this is where citizens get together, talk to each other and DECIDE on the path moving forward, rather than act like little soldiers for the economic governmental system that TELLS them how to behave as a means to make sure we can bring about certain ends. Now, what has ALSO happened in modernity that has led to the relationship between the lifeworld and the system being even more complicated...is that the nature of media has drastically changed. By and large anymore people are not reading journals and newspapers to get their understanding of what's going on in the world...and if they are the ownership and agenda of those newspapers and journals has completely transformed. Remember our salesman at the kiosk in the mall trying to sell you a smartphone case? How it feels like it's not even an authentic conversation because they're constantly trying to SELL you something and you can leave the conversation feeling a little bit dirty. Well Habermas thinks the nature of media has changed into more something that's looking to SELL you a candidate than to report the news. To SELL you a way to be, a system of values to believe in...rather than you participating in communicative rationality with your fellow human beings and arriving at one. Now you might respond to that with: well, when you get around the dinner table and start talking about values...THOSE people are just trying to SELL you THEIR ideas as well! But this is why it's so important...that to even PARTICIPATE in communicative rationality you need to genuinely believe in whatever it is you're arguing for. Because of COURSE...Habermas thinks MOST OF THE TIME...people within these conversations are going to disagree and misunderstand each other and both sides are going to try to convince the other one of why they're right...but the relationship BETWEEN these two parties is going to be between two REAL human beings having a conversation about something they both believe in...and NOT between a salesman and a customer. When transnational corporations with very specific ends they're trying to achieve OWN major media outlets. When there is so much power in controlling people's values...Habermas thinks the economic/governmental system COLONIZES the lifeworld. Where we used to sit around the dinner table and have discussions to determine our thoughts about the world...we now turn on a screen and are

SOLD ways to think about things. The further we got from the origins of the public sphere in those coffee houses back in France ...the further we got away from communicative rationality. We got so far away from it we could barely SEE it anymore...to the point where brilliant thinkers like Adorno and Horkheimer wrote an entire book about rationality and didn't even consider its existence! But for any chains we were supposedly wrapped in by the Enlightenment, Habermas thought the key to get us out of them was built into the Enlightenment all along. We just lost sight of it. The emancipatory potential of reason...reason's ability to direct us AWAY from treating people as a means to an end...the type of reason GROUNDED in communication...GROUNDED in the pursuit of genuinely trying to understand the other person's perspective and then working towards agreement...the type of reason that can allow us to make our decisions about things not by buying into an endless sales pitch, but by talking to our fellow citizens in the lifeworld comparing our individual perspectives...True democracy, to Habermas, is when the lifeworld controls the system. Not the system controlling the lifeworld. Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Max Weber - Iron Cage

Episode #144

This is a transcript of episode #144 on Max Weber. Check out the episode page [HERE](#)

So when the enlightenment began the hope was that through the process of scientific rationality... we would be gradually, but steadily moving forward towards several very important goals...freedom on a level never before witnessed by human beings...the promise of societies with levels of EQUALITY never before witnessed...through the ongoing process of using science to refine the systems of thought that surrounded us...the Enlightenment promised higher levels of efficiency, more sophisticated levels of technology...what the Enlightenment sold to people... was the expectation that every day that a human being lived henceforth would be a day lived in the direction of progress...constantly moving towards a better world.

Now one thing that is ABSOLUTELY clear is that when it comes to delivering on a lot of these promises...credit where credit's due...the Enlightenment did what it set out to do and it did it well. Not many people question the level of impact the Enlightenment had...because ...quite frankly if it produced little to no results not only would there not be as many critics as there are, but there'd be no reason to delineate between pre-modern and modern if we weren't talking about two very distinct eras. Make no mistake: the Enlightenment DELIVERED like it was an essential worker.

Science was all the rage in the early Enlightenment...and when people saw the kind of results it was getting there was a feeling by some that maybe it would be a good idea...to apply this new kind of scientific rationality...to EVERYTHING. Scientific rationality leads to efficiency and accuracy, we KNOW this...why not HAVE a scientific approach to

the government...a scientific approach to the economy...a scientific understanding of human cognition...why not have, a scientific understanding of the historical forces that drive society...or a scientific understanding of how people interact with each other within a society. What we're talking about here is a movement at the end of the 19th century that will eventually become known as the birth...of the social sciences. One of them being sociology and one of the founding members of it was the guy we're going to be talking about today: Max Weber.

Now it should be said right off the bat that this focus on hyper-efficiency when it comes to our social institutions has not always been the way that we do things. For example, in the pre-modern world generally speaking they did the best they COULD when it came to efficiency...but a more primary concern of theirs was to put together a society that endured. What combination of things has worked in the past? This is why they were so adamant about tradition.

Max Weber would say these pre-modern societies were like little art projects...they were a bunch of different parts cobbled together into something that worked...and this entire process of applying scientific rationality to every piece of the world to make it the most efficient...BREAKS these societies down into their component parts, in other words...scientific rationality is not looking at society as a WHOLE and trying to make it more efficient...government has it's own rationality and set of premises it's beholden to, the economy was the same, the arts had it's own goals, all in an attempt to make each of these respective fields and many others...AS, efficient as possible. Now...more generally...Weber saw the whole project... of trying to use scientific rationality to make everything as efficient as possible, to know EVERYTHING about the natural world, to be able to offer TOTAL freedom and equality for every person in the world...this was ultimately humanity's attempt at what he called a sort of "world mastery". We want to master...the world.

Now, Weber might say...you hear the term world mastery...doesn't really sound too bad! I mean who WOULDN'T want to live in a world where we've mastered it. Who WOULDN'T want to live in a world where every day that passes is civilization progressing further and further into a level of existence no human being has ever experienced before? Then again...he would say...think of the WEIGHT that you live under...that also NO HUMAN BEING has ever experienced...think of the weight of feeling like every day that you live needs to be a step forward. This is NOT the way most societies throughout history have felt.

That thing that I did right there...where no matter how good something sounds at first there may be unintended side effects that necessarily go along with it...that's going to be common in this episode...because it's a hallmark of Weber's work. See being a sociologist at the end of the 19th century...one of his primary goals is going to be looking at the lives of the people of modernity...and he's going to consider no matter how good it sounds...when you talk about what the enlightenment has produced...technology, efficiency, equality, knowledge and freedom...how has MASTERING THE WORLD in these areas created NEW challenges for people that have to live in the present era.

So I want to start with equality because it's obviously an issue that's on everyone's minds lately. But before we get started there are a couple very important disclaimers I want to make, that are relevant for the entire episode but particularly relevant for the subject of equality just because of all that's going on in the world. First of all....when Max Weber says something like we have progressed since the Enlightenment when it comes to the subject of equality...he is by no means saying that we have reached some sort of END POINT in that area. This actually applies to many things that the project of the Enlightenment has helped bring about. Take knowledge for instance: we have undeniably made progress when it comes to our scientific understanding of the universe...but there is obviously still an enormous amount of work that needs to be done

in that area. Take technological progress: we have definitely come a long way since the days of the early Enlightenment when it comes to the technology we have at our disposal...but CLEARLY we are not at some sort of endpoint...clearly there is always more progress we can make in that area if we dedicate resources to doing it. Well, same thing with equality. When you compare the life of the average person living in medieval Europe with the life of the average person living during Weber's time...still a lot of work that needs to be done of course, but we have been generally moving in the right direction. So if over the course of the episode you hear Max Weber say things that sound critical of the idea of equality...please understand that he's not making a case against the idea that we should be making our societies more equal...he's ultimately weighing the pros and cons of pre-modern approaches to society to modern ones. That as we continue marching forward towards making our societies as equal as we possibly can FOR EVERYONE in society...there will undeniably be great things that come from it...but as a sociologist he wants to also point out the unique challenges the people of modernity are going to have to figure out how to deal with along the way, as we inevitably move closer and closer to that goal.

So what are some new things the people of modernity are going to have to experience as a result of us making equality one of our major priorities?

Well Max Weber would say that with increased levels of equality within our social institutions...the more TRULY equal everyone is, the closer we get to that ultimate goal we will always have to deal with a higher level of dehumanization and increased levels of bureaucracy. The classic example of this that you can find in tons of essays on Weber's work is to think of how things work at the department of licensing or the DMV. What is the first thing you do when you walk into the DMV? You take a number and sit down until your number is called. Outside the doors of the DMV you are an individual person, you have friends, family, social status, values...inside the doors of the DMV...you become a number.

Now let's say the reason you went to the DMV that day was because of some sort of emergency situation. Let's say your mom was sick and needs someone to take care of her, but she lives upstate, your license is expired, so you have to get it reinstated so that you can drive up there and take care of her. Now let's say you go up to the counter and the person behind the counter tells you that there's a 48 hour waiting period for them to be able to renew your license.

There are a serious number of people out there...that would lament the fact that the DMV wouldn't look at their individual situation...and make an exception for them. Maybe put their form at the top of the pile...maybe just run in the back real quick and fix my license right now while I'm here. Why can't this person behind the counter just treat me like a human being. Why can't they smile and say "how ya doin? what brings you into the DMV on this fine day? oh, I'm so sorry to hear about your mother!" Why can't this person take things on a case by case basis? Why must I be a number instead of a name?

Max Weber would say, so in other words what you want is a privileged status? Preferential treatment over everyone else? Some people are more charismatic or good looking than other people. What if the person behind the counter just likes people with blue eyes more than people with brown eyes? What would HAPPEN at that point is anyone born with brown eyes... would instantly be part of some under-privileged class that doesn't get THEIR form put at the top of the pile for their entire lives... because of something they were born with that was COMPLETELY out of their control. How is THAT equal? Weber would say that as our imperative towards greater levels of equality progresses...SO TO must the citizens of modernity learn to deal with being just a fellow number and not a special human being. Once again these great things that we want to implement in our societies often come with a price. The question is CAN people THINK of themselves a little less, pay that price, and be consistent in our values as citizens rather

than individuals.

Nevertheless this was a NEW THING that the people of modernity had to deal with that the people of pre-modernity never had to consider. Take ANOTHER example of something the Enlightenment has produced: greater levels of freedom for the average citizen. Now once again...you'd be hard pressed to find ANYONE...living in today's world that would have a problem with trying to progressively find better and better ways to make people as free as is prudent. But Weber would say consider the potential downsides to having this societal imperative of freedom.

See, if you were living in a pre-modern society...say you're a peasant in the middle ages. From the moment you are born...you may know a LOT OF THINGS about what you're going to be for the rest of your life. You may know that you're never going to hold political office...you're never going start a business...fact is you may know you are going to be in that village for the rest of your life working the land...adhering to the will of a God whose decree you were born into rather than chose. You may know pretty much who your significant other is going to be...you may know the answer to whether you're gonna have kids...but for all this lack of freedom that may sound HORRIBLE to people living in modernity...Weber would say IN this position... you would also AT LEAST be able to know...who, you, are.

Your identity, at the very least, would not ever be something that ever caused you too much stress. Now, smash cut to modernity. How many people have you met that agonize for YEARS trying to figure out the answers to these enormously complex life questions? See, when we seek to guarantee as much freedom as possible to our fellow citizens...there are undeniably many great things that are gonna come out of that. But the flip side to being able to go anywhere, be anything, do anything...is that now it is YOUR exclusive responsibility to choose from the BILLIONS of different decisions at your disposal...and also to constantly worry about whether or not you made the right decision. Once

again...let's keep going on our journey...let's make people as free as we possibly can in our societies...but Weber's saying this is something the people of modernity are going to HAVE to learn to deal with along the way.

Let's look at another example: technological progress. Again, most people, would see increased levels of technology as a good thing because of all the different things it allows us to do, not to mention the lives it allows us to save. But Weber would say consider the fact that as technology progresses, it produces a sense of alienation when it comes to our connection to the world around us. Here's what he means: the nature of technology is that the current state of technology always produces the next GENERATION of technology. We then have better technology that is then used to produce the NEXT generation. The SPEED of technological progress increases as the level of sophistication increases in the technology that builds it. You could compare this...to a snowball rolling down hill constantly picking up speed and getting larger and larger.

Now consider what a new technology DOES when it displaces an old technology. The older piece of technology is rendered obsolete...which in turn means that pieces of our LIVES are then rendered obsolete. Let me give you an example.

Say you're a computer programmer. Now imagine you went to school for YEARS to learn how to code using a particular coding language. Now imagine you graduate, get a job, and two years later a brand NEW coding language becomes the standard, and it is clear to everyone including you... that this language is just clearly better than the one you are currently using...it can do things, more efficiently than that old language could ever even aspire to. Now on the surface this is just the world getting an upgrade...technology is progressing and making people's lives easier. But think about it from the perspective of the programmer. This person spent YEARS of their life essentially writing digital poetry in this special language that they speak. They expressed themselves with it. They took things that were at one point just pictures in their minds and CREATED it in reality, with

this language. Whatever connection they had to the real world that we made possible by that language, is gone now, in other words, they have one less thing to feel connected to in the world. But the thing is this isn't just the case with computer languages...there are countless examples of this.

Picture not being able to watch old home movies because nobody sells VCRs anymore. Picture going back to your childhood home to see the setting where you grew up...only to find it was replaced by high rise condominiums...or some NEW house with FAR BETTER structural integrity because construction methods have improved DRASTICALLY since you were a kid.

What we love about technology is that it subverts the current world as it is...but the flip side to that is that often times it is SUBVERTING things that have meaning to us...and this whole process is only speeding up. And as the rate of change becomes faster and faster...it becomes next to impossible for anything to endure long enough in the world for us to feel any sentimental value. The world starts to change so fast... that we can't even locate pieces of ourselves within it. This is another thing the people of modernity will have to learn to deal with.

Let's talk about one more thing the Enlightenment promised and ABSOLUTELY delivered on: increased levels of efficiency. The idea was that we could take scientific rationality and in the same way we applied it to the task of trying to understand the universe better...we could apply it to things like agriculture, the economy, government, the farming of animals, manufacturing of consumer goods, there was a sense in which there wasn't any process that couldn't be made more efficient compared to how it was done in the pre-modern world if only we look at it scientifically and trust the numbers and data.

Now keep in mind if you were living in the PRE-MODERN world, these things are

usually carried out by yielding to tradition. Good portion of the time there are rituals and ceremonies that people have come up with over the years that not only commemorate the whole process but also allow for human beings to feel a sense of connection to these aspects of maintaining their society. But in the MODERN world, Weber would say, where making things as efficient as possible has become the chief priority, these traditions, ceremonies and rituals start to become just unnecessary inefficiencies. To make things as efficient as possible often times we have to get rid of any sort of pesky human feelings that get in the way so that the numbers can look as good as possible.

Should be said this DOESN'T just have to do with needing to toss out all our old traditions that formerly gave us a sense of connection to the world...this same sacrifice of humanity for numbers exists in the world of modern corporate accounting as well. The employees of a medium to large sized company become numbers on a page, dollars in vs dollars out. Modern accounting gives our businesses an unprecedented level of efficiency, but again Weber would say it does so with a certain level of sacrifice.

Now what do all these sacrifices we've been talking about add up to? Weber would say that every one of these things we've been talking about is an example of humanity trying to apply what he calls "rationalization" to the component parts of a society all in an attempt for eventually achieving world mastery. Science and rationalization is undeniably great at doing all these things that we're asking it to do. The question that plagues the people of modernity is when every day NEEDS to be a day moving towards PROGRESS, where NO CIVILIZATION HAS EVER GONE BEFORE!...when you try to make everything as RATIONAL and EFFICIENT as you possibly can...do we end up creating societies where people work at an EXTREMELY efficient workplace, have a SWEET iphone 16x plus max plus, they have a BILLION options at their disposal in terms of what they can be...they know more about the universe than any other human being that's ever lived before...do we create societies where people have all these things...but feel utterly disconnected and completely empty inside?

Weber says that to live in modernity is like living inside of an iron cage. He describes the people of modernity in one of his most famous quotes ever:

We are "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

See at a certain level we're fooling ourselves, to Weber. We THINK we've achieved this level of civilization that is so advanced because we've learned to understand the external world around us and make a super efficient profit and loss sheet. But often times when you have this progressively, enormous understanding of the natural world around you...when you aim for world mastery...the only thing it REALLY serves to do for the average person is "demystify" the world, as he says. People in former societies have been capable of looking at the universe around them and reveling in the wondrous nature of it, but rationalization, as a process, the longer we make it one of our chief priorities...removes the mystery out of human life. Which is, again, on one hand the exact reason we LOVE it, we're TRYING to do this...but on the other hand it progressively disenchant the universe that we live in for people. Once again, for Weber...there's pros and cons to every strategy and we would do well to consider BOTH sides of things before we ever decide to implement something new.

Now, it's with THIS understanding of the work of Max Weber that I think it's important to pivot and begin talking about another thinker from around this time...Henri Bergson. Simply put, just to pick one of many entry points into the upcoming series we will be doing on him, simply put, Bergson thought that we as human beings try WAY too hard to relate to everything in the universe...spatially. When we look at the universe around us and we're trying to understand it better...we almost always begin by asking questions like...what are the spatial PROPERTIES of this thing? What are the three spatial

dimensions that define this thing...what is it's length, width, or height. What spatially definable material is this thing made out of? What's the volume of this thing? What's the mass? What's the relationship between these two things that we HAVE these spatial definitions of, how does they spatially interact?

But all this spatial bookkeeping eventually only leads us down the road of thinking that to FURTHER understand these things we need to break things up into their component parts, in other words, understanding things deeper means breaking SPACE down into smaller pieces for us to examine more closely.

But Bergson's gonna say that there is no reason to assume... that SPATIAL considerations are necessarily the way that the universe should be broken up and understood. In fact, he thought all this talk about SPACE greatly shades the way that we see EVERYTHING about the universe around us. Famous example of this, that we'll talk about briefly now just to introduce the scope of his work but we'll of course talk about it far more in depth in the coming series, famous example is how he viewed the concept of time.

Now how do we typically view this concept of time in a scientific world obsessed with measurements and defining everything spatially? Well we break down time into tiny increments, a seemingly infinite succession of present moments. Seconds, minutes and hours. We love this way of looking at time...because it allows us to continue using the same methods we use to try to understand everything else we look at in the universe...we can measure time, we can rely on it's consistency maybe even come up with an equation that can predict it, we can think about time in terms of visual units all stacked up next to each other neatly into the horizon. But Bergson would say this isn't how time works. Time...is a process. Much like when you're in the movie theater and you're watching a movie...you don't experience what is on the screen as tens of thousands of little snapshots being run through a projector behind you...the story is just unfolding... into

the future. When you think of what it is you're experiencing when you're watching a movie...there's a sense in which trying to break it down into a bunch of different present moments all lined up misses out on something CRUCIAL about our human experience of it. The same way it might be if a scientist or a mathematician tried to, for example, measure levels of sadness in people.

Say two people go into a lab and they're in a competition with each other to find out WHO is more sad between the two of them. They both say they're REALLY sad. They both rate their sadness 10/10. We can ask them questions and do brain scans all day long, but how can we EVER really, scientifically quantify if THIS person is more sad or THAT person? What measuring stick can we use to get to the bottom of how much suffering they FEEL in their internal, subjective human experience? More than that...could we ever REALLY pin down a persons level of sadness just by measuring it, as though it works that way, as though I experience life through this static level of sadness that doesn't change, or are these things more like processes...waves that are constantly unfolding into the future in unknown directions.

See as important as understanding the external world is...this internal world JUST AS MUCH a domain for philosophy to explore. These questions are JUST as much a part of existence as the volume and weight of limestone. Bergson thinks when you look at things like time, or internal experience, or thousands of other things we'll talk about in the upcoming series...when you look at these things you start to understand that the fundamental building blocks of the universe may be processes...rather than anything static and easily measurable.

The best metaphor I've seen used to describe this is a common one and it goes like this. Picture you're out in the desert and you come across a giant sand dune on a fairly windy day. Now imagine THAT SAND DUNE is the universe, and you represent humanity's attempt so far to try to understand it. Now picture you try to measure it, you try to weigh

it, you pull out your measuring tape and get started...and there's a sense in which by the time you've even gotten done taking the first measurement...that sand dune is a different thing than when you began. Halfway through that sand dune has transformed into a COMPLETELY different thing. You could be out in that desert for a BILLION YEARS trying your hardest to get the measurements and pin down what exactly that sand dune is and STILL fail, through no fault of your own. That sand dune is a process, not a static thing that can ever be measured. This idea would form the basis of what would eventually become known...as process philosophy. And I'll explain more on next episode.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Henri Bergson pt. 1 - History

Episode #145

This is a transcript of episode #145 on Henri Bergson. Check out the episode page [HERE](#)

So maybe the best place to begin this episode is to talk about laughter as a marker of happiness. Should we consider laughter to be a true marker of happiness...like if we see someone who laughs all the time...can we reasonably assume that that person is happy? Well if not...can we assume that laughter is a thing that's GOOD for us in and of itself? Think most people would say it is...think most people would say we should try to laugh as much as possible. Laughter...is one of the most joyful experiences you can possibly have as a human being. Look at any antidepressant commercial...when they're reading off all the side effects those people are frolics through the park laughing about something...I don't know what, but they sure look a lot happier than me.

But what's funny is that regardless of how much we value laughter, and aim towards it in our daily lives...when philosophers throughout history have tried to take a philosophical approach towards understanding WHY we laugh at things...the reasons we laugh often seem to carry with them some sort of negative connotation. We'll be looking at a few of them here today. Now, most historians of western philosophy will say that the first theories offered for WHY we laugh at things came out of ancient Greece in the era of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle...there almost certainly were theories before this by the presocratics, but...history is a set of lies we all agree upon, right? And we gotta start somewhere so let's just get into it.

There is ONE big plus though...for trying to understand laughter by starting during the era of Socrates. Two themes that were CENTRAL to the theater of this period of Athens: comedy and tragedy. We can see why there might be some sort of negative connotation

that could come along with why we laugh when you compare comedy and tragedy. Because as much as they may SEEM like polar opposites at first glance...Something tragic happens: you cry...the ultimate expression of sadness. Something comedic happens: you laugh...the ultimate expression of joy. But when you really take a closer look at these two things something you realize VERY quickly is just how similar the two are.

Consider the fact that in both comedy and tragedy there is often a problem that arises, both formats usually cite the reality that we live in a world of complex competing forces that are mostly out of our control, and in both these formats the lens is turned outward, observing the world around the characters, mostly concerning socio-political issues, at which point a character steps up and tries to offer a solution to a problem that faces everyone in society.

While the SOLUTIONS offered by these two different approaches are VERY DIFFERENT...both of them ultimately aim to subvert the expectations of the viewer. There are certain, patterned ways that we look at the world around us...comedy and tragedy are designed to present a different perspective.

Within a tragedy...some hero may sacrifice themselves or die for some sociopolitical cause, looking to have their death evoke some sort of change...while in comedy the goal is more to shift public consciousness by mocking how ridiculous things have gotten.

You know, Voltaire had STRONG thoughts on humor and its utility in the public realm. During his time he would just MERCILESSLY make a mockery of Rousseau and his thinking...and he has a famous quote describing why he did it, I'm paraphrasing a bit here but the idea is that he thought once you can get people to LAUGH at something...they never take that thing quite as seriously ever again. He didn't want Rousseau's work to become some sort of anointed political stone tablets. By the way this

is the SAME reason if any of you are thinking of becoming the dictator of a small country...why if there is someone ruthlessly making fun of you in public to everyone...this is why most of your dictator colleagues drag that person off into an alley and they're never seen again. You need to maintain that status of infallibility. Comedy, in other words, is not just telling knock knock jokes...comedy can be one of the most powerful tools a society has to speak truth to power...and I'm sure we can all think of examples of comedians, TV shows, movies, books, etc. that serve this very purpose. More on that later.

Now obviously the comedies concerned with sociopolitical commentary are far different than the comedy you watched last week starring Adam Sandler. But somebody might want to ENGAGE in a comparison between the two to try to get to the bottom of what makes us laugh at all. Why do these two VERY different things BOTH make us laugh? Philosophers all throughout history have tried to figure out what exactly do we mean when we say something is funny, and what makes it funny?

Ultimately today's episode is going to lead to a famous essay by Henri Bergson called Laughter and in it...he wants to examine the relationship between people and the comic. By comic...he's not talking about a person who tells jokes...by "the comic" he more means "the comedic" or "the funny". He wants to examine it...but he wants to do it from a different angle than has typically been done historically.

See all throughout the history of Western Philosophy thinkers have been pretty excited to USE philosophy to understand things metaphysically or epistemologically. This tendency has limited them to Bergson...because so often when they look at something like the question "what is funny"...they'll immediately try to understand what we MEAN by the concept of funny...what MAKES something funny...in other words, they try to CATEGORIZE it and nail it down.

Bergson is more interested in examining the relationship between funny...and the internal experience of human beings. This may seem like just a slight shift in perspective, but it's emblematic of Bergson and the scope of his work. Bergson believed that our long history of looking at everything in such spatial terms made us almost completely neglect to use philosophy to look at many aspects of the internal experience of people. He actually wonders at one point in his work if since the dawn of the scientific revolution philosophers had taken a different course, and instead of trying to understand the external world they endeavored to understand our internal world...how might the field of psychology look today? A field that during HIS time was practically in its infancy.

So that said...I've thought about it a lot and I think the best way to understand Bergson is to structure it like this: first I want to just SAY WHY Bergson thinks we laugh at things, just get it out there... which probably won't make much sense right now, then I want to do a bit of a historical overview of several key philosophers and why THEY thought we laugh at things, and then I want to return to Bergson and explain how these theories throughout history relate back to what we initially talked about.

Bergson believes that any time we find ANYTHING funny...it is because at some level we are witnessing what he famously calls, "the mechanical encrusted upon the living". Let me explain. Think of some random object out there...let's just talk about a tree. A tree is not funny in and of itself. You don't just look at a tree and start laughing. The very concept of something being funny, to Bergson, is an extremely humanistic activity. Things aren't funny to the universe...they're not funny to gravity...or bacteria...things are funny to other human beings...funny is a HUMAN activity...and everything that we find funny, ultimately to Bergson, is us seeing something that looks mechanical within human behavior, behavior that is otherwise, fluid, elastic and constantly in flux. This hallmark of the late nineteenth century...to put rigid, mechanical parameters on something that is ACTUALLY fluid and constantly in flux causes us to laugh,

now...there's obviously much more to this...but to understand how Bergson arrived here let's look at some other theories throughout history and try to spot how these theories might relate back to what I just said.

So one of the earliest known theories when it comes to what makes something funny...taken up by philosophers like Plato, Thomas Hobbes and partially in the work of Aristotle, Rene Descartes...is something that has come to be known as the superiority theory. The basic point is this: when we laugh at things it is because at some level we feel superior to some element of the joke or situation. Laughter is a response to this feeling of superiority.

You know a common saying is that there is always a VICTIM in comedy...there is always a butt of the joke. This theory offers an explanation for why that HAS to be the case. Let's talk about some examples...maybe the most basic one is slapstick humor.

You and your friends are walking through the woods...your friend in front of you is looking back telling everyone about how they're about to start their own vape store...and they trip over a log and faceplant into some sort of shrub and EVERYBODY laughs, now...the Superiority theory would say that you and your friends are laughing at that because you're getting a certain amount of joy in knowing that you are superior to this person in this moment. So if we extend this line of reasoning this is why stand up comedians might be prone towards self deprecating humor...because the audience can always laugh at how pathetic they are...this could be why in comic strips they go to strategy is for some character to say something really, really dumb...this could be why in movies funny scenes are OFTEN written to have a character in a super embarrassing situation that they can't get out of. Common to all of these is that the audience feels superior to the butt of the joke.

Whether you agree with this or not, should be said, there are certainly things you could

point to that seem to verify the legitimacy of this...for example how bout the fact that we feel COMPLETELY different, when we are being laughed WITH...as opposed to laughed AT. When you're laughed AT by a group...it's almost like you're being seen as lesser, than the other members of the group. Being laughed AT immediately brings up a sense of a hierarchy in our heads.

Now, the problem with this theory ended up being a lot of different things not the least of which is...that if we're going to start with the premise that what evokes laughter is a feeling of superiority over something...then why do we have such a strong capacity for pity? Why when we see people with health problems, relationship problems, financial problems...why are there so many cases of people being worse off than us that don't amuse us at all? We don't even come CLOSE to laughing in those cases. Also what about insects and plants that people often feel superior to? Why aren't those people walking around at the botanical gardens laughing like bozo the clown all the time? How bout the fact people often laugh at themselves? Superiority may be a part of the formula for what makes us laugh, but philosophers were quick to point out that there has to be something else going on here. So they went back to the drawing board.

Now another theory that came later...is that laughter is kind of like a pressure release valve. This is more commonly known as the Relief Theory, held by people like Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud. Proponents of this theory might say...think of laughter as sort of a psychological tool that helps us get back to homeostasis. Let me explain: often times within the boundaries of a single joke or group of jokes...there's a sort of nervous tension that begins to build...during the setup of the joke we start to feel a sense of pity for the subject of the joke and we start to develop expectations about their situation...only to find out on the punchline that those expectations were wrong and that all that mental energy we put into caring about them was a total waste of time and everything's actually completely okay.

For example take the very simple joke, "Did you hear about the mathematician that was afraid of negative numbers? Yeah, he'd stop at NOTHING to get away from them!"

First of all none of you judge me...I don't wanna hear it...point is this is a super simple example of the structure of some jokes...the first line is telling a story of somebody immersed in a career where they're terrified of something they have deal with every day. We might start to feel bad for this person, think of how miserable their life must be. Only to realize one sentence later that any mental energy we expended in that direction, was actually useless and any expectations we had were wrong. Now when you extend this theory to formats where you have more than two lines to work with...TV shows, Movies...stand up comedians are absolute masters of doing this over the course of paragraphs, maybe over the course of their whole set. When we've exerted mental energy towards caring about a character in a story only to find out it was a joke and that it actually didn't matter, to some supporters of the Relief Theory, we laugh as a psychological tool to release that tension and bring us back to homeostasis.

But other thinkers who are still proponents of the relief theory might disagree with the idea that the Relief Theory is this narrow. They might say, for example, look at this classic quote from Groucho Marx:

"Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog it's too dark to read."

Now, some people might laugh at that. But why if we're accepting the premises from before? There wasn't any nervous energy being built up to set up a thwarting of someone's expectations. He was only saying something positive before the punch line. Arguments like this led some philosophers to think of the relief theory in more macro terms. We go about the stresses of our everyday lives, in other words we fear things within our cultures, we suppress our desires, we create narratives and expectations of

ourselves and others and our place in the world...all of this accounting for the true source of that nervous energy that needs to be relieved by laughter.

Think of somebody that goes to work all week...50-60 hours at their job, constantly building that pressure up and then goes out on Friday to the comedy club to let off some steam. Or even goes home nightly and doesn't want to do anything but watch a funny show they like.

This reminds me of a theory Adorno had which is that as citizens of late stage capitalist totalitarian societies...we watch these products created by the culture industry...we watch these funny TV shows and movies and comedians and we laugh and it distracts us away...from the economic chains we walk around in every day of our life. What might otherwise be a sort of nervous energy that would increasingly build and result in people feeling so uncomfortable it would lead to revolution for Adorno...instead we're given bread and circuses to keep us at bay and laughter is the steam being released from the pressure cooker.

Nonetheless, as interesting as this theory is probably everyone listening can think of a TON of different things people laugh at that clearly have nothing to do with a release of built up nervous energy. But this theory was a CRUCIAL part of the history of these theories of what makes us laugh, so we have to know about it. Because even if philosophers think there has to be something else that accounts for laughter, maybe, just like in the case of the superiority theory, the relief theory is part of the answer.

The LAST of these big theories from history about what makes us laugh is probably the most popular theory in today's day and age...what's known as the Incongruity Theory. Sometimes called the Incongruous Juxtaposition Theory.

Now real quick it should be said for all three of these: the superiority theory, relief theory

AND incongruity theory...I'm just covering the central theme of what these theories are trying to get across...every one of these had several major thinkers that appropriated them and each of those thinkers had their own unique details and terminology when it comes to how they approached them. My goal is not for us to understand everything ABOUT these theories...just the ideas to the extent that they are useful in understanding Bergson's theory later on.

That said the incongruity theory needs a little more explanation than the other two. The earliest sighting of the incongruity theory actually is by Aristotle in his work Rhetoric. He says the easiest way to get an audience to laugh is to somehow establish some sort of expectation in their heads...and then to violate it. Now, at first glance this may sound like the incongruity theory is saying that we laugh when our expectations are violated or we are surprised...but it's actually not that simple! Think about it, there are a lot of surprising things you could say... that really aren't that funny at all. For example if you were an alien that came down to this planet and you wanted to find out how to make humans laugh and you went to the library and read about this theory and thought it just meant surprising someone's expectations...someone comes up to you and says hello...you wanna make them laugh so you say welcome to minnesota...certainly that's a surprising response...but it's not FUNNY. They're not gonna laugh, they're gonna call the police.

Now what makes this an important point is that what makes us laugh is NOT in the incongruity in itself...we don't laugh JUST BECAUSE two things that are unrelated come together...the way it's COMMONLY described is that we laugh in the RESOLUTION of that incongruity. The thing that JARS our expectations NEEDS to fit within the context of whatever the story is or whatever conversation we're having. This idea of the context that we view things within is going to become extremely important when we start looking at the theory of Bergson.

Keeping in mind that context is important and that the comedy lies in the resolution of the incongruity not in the incongruity itself...we navigate our lives, we categorize the world around us, we label things, we group similar things together, we see which contexts things are "supposed" to be used in, we start to see patterns in the way the world unfolds and then we start to develop expectations of how things fit into the world. Laughter occurs when one of those expectations are violated, we feel a momentary sense of discomfort BECAUSE our expectations have been violated, and then that discomfort is resolved in various ways and it produces an affect we call laughter. There are several philosophers that were fans of this theory...Aristotle, Schopenhauer, Kant...in fact here is Kant in the Critique of Judgment describing the theory for himself:

“In everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd (in which the understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing”

So some examples of this. Some stand up comedians are absolute masters at tying together two concepts that are incredibly familiar to us in an unfamiliar way...or two concepts that seem completely unrelated to each other in a way that actually makes total sense. TV shows and movies are very character driven...so we have expectations of the way a person is supposed to behave in a particular social context...when one of these characters violates it in a way that, as Kant said, is absurd and ultimately resolves into nothing...we laugh when we don't feel that STRAIN on our expectations anymore. This can also be said of sitting around with your friends having a funny conversation.

One of the biggest problems with this theory has proven to be that there are a ton of examples of incongruity that's absurd and resolves into nothing... that doesn't make

people laugh...picture someone who's not a carpenter, going to a seminar full of journeyman carpenters, giving the keynote speech about drywall screws. No doubt violating expectations, no doubt absurd and resolving into nothing...no ones laughing. So if we want to claim that we've somehow found the FORMULA for laughter we have to be willing to accept that AGAIN, maybe this theory is part of it...but maybe there is more to it that we aren't considering. Maybe there IS no formula....or maybe these formulas have been too fragmented in the past. Henri Bergson's theory is often cited as a strange variation of the incongruity theory, but a better way to think of his theory is as a hybrid theory. He synthesizes the strongest parts of the superiority, relief, AND incongruity theories and then adds on a pragmatic social element of the function of laughter that helps us regulate our cultures and communities.

This idea...that laughter is something that's an important tool to help regulate society...this is an idea that we still are debating heavily to this day. There seem to be two sides to this debate. One is that comedy is an important tool used in the public realm to speak truth to power. The comedian or the comedic writer LOOKS at the world around them...observes the way that things are...they see things that are ridiculous and they point them out ACTIVELY trying to get other people to notice them in an attempt to change their worldview...to put someone IN a position of power in check. Like we talked about with Voltaire...so that no one can take this person or these ideas quite as seriously ever again, AVOIDING the deification...AVOIDING the illusion of infallibility. Comedy is a powerful tool that has the ability to do this.

Now on the other hand there are others that would say that comedy is ALSO a forum for the completely absurd and disingenuous. That comedy is EQUALLY...NOT something where you're getting up on stage holding a press conference about your views on the world...quite the opposite...the GOAL of comedy is to get laughs...there are TONS of comedians that make their living saying things that are WAY over the top that they clearly don't believe, and no one in the crowd thinks they believe it, but they say it simply

BECAUSE it's completely ridiculous. BOTH of these different approaches to comedy fall under the same heading.

But you can see the tension that might start to arise here...the people that believe only in the truth to power side of comedy might look at the absurd side of comedy and think they're saying things that are affecting people's worldviews that are maybe dangerous...the absurd side of comedy might look at the truth to power people and think they're pigeonholing comedy into these narrow parameters that excludes people that don't want to hear a political lecture, they just want to go down to the comedy club on Friday after work and laugh with their friends about nonsense.

Doesn't really matter who's right, but this tension between these two very different approaches INVITES people to try to come up with a theory for why we laugh at things...that can explain why we laugh at BOTH of these. They seem very different from each other. Some of you might be saying why does it have to be one or the other? Why can't comedy be both? We have blanket terms like Sports...that includes both football...and badminton. They're very different but both sports. Why can't comedy be the same way and I hear you!

But we always arrive at the same conclusion. See just like in the Isaiah Berlin episodes: it's not enough to just say Why not both? and then wash your hands of the question. Fact is if we're going to say why not both...we NEED a theory of why we laugh at things that can explain why these two seemingly different things are actually very similar. This is what Henri Bergson tries to do in his famous essay from 1980 called Laughter. We'll be going into it in depth next episode as well as how laughter relates to the fluidity and elasticity of human behavior, the inspiration he took from the presocratic philosopher Heraclitus we covered on episode one, how this relates to time and we'll start looking deeper into his view of the universe rooted in process philosophy. Good news for YOU people is that the episode is already done...in fact the episode after THAT is 95% done.

See I've been writing episodes in quarantine...I just haven't been feeling good enough to record them. But I do NOW! So, a person much smarter than me about podcasts told me that it is horrible for the show to release two episodes at once...so I will be releasing part two of this in four days...maybe three. We'll see if I can stay patient.

That said have a GREAT three or four days, spend time with the people you love.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Bergson on Laughter pt. 2 - Vitalism

Episode #146

So in response to all the different theories about what makes us laugh that have been laid out historically...Henri Bergson presents his famous hybrid theory in his work released in the year 1900 understandably titled "Laughter".

Now by the end of our explanation here today... we're going to ultimately conclude with the idea that Bergson believes laughter at it's core is ultimately a message to other people. But to understand what he means by that we're going to need to have a deeper understanding of why he thinks we laugh when we witness "the mechanical encrusted on the living"...but to understand THAT we're going to need some more detail about one of the key ideas that helps him ground his entire worldview: process philosophy...and to get started doing that we have to go all the way back to episode ONE of this show...to a presocratic philosopher born in 535 BC...a man by the name, of Heraclitus.

So because it was seven years ago if Heraclitus was going to make a bumper sticker of the simplest way to put his biggest idea... it would be that HE thought the universe is always in a state of flux...or constant change. We could also think of flux in terms of the universe being ever flowing. Flowing between dueling polarities, day and night, good and evil, chaos and order, existence flows between things that seem to be opposites that are, in fact, two sides of the same coin. Two different states of a larger overall PROCESS...that is constantly in flux. Now...thinking of flux as being similar to flowing is actually very helpful when trying to understand Heraclitus in particular because as you might remember his most famous metaphor from one of his fragments is about a river. He says:

"No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man."

Picture yourself standing on the bank of a river. You step into the river for a second. You get out for a minute. You step back into the river. What the metaphor is saying is that when you step back in that river... you are NOT stepping into the SAME river. Because the river, the water, you stepped into before is now somewhere about a mile downstream. Seeing as how Heraclitus wasn't a kayaking instructor it seems like a pretty weird point for him to be making...so what was the LARGER point he was trying to make here? Well one of the points put in a more modern context that will help us understand process philosophy is that so often we stand on the bank of the river and we see that river as a freestanding, separate, static entity. This is the Nile River a land surveyor might say. In fact, all throughout history to Bergson scientists and philosophers have tried to do this with things much BIGGER than a river...they've sometimes tried to do it with the entire universe! But Heraclitus is saying that the universe is not made up of a bunch of static, separate, distinct objects that can be cataloged and compared up next to each other to be able to understand them...there is something more fundamental about the universe that seems to him to be more like the flow of a river, and what's more is that to Heraclitus it seems that it's not just the UNIVERSE that is flowing...as observers...we seem to be flowing as well.

Well similar to the river example is the more MODERN, popular example of the sand dune. Picture a sand dune on a windy day...and for whatever reason a scientist decides they're going to try to empirically quantify what exactly that sand dune is. Like we talked about a couple episodes ago there's a SENSE in which by the time you get done making your first measurement of one little piece of that sand dune...the sand dune has shifted, and morphed and turned into something else. It can seem impossible to take an accurate snapshot of what that sand dune is in any single moment.

See, but to Bergson, even THIS is already making a mistake in thinking...to even think of

the sand dune in this way...is to think of the sand dune and what it is in terms of what can be spatially measured and quantified in this moment. But is the sand dune ever REALLY defined by this moment? When you actually look at the sand dune it starts to look a lot LESS like a bunch of distinct parts that someone can measure and quantify...that can then later be assembled next to each other like building blocks and then we can eventually recreate something we call a sand dune...no, a sand dune starts to look MORE like a continuous, fluid PROCESS...a process of parts that interpenetrate each other, parts that NEED each other, parts that cannot be broken down or separated or else we aren't looking at the full sand dune at all. What I'm saying is that the sand dune never TRULY exists in a single moment that can be cordoned off, quantified and recorded by a scientist or philosopher.

This tendency we have though, to look at things in terms of what they are in THIS PARTICULAR MOMENT is why Bergson thought it was so important to explain process philosophy through the example of time. Bergson used the word time as we all do in a casual every day sense. He completely understood that we need clocks and seconds, minutes and hours to be able to function well in social life...we need to know when it's time to pick the kids up from school...we need to know when the bus is going to get to the bus stop...but outside of this he thought our understanding of time was yet another example of us projecting our thousands of years of spatially biased thinking onto a universe that can't be fully understood spatially. There's probably no better example of this than the common idea of a time line. Imagine you're watching a video and there's the bar underneath that allows you to click to any point in the video. This video represents the world as we're living in it and the time line underneath represents the way we commonly perceive time. The thinking is that there is a line of events that have occurred... that can be subdivided into tiny increments...and these increments lay side by side on this time line allowing us to go back to any single snapshot, in that timeline and see it as distinct from all the rest...for example, we say things like I met this person at this second, on this hour of this day. In other words, we have GPS coordinates for moments

in time... we think of time spatially...NOT ONLY in terms of locating specific moments in time, but we even think of the increments of time, like seconds, as though they're these things that are distinct from each other and quantifiable. As though THIS second stands alone from the second that came before or after it.

Bergson thinks what we typically call seconds are not distinct, separate moments at all...these "moments" (if you even want to call them that) interpenetrate each other. They are interconnected and cannot exist without each other. In fact, Bergson wants to get away from the name time altogether, the technical term that HE uses is DURATION, and duration is a holistic, connected and continuous process...NOT unlike the sand dune. To try to quantify it in any single moment would be missing the point of what it is you're even trying to measure and understand in the first place, and HERE'S THE BIG POINT! Whenever we try to spatially quantify ANYTHING that is more fundamentally a continuous process...we only end up distorting the phenomena that we're trying to study.

Now, we don't just do this with sand dunes and clocks...we do this with all KINDS of things...we do this with consciousness...we try to break down the different parts of consciousness to be able to understand it better...we do this with identity, the pieces of our identity work together like a unique set of puzzle pieces, we do this with human behavior, we do this with what drives life at all...which brings me to Bergson's next big point here:

Mechanism. Remember his idea that we laugh when we witness the mechanical encrusted upon the living? Well we're actually talking about what he MEANS when he says mechanical.

By mechanical he's referencing a way of viewing the universe popular in the late 19th century...the idea that everything can be explained by looking to material and mechanical principles to be able to explain it...we break things down into their

component parts, we try to understand each part and how it works and then we try to understand the THING by seeing how those parts all work together almost like gears in a machine. The point is these machines are multiplicities...they are a bunch of different things assembled together to make something else...Bergson of course wants to look at processes, which are by contrast singular, continuous with their parts not being distinct from each other. This is going to be a key distinction he uses when laying out his theory of why we laugh at things: process vs mechanism, but the more technical way to put that in the case of Bergson would be VITALISM vs Mechanism.

Let me explain because this brings me to the last piece of the puzzle that'll allow us to understand his theory of laughter and that is a look into one of the answers Bergson gave to the big questions that faced the thinkers of his time. Once again Bergson's living during the late 19th early 20th centuries...the theory of Evolution is at the forefront of people's minds...now for people like Bergson who believed that evolution was a scientific fact...what was more on HIS mind was finding ways to not only justify the theory but also to explain little scientific loose ends that people believed at the time that didn't seem to be fully understood yet.

Now whether we're talking about life as a process or we're talking about evolution as just a theory to explain what is going on one thing that you eventually HAVE to recognize is that whatever this thing is it seems to be changing...and at times to Bergson it seems to be changing creatively. Which is a pretty curious spot to be in if you're a thinker during this time...how do you account for this change? What is directing it if anything? And if there IS some creative element to that change...what is the source of all the new stuff it's creating?

You can imagine why Bergson thought this was an important question worth answering...consider the two dominant theories trying to account for the change of evolution during his time: the mechanistic and the teleological. See some thinkers

thought that we could understand the inner workings of life and nature almost as though it's a machine with a bunch of different parts working together, again the popular mechanistic view. Bergson thought this was wrong because that explanation could NEVER fully account for new things being created out of evolution. Reason being is that IF life is emerging and it resembles something like a machine...then nothing new could really come out of it...because everything new would have to be borne out of the existing, finite set of cogs and gears that it has, whatever those are. Now on the other hand there were people of his time that accounted for the change by pointing to final causes...or various forms of finalism...the idea that HUMAN BEINGS are an ENDPOINT that evolution is aiming towards...a SQUIRREL is an endpoint, a MOOSE is an endpoint. Not only does this not account for the creative evolution that Bergson saw he thought it completely ignores a lot of the discontinuity between species and even how some species have very different characteristics in one location as opposed to another.

Bergson's solution to this problem is his famous concept of *elan vital*...loosely translated to vital impulse...or an impulse... rooted at the origin of life... that accounts for the creation of all the species. To explain the discontinuity of all the species he offers up two primary factors that he calls instinct and intelligence. This is where we can understand the contrast he marks between the traditional mechanistic view of things and what would eventually become known as Bergson's Vitalism (hence the vital impulse)...See if the mechanistic view says that nature is like a machine, then Vitalism is going to say that life is actually a process...a process that has it's own rules and norms ...and that the laws of things like physics and chemistry cannot adequately describe or account for all that goes on in this life process. The idea was that both physics and chemistry are scientific approaches towards understanding how the material world operates...life is not wholly material...and to try to use our understanding of matter to make sweeping claims about our understanding of life would just be too far of a reach to Bergson. Not to mention this goes BACK to the fact that Bergson believed human methods of analysis LIKE physics and chemistry were incapable of studying these sorts of processes without distorting

what they were trying to study. These sorts of mechanical, spatial approaches being applied to the process of life...you could almost say this would be like the mechanical being encrusted on the living.

Now it doesn't really matter whether or not bergson's CRACKED THE CODE of evolution. And his lengthy explanation for why instinct and intelligence account for the differentiation between species really wouldn't be relevant to our discussion here today. So out of respect to YOUR time, the important point we need to take from his work in Creative Evolution is that we live in a bit of a paradox as human beings between instinct and intelligence. See on one hand we are the ONE SPECIES that wants to know about the complex inner workings of the process of life and how it operates...and yet, because we always have to use our intelligence to be able to ARRIVE at that knowledge...we are the ONLY species that can't get intimate access to it. See other animals have no PROBLEM accessing this vital impulse that Bergson talks about...they live a much more intuitive existence than human beings do...we on the other hand use mechanistic thinking, spatial thinking, scientific analysis to try to understand the process. Well we already know how that worked out with the sand dune...we can't use intelligence to get access to elan vital because simply by virtue of imposing ANY human created system of analysis we are distorting the very phenomena we're trying to study.

You probably no doubt see parallels between THIS sort of argument and things like the observer effect. Well this places Bergson FIRMLY in a tradition that was popular during the early twentieth century that would come to be known as intuitionism.

Now all that said...we can finally understand what he means when he says that we laugh when we witness the mechanical encrusted upon the living. The true nature of life, of human behavior and of human behavior within societies is driven by this vital impulse or vitalism. In other words the mechanistic view is wrong. Society is not a machine, nature

is not a machine, and we are not the cogs and gears that make it up. Human behavior is a process...it is fluid, flowing between different polarities, singular, continuous, and the parts that make it up are not distinct and separate...their existences rely on each other, a person is not exactly who they are without the people on either side of them.

Now we can try all day long to try to use our intelligence to scientifically break down human behavior and society...and we DO, through psychology and sociology among other things...but as undeniably useful as that information will be to us practically in this moment, we are only, to Bergson, distorting what we are trying to study and will never be able to have access to the overall process that is going on or *elan vital*. The only way we can gain access to THOSE things, again, is through intuition.

To Bergson this explains why no single philosophical or scientific theory has been able to explain why we laugh at things. See when you and your friends are walking through the woods, your friend in front of you is going on about the vape store they're going to open up, and then they trip over a log and ruthlessly attack a rhododendron with their face...whether you realize it or not, intuitively you are at some level assessing somebody who is a direct threat to the health and fluidity of society. See we know at some intuitive level as people...the process oriented nature of life and of human society. We intuitively have ACCESS to this vital impulse whether we realize it or not...we know at some level that the success or failure of our societies often times spells the life or death of us as individuals. So when somebody engages in a behavior that starts to resemble mechanization, death or robotic-like automatism, we see that as something that could be a direct threat if it continues and laughter...begins to serve as a corrective action in that effort.

Laughter is a mediator between Vitalism and Mechanism to Bergson. To be a functioning member of society in touch with this vital impulse that drives us.... takes a certain amount of flexibility as a person. The world can throw a LOT of things your way as a

citizen of a society...we need to keep our wits about us and Bergson thought one of the worst things you can be is overly rigid. Bergson thought it was SO EASY to fall into the trap of what he called the easy automatism of acquired habits.

Now according to my friend...her name is Merriam Webster...and I know that's usually two last names just a CRAZY coincidence I guess...but according to her the word automaton means: a moving mechanical device made in imitation of a human being.

When people start to resemble automatons more so than they resemble vital, functional members of society, we witness one key example of how the mechanical is encrusted on the living.

So, when your friend trips over the log... because they are so distracted and are hyper focused on some set of plans they have...in that moment they resemble an automaton programmed to start a vape store, far more than they resemble a functioning member of the process of society. They can't BE flexible to whatever society throws their way...because quite frankly they're too distracted to be paying attention to it. Bergson would call this a "lack of elasticity due to absentmindedness." This is why we laugh at them. Because if everyone lived their life so distracted that they can't even see the log sitting right in front of them...then society wouldn't last very long at all. Laughter becomes the way we communicate to this person that they need to lock in and get it together.

Another example Bergson gives is a type of person we might more commonly call a conformist. This is a member of society that to Bergson has fallen asleep at the wheel. They accept whatever narrative is thrown their way, they accept their place within it...they're told what to do and they LIKE it that way because it's easy. The example Bergson gives is of a business person with their strict, rigid dress code, the rigid decorum of behaviors that's expected of them, the power poses and Tony Robbins affirmations in

the mirror every morning...you see I even started to try to do it right there...it's so easy to start trying to laugh at this person's expense because if everybody blindly committed to some role that they just fell into one day then we wouldn't have enough resistance against the current dominant narrative at any one time...society in other words would be less vital or healthy to Bergson.

One more type of person that lacks elasticity is somebody that goes too far in the OTHER direction. Bergson calls this type of person somebody with "separatist tendencies". This is someone that goes against the glue that holds society together at a level, that if left unchecked...might actually do some harm. Good example of THIS in comedy is maybe a WACKY sitcom or movie character. Or picture a stand up comedian talking about some crazy thing they do when they're out in public. This is the OPPOSITE of the conformist...this is someone who REFUSES to conform and is alienated from the fluidity of the social process because of it.

Generally speaking though, what's common among ALL these examples is that they are all pushing the envelope of behavior that will maintain a vital, healthy society...but Bergson would want to point out that what's interesting to consider is that we have ANOTHER group of people that often push the envelope of what's good for society, CRIMINALS!

We have an obvious solution for criminals...we put them in jail. But these minor offenses... where people really aren't HURTING anyone else...they're just lacking elasticity...we're not gonna put them in JAIL for that...but society STILL NEEDS some manner of recourse. That is where laughter comes in for Bergson. Laughter is a self administered antidote where people pay a minor social price for the sake of having the most vital society possible.

So we can see now why Bergson's theory is considered more of a hybrid theory of

laughter. You could make a case that there are pieces to this that match the superiority theory. You could say that this is a variation of the incongruity theory, and tons of other bits and pieces from the hundreds of theories out there. What's interesting though is that Bergson's theory SEEMS to account for the discrepancy we talked about at the end of last episode...the question of why it is we can laugh at BOTH, comedy that speaks truth to power AND comedy that is just completely absurd. When you think of laughter as a tool to promote social vitality and health...then OF COURSE...OF COURSE we'd laugh at people pointing out how people in power are being ridiculous, we need our leaders to be in check...and OF COURSE we'd laugh at someone saying something totally absurd or over the top...because even if we know at some level that they don't mean any of it...just IMAGINING this being a real member of society engages that part of us.

But just to play devil's advocate...what about somebody that tells a joke for the sake of telling a joke? You know how the kids do it...what do they do? Wanna hear a joke? And then the other person laughs...there's no corrective action going on there...they're just telling JOKES!

Maybe somebody that can offer some insight here is Aristotle. He has a section in his work where he talks about the function of eyesight. See you can ask the question what is the function of eyesight the same way you can ask what is the function of laughter. The same way you could say that we laugh because it serves a purpose, it maintains social vitality...you could say we see because it serves a purpose, it allows us to see predators, allows us to pick food, work together in groups, etc.

But Aristotle says how horrible would it be if the only time you ever got to use your eyesight was when it was doing something useful for your survival? What if every time you weren't doing something to immediately survive you just went blind? Wouldn't be fun Aristotle says and why? Because sometimes you just want to enjoy the view. Sometimes you just want to look out the window and see things for the sake of seeing

them.

Now Aristotle is eventually going to use this to talk about why philosophy is important. People of his time loved to say that the value of philosophy is that it gives us tons of useful benefits at the level of society. Not unlike Bergson's view of laughter. But Aristotle is going to say that a true philosopher is capable of loving wisdom for wisdom's sake. Sometimes there IS no practical benefit to engaging in philosophy...sometimes it's just an activity that's worth doing for the fun of it...something you can do and you don't even NEED wifi or 5G or a floppy disk drive or any of that fancy computer stuff people have nowadays.

What if it's equally possible to do this with laughter? What if laughter undeniably provides us with social benefits, but it's also entirely possible to just laugh for the sake of laughing...and that we don't need some superiority theory or incongruity theory or all this overthinking to explain it.

No matter WHY you're laughing though Aristotle has some advice for you. He'd say make sure you never find yourself too extreme on either SIDE of humor. What he means is always make sure that you're not that person that can't take a joke, where everything needs to be a serious, productive conversation all the time...but equally make sure you're not that annoying person on the other side, laughing and joking about everything no matter HOW serious it is while the world's on fire all around you. Laughter can definitely be a convenient distraction. Which reminds me with ALL this talk about jokes and laughter these last couple episodes...this type of person aristotle's referencing reminds me of one of my favorite passages about humor that I'll leave you with here today...ironically from Kierkegaard...posted this on twitter before, Kierkegaard...says...this:

A fire broke out backstage in a theatre. The clown came out to warn the public; they

thought it was a joke and applauded. He repeated it; the acclaim was even greater. I think that's just how the world will come to an end: to general applause from wits who believe it's a joke.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Being and Becoming

Episode #147

So with all this recent talk about comedy I thought it would be fitting to BEGIN our episode here today with a passage from the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in his famous book *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche writes this: "Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as fitting, the most cheerful."

See Nietzsche had a special place in his heart for comedy...AND a special place for it in the work of a philosopher. He famously said he has a ranking...for philosophers. NOT based on how good their ideas are, NOT based on how sound their arguments are...but simply by their ability to use HUMOR in their work.

Now as fans of philosophy this can initially be a little confusing...WHY would Nietzsche ever even CONSIDER the legitimacy of a philosopher's work in terms of how many knock knock jokes they're telling? Well his ULTIMATE point is going to be instructive towards our episode here today...but it's going to take a few minutes to understand exactly where he's coming from...the BEST place to start is going to be all the way back where we began LAST episode...through the work of the presocratic philosopher Heraclitus and his famous debate with ANOTHER presocratic philosopher Parmenides.

So we already talked about Heraclitus...the doctrine of radical flux, the universe being in a constant state of change, not unlike the flowing of a river. Well if this was Heraclitus then the OPPOSITE can be said of Parmenides. His famous line if you remember from all the way back then is what is, is...what is not is not or in other words, what we mere humans PERCEIVE as change that's going on in the universe all around us is actually an illusion. He calls the illusion that we live in "the way of opinion" and he thought our

flawed senses deceive us in a world of appearances and that actual TRUTH about the state of things is eternal and unchanging.

Now out of this famous debate between Heraclitus and Parmenides came one of the most famous debates in the history of philosophy. That is the contrast of what is later called Being vs Becoming. But it's ALSO the major thru line of our episode here today.

So a philosopher that favors the concept of Being believes there is a way that things are...and our job as scientists and philosophers is to go out there and use whatever tools we have available to FIGURE OUT the way that things are. These people historically often look at the world spatially because they often THINK about existence in terms of subjects and objects, they often favor terms like substances, concepts, forms, eternal truths...the basic idea is look around you...there's obviously a way that things are, let's categorize and understand what it is.

Now people that are fans of BECOMING...or the process oriented way of thinking we've been talking about the last few episodes...they don't believe there's a way that things are in the traditional way that phrase is used. Things are fundamentally a process of constant change and if we haven't intuitively recognized it in the past it's really just because, what's the famous saying? We're mayflies in the cosmos? We just don't live long enough or are born into a historical tradition of ideas...or lack the perspective to be able to see it.

Nietzsche wouldn't have been surprised that Heraclitus, the guy associated with becoming and the more process oriented way of thinking, he wouldn't have been surprised that he was a funny guy. Because this is a great example of why Nietzsche values comedy in a thinker's work. One of the things that makes Nietzsche such a great writer is that he commonly utilizes BOTH comedy AND tragedy in his work. See because part of the ESSENCE of both comedy and tragedy to Nietzsche is a direct negation of BEING, in this being and becoming...which put another way is to say that both comedy

and tragedy directly concern themselves with a denial or a subversion of "the way that things are."

Think about it...think of the job of a comedian. What do they do? They look at the world around us...they see something most people see as just an ordinary reality of the world...and by making fun of it they SHOW people that this thing ISN'T the way that things are...this is just some absurd way that we're doing things right now that's eventually going to transform into some OTHER absurd thing that they'll be sure to make fun of then.

Think about tragedy. There is a current state of things in the socio-political realm. Great tragedies often include a person or a group of people making some sort of tragic sacrifice for the sake of making a STATEMENT about the way that things are and how they need to change.

See to Nietzsche one of the marks of a great philosopher is not to just accept the way that things are and never question them...that's kinda the OPPOSITE of your job. So this is ONE of the reasons why when he's applying his thought to the way that things were near the end of the nineteenth century...he pointed out how while many people thought this was the greatest age of technological advancement (sounds familiar)...he also thought this was simultaneously a period of most people's blind adherence to the masses. Which, for Nietzsche came along with a period of people having an inherent desire for social conformity.

Whenever you say something like, "I am a THIS!"..."I am a card carrying member of this GROUP!" You are thinking about your identity in terms that are a lot more like Being than Becoming. There is a way that things are...there is a way that I AM. Here's how I can nail myself down as a person in RELATION to this way that things are.

But this is not the best way to think about our identity to not only Nietzsche but MANY of the existentialists. Some of them would say...sure, there is an aspect of you that is Being, there IS a way that you are right this split second...but there's a sense in which by the time you even get to the end of this SENTENCE, you will have changed in small, incremental ways...you will be a little bit older, you'll have developed your views on being and becoming in some small way, you will have moved positions spatially, your body will have run many processes trying to keep you healthy, your career and relationships will be in a slightly different place...in other words...you may look in the mirror every day and not notice the small incremental changes, but everybody would admit they are a different person today than they were five years ago. Now if we took a snapshot of something you said on facebook five years ago...does that encapsulate who you are?

So lets say you WERE TRAPPED in one of these groups, where your identity feels like something given to you each day...like something branded into your side so the other members know you're one of them...you can start to feel a little stuck...like there's something static and fixed about who you are, this can LEAD to a sort of malaise that Nietzsche describes in great detail. Thinkers of the time tried to offer antidotes to this feeling for people. They recommended turning BACK to religion, or turning BACK to the great poets and literary works of the past...the thinking being to try to revive some semblance of sentimentality that existed in a former world. But Nietzsche thought NONE of these things could offer you any sort of real relief. The ONLY thing that could offer you relief to Nietzsche, was human will, taking action, to affirm life as a creative, on going act...to exert your will to power. In other words, to get away from viewing our identity in terms of being, and to see yourself more in terms of becoming. And here's the big point: we recognize this intuitively when it comes to our identity. Think of all the parallels to the way scientists and philosophers have been trying to create categories and brand an identity into the universe itself.

The same way there's no static fixed eternal YOU...There is no static, fixed, predictable stability in the universe. And in both cases...The only way you could possibly think there is is because you're only viewing it from your incredible narrow perspective that you have access to. Look around you right now and pick something in the world around you that is a stationary object. Now from your obvious, single person perspective what rational person could ever think that that thing is not some static entity that is a fixture in the universe. But look at it from a different perspective...take a few steps back...in fact, take a few light years worth of steps back and look at that thing from a different perspective outside our solar system and you will actually see that it is hurling through space at almost 70,000 miles an hour and is spiraling around a nuclear explosion that is also hurling through space. You may not be able to see it from minute to minute, but take a coffee table for instance...looks like a static piece of wood...when in reality it has been undergoing a constant, slow process of decay from the moment it was removed from a tree. When you view things in terms of being instead of becoming...you instantly bring to bear a host of metaphysical assumptions that determine not only the questions you think are worth asking about the universe...but the very way you see the concepts of truth and knowledge at all.

Now both Nietzsche and Bergson are part of this movement in the late nineteenth century that came to be known as Naturalism. But they were very different from a lot of OTHER Naturalists. Good PORTION of these Naturalists were what is called material reductionists...or the idea that the material world should be the primary or ONLY object of our study...but also that everything ABOUT the universe could be understood if only we could understand the most fundamental PHYSICAL parts that make things up.

The way I think every philosopher professor in existence has ever described this goes like this: We have a certain psychology that is in many ways mysterious to us, but it can be understood by appealing to a more fundamental field known as biology. Now our biology

is incredibly complex, but in many ways it can be understood by our knowledge of this elaborate confluence of chemical reactions, atoms molecules that we know as chemistry. But those atoms and molecules can be better understood when we look at them through the lens of physics. Physics begets chemistry which begets biology which then begets psychology, in other words, the thinking is if we can just thoroughly understand the physics and the material components that make something up...then we can understand processes like psychology that remain mostly mysterious to us.

But process philosophers from around this time like Bergson thought the material reductionists were way off here. Came up with an example to try to illustrate one of their main arguments.

Picture you're going to IKEA to try to pick out an end table...you find one, grab some meatballs on your way out and head home to put it together. Now in example A...you follow the directions and put that end table together perfectly...i mean the thing is glowing as it's sitting there. But in example B...you decide to get a little more creative. Let's say this time you don't give a hootinany about the directions. You got the shelf sticking off to the side...got some diagonal pieces...you take all the remaining bolts and position them on the top like they're playing a kick ball game against each other, maybe a couple towers...Now place example A right next to example B. That perfectly assembled end table in NO WAY resembles that abstract art project at all...but... the materials that make them up are exactly the same. The materials that make something up are not the entirety of what something is. The same way you can't know everything about me by studying the atoms in my body, you can't know everything about the universe by JUST analyzing it spatially, or at a material level. You can have SOME understanding, for sure, but there is clearly more going on here...might that be a more fundamental underlying process that the scientific approach of the late 19th century can never get access to because they're thinking of things so spatially. Might philosophers of the past have been so completely incorrect because they're beginning from a set of metaphysical

presuppositions that have been taken as gospel from the time of Plato?

For process philosophers this Newtonian methodology of analyzing the universe is an outdated scientific paradigm that runs into very important barriers and we need to recognize its limitations. Remember, thinkers like Bergson are living in the wake of the work of Charles Darwin. We never made much headway with the Newtonian model when it comes to understanding a lot of the non-material components of the process of life...how it began, where it's directed. Thinkers like Bergson want to look at OTHER elements of existence that we haven't made much headway in understanding, and he wants to look at them from this same process oriented perspective. Things like consciousness, things like meaning, things like aesthetics this is WHY Bergson is so interested in internal human experience.

Now there was a MASSIVE scientific revolution at the beginning of the 20th century. Dozens of thinkers including Albert Einstein, general and special relativity...these people fundamentally changed the set of presuppositions science was using when trying to understand things. New PROCESS philosophers were living during this time too, fully aware of the work of Henri Bergson was the thinker Alfred North Whitehead. By the way...the real pronunciation is Henri Bergson...but that's not happening. But Alfred North Whitehead on the other hand...now THAT'S something I can say perfectly.

Maybe I should start this section on Whitehead by saying that this all can seem to people to be extremely hostile to science. But almost invariably these thinkers are not at ALL opposed to science...they're opposed to the way that science has become this monolith of truth in the eyes of people that live in modernity. The way we've been doing science so far is absolutely GREAT at studying the material of the universe, and pragmatically it does amazing things for us when being able to manipulate the material world around us and create things that make for greater possibilities...but to a process philosopher you can't just say "Hey! look at this method I have that is really great at studying rocks!" "It

undeniably provides TONS OF USEFUL benefits to us because of our understanding of those rocks!" "Therefore, it MUST be capable of understanding EVERYTHING about existence! Not that it has very REAL limitations built into it because it was ultimately created by human beings...no, whatever limitations there may seem to be...you just need to study more rocks and the truth of the universe will be revealed to you!" Moving away from being and more towards becoming...may be as instructive towards understanding our own identity as it is towards understanding the universe.

□Because one thing's for sure to a process philosopher...ANY comprehensive account when it comes to understanding the universe...NEEDS TO INCLUDE things like meaning and consciousness and aesthetics and many others that science has formerly left us in the dark on...because THESE THINGS...are JUST as much a part of the universe as a rock is. We can't be satisfied with just understanding rocks. Now...this is the place that Whitehead wants to begin his metaphysical analysis.

We talked about the Newtonian paradigm and this new paradigm that came along and what's being referenced there is the famous book we talked about on an earlier episode: Thomas Kuhn's Structure of Scientific Revolutions, and in it...he talks about how there hasn't been just one scientific revolution that occurred all the way back during the time of Sir Francis Bacon. History is punctuated by many different scientific breakthroughs that caused the scientists of the time to change the ENTIRE SET of assumptions that they enter into experiments with. These dominant assumptions determine not only the research that gets funding or the thinkers tenured at universities, but they shade the very hypotheses that the scientists of the day think are reasonable to explore. We can see this pretty clearly when it comes to this Newtonian method getting piled on top of by this new method.

We can see this paralleled in philosophy in the work of Alfred North Whitehead. Living

during the time of the development of general and special relativity...he can be seen as wanting to throw out the old metaphysical paradigms of philosophy and to try to create a new one that corresponds and works together with these incredible breakthroughs in the sciences. Metaphysics to Whitehead is not just about explaining how the physical world is the way it is like many philosophers have done in the past...metaphysics is the realm that he says sets the "conduct of discussions" the actual framework that we use to even be able to have a conversation about the way things are in the universe. Whitehead wants us to reimagine metaphysics and think about it in a whole new way.

You know...a thinker that is pretty similar to Whitehead in some ways is the guy we did a six part series on before named Gilles Deleuze...and Deleuze...similarly talks about metaphysics in a way that may seem pretty foreign to a lot of people unfamiliar with process philosophy...precisely BECAUSE he's LOOKING at things more from the metaphysical framework of BECOMING rather than one focused on BEING. The SAME WAY a scientist... living in the early 19th century... might hear someone talking about science in a POST Einstein world, and be utterly confused...may even say this is pseudo science, this is not even worth READING it's so OUT THERE and incomprehensible...SO TOO might someone who's not familiar with the concept of becoming and this process oriented approach...they might try to understand Deleuze and have a really hard time wrapping their head around it. Now of course I'm not necessarily talking about superiority of thought...just a difference in the metaphysical approach.

Deleuze would say things sometimes like that I want people to think of me PURELY as a metaphysician. Which initially might seem kind of weird..."That's great Deleuze, but I just got done READING your work on politics. About to start reading your work on Epistemology...you remember that...remember the Rhizome you talked about with all the roots that connect in seemingly chaotic ways? How about all you had to say on aesthetics?"

But to someone like Deleuze...these things are ALL derived from metaphysics. The fact philosophers in the past have tried to subdivide these non material things into their own categories and study them on their own...as though they're NOT interrelated to each other AND NOT interrelated to existence at large...this is a good example of why we run into this paradox of the fact that as human beings we are simultaneously the only tools we have to try to understand the chaos of existence, but man do we take what seems like a good idea and run too far with it sometimes.

Nietzsche might interject and describe us all as Human...all too human. You know we like to think that we are rational people. I'm not crazy YOU'RE crazy. I have the arguments to back up MY beliefs...the OTHER side doesn't! Just a bunch of animals over there! But Nietzsche would say HOLD ON A SECOND. We have a LONG history of thinkers telling us that we're these rational creatures...human REASON is what separates us from the rest of the animal kingdom. You want to be as RATIONAL as possible at all times. But even at our best are we really...that rational? Just as our rational minds exist perched inside of an animal body...so too do we try to harness the chaos of the universe with tools that are human, all too human. LANGUAGE is a big one for Nietzsche. Lot of people don't like Bergson for not wanting to talk about what processes are or exactly what they're like...but that's the problem...whenever we have to try to describe ANYTHING we have to go through language...but there is no guarantee that this symphony of grunts we've created is capable of describing ANYTHING accurately beyond basic human interactions...and you could argue it's not even very good at doing THAT either.

But we try, don't we? We want to remain optimistic. Language is all we have...maybe it IS capable of accurately describing everything. Process philosopher might see this as a similar line of thinking as the person who is overly optimistic about the limitations of science. And maybe this is the reason process philosophers seem to be so interested in

humor. Because when you truly consider the levels of existence that we're trying to access...and you consider the utterly broken tools we have to do the job with...to go back to the quote at the start of the show...maybe the only thing the most melancholy of creatures can do...this sub species of primate on this tiny blue dot...maybe the only thing we can REALLY do about existence...is laugh.

Nietzsche thought once you accept a negation of being...a movement towards becoming...once you accept that there isn't a way that things are about you OR the universe...you can finally start to wrestle with two of the biggest problems that lie at the heart of the human condition. Number one...is how terrifying existence truly is, I mean we ALL KNOW BY NOW...that no matter how static and fixed the world may seem...no matter how there may SEEM to be a solid way that things are that isn't going to change...that entire facade can chip away in a matter of hours and you can find yourself face to face with an entirely NEW world and the reality you've been living in the whole time. Nietzsche says the other problem we have...is a constant campaign that has to be fought with the limitations of knowledge. Once you accept that we don't have access to objectivity, or eternal truths...once you accept that all you have is a perspective and all WE have is intersubjectivity...how can you reliably decide what you're going to believe? How do you stop other people from believing things that are patently false? How do YOU know what YOU believe isn't totally wrong? More relevant to US living in the world today...who gets to GIVE people their views on the order of things?

This show is never going to try to give you answers to any of these questions...but WHATEVER answers you find, consider the fact that if you ever feel stuck in EITHER of these problems Nietzsche lays out that there are a lot of people out there who have claimed to find a way out. Being and Becoming. Whether you're looking at yourself or the universe the best way this way out has EVER been described in the history of the world, and it's not even close I leave you with here today. I say that from a completely objective, non biased perspective at the top of a mountain while you all listen from the BOTTOM of

the mountain:

"I tore myself away from the safe comfort of certainties through my love for truth — and truth rewarded me." Simone de Beauvoir

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

On Media pt. 1 - Manufacturing Consent

Episode #148

So I want to begin this series on media by talking about it from a bit of an alien perspective...or at least alien to how we often hear people TALK about media and what it is. Want to begin today by talking about the concept of media...as a plural form of the word medium. Cause ultimately that's what it is.

You know..we don't often THINK of media in this way especially things like news media. Like how is the news typically described? Well it's often described as the fourth estate of government. The implication being that these people that REPORT the news to us are practically thought of as public servants...the tip of the spear... going out there into the world while we live our daily lives...they're the people that are gonna ask the tough, hard hitting questions that help keep us informed so that we can know what's going on and vote accordingly every four years. They're often framed as though they're performing a SERVICE for us, many of them PASSIONATE about the truth, PASSIONATE about getting to the bottom of what's going on.

But what if we think of media as a plural form of the word medium...how would that change things? Dictionary defines medium as "the intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses"...another way it's defined is as "the substance in which an organism lives or is cultured".

Now...regardless of any sort of fourth estate mythology that could be tacked on about news media...forget about what our culture TELLS us the media is doing for us...want to consider on the episode today that BOTH of these definitions of the word medium could EQUALLY describe the service that the news media provides for us. See to the thinkers we're covering today it may be incredible useful to think of the news media as an

intermediary between us and reality. Meaning...the reality of the world is that we can't get on a jet ski and rocket across the ocean to see what's going on in Bolivia, for example. But man isn't it great... we have these thankless, truth loving public servants out there on the news that can do it for us...then create a nice little short set of moving pictures that tell us exactly what IS going on on the other side of the world.

Media in this way serves as a filter. The intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses. But another thing the thinkers today would want us to consider is that...say you could somehow have control over those impressions that are conveyed...to GIVE people their impressions of what the world is like...to have the only key to a lock on a door that people want opened for them every day...needless to say you'd have quite a bit of consolidated power. What would a media landscape look like if such a concentrated level of consolidated power existed? Would we even know it? Would it require a conspiracy on a level so vast that it would just be impossible? We're going to be exploring the origins of modern mass media today by looking at the work by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman published in 1988 entitled Manufacturing Consent with many OTHER references to Chomsky's later work entitled Media Control.

Now the term Manufacturing Consent is actually a borrowed term. Rightfully so Chomsky and Herman begin making their case about media by alluding to the theories originally laid out by Walter Lippman in the early 20th century...a time they saw as a point in history where the filter of media between us and reality started to take on a very different role in our lives.

Now right off the bat some of you out there may be wondering and rightfully so...when you live in a democracy...why does it even make sense to TRY to control media in the first place? How evil would you have to be, I mean, don't we ALL stand to benefit from people being educated...knowing what's going on in as accurate a way as possible? Well this is part of the beauty of Lippman's work...there are philosophical arguments you could

make and DEFEND without being evil necessarily... that make a strong case for controlling what the average person consumes. Lippman says these ideas are nothing new...it was done through Lenin, it was articulated by Marx, the only thing relatively new here is that these same tactics are NOW starting to be done in the democratic societies in the early 20th century...so why would that benefit anyone at all?

Lippman lays it out like this...there is a type of person out there that could think of a democratic society in terms of there being three major classes. We have on one hand...people that hold REAL positions of power...more on them in a second. The second class are what he calls the "specialized class" which are more or less just elected officials that do the bidding of the public in a democracy...and the third class is what he calls the "bewildered herd"..which are the rest of us... the masses, and just to clarify, these are NOT the views of Lippman himself...he is describing one way that people COULD view a democratic society.

Now people that hold the REAL positions of power have ways that they control and direct the behavior of these OTHER two classes. They control the "specialized class" the elected officials by controlling the parameters of their entire lives AS elected officials. So in this way theoretically a politician with all the qualifications in the world...with the best INTENTIONS in the world...can not survive for very long or even win an election in the first place if they're not willing to play by the rules of the people that MAKE the rules. What inevitably happens next is they become tacitly indoctrinated into a way of getting things done politically...THIS is the way you do things in Washington if you want to become part of a committee that can actually get things done...you don't fundraise by appealing to certain powerful private interests, you don't get re-elected. You don't rub elbows with the right people in the existing government, your elbows are not going to be around for very long.

Now so far this all makes sense, but the more DIFFICULT problem that has to be solved

by people in positions of power...is how do we control the herd? Don't know if you've noticed but there's a LOT of people out there...the masses are scary to people in positions of power. How do you control the multivariate nature of all the things they could possibly want? Well, to the people that believe in this view of society the herd is most effectively controlled...by keeping them distracted, in a number of different ways.

But again this brings us back to the original question... why distract the herd in the first place...especially in a democracy? Why not give them access to the best information we possibly CAN so that they can VOTE in the best way they can? Chomsky gives a great example of the worldview behind this kind of thinking. He essentially says imagine you're a parent and you have a three year old kid that you need to take care of. For anyone that's been around a three year old...you KNOW...that kid is about four seconds away from destroying themselves at any point in time throughout the day...and to COMBAT this...as a parent... you need to set up an extremely narrow set of parameters for their existence. You may give them a toy to play with...you may put on some cartoons just so that you can have a few minutes where they are distracted enough to not explore the light socket with daddy's BBQ fork.

But here's the thing Chomsky says...as a parent...you have the ability to GIVE that toddler as much freedom as you want really. You COULD give that toddler permission to run across the street anytime they thought it was a good idea. But why would anyone ever actually do that? ..not only would that be completely dumb...that would be downright irresponsible. And responsible is going to become an important word to these people in power that have this view of society.

This is how people holding this view of society SEE members of the herd. We need to LIMIT the parameters of their lives...keep it VERY simple...keep them distracted. Give them some toys to play with. Give them some cartoons to watch, so they don't do too much damage with their complete lack of understanding while we let them explore the

light sockets of the world. Similarly...we can't have a bunch of what they call "irresponsible men" running the show...we need responsible ones...ones that ACTUALLY know how to bring about positive change in a society...ones that recognize the dangers of giving the herd political power...because similar to the impulsive, unaware nature of the toddler running across the street, the herd reacts impulsively and often violently to the emotional stories of the day, lacking the knowledge and experience to make measured, long term decisions.

Bottom line is: we need to treat the herd like they're little kids. Make them THINK they have freedom of thought, but again freedom is always freedom within certain parameters...and if we can LIMIT those parameters we can limit the possible world views that people can have and thus keep them in line more or less with what the "responsible men", the truly qualified individuals...have deemed to be the best way forward for the herd.

Now...limiting what ideas are acceptable to believe has been pretty easy throughout human history...and it only becomes MORE easy within a totalitarian state. I mean people organize in the street with a message of political dissent that's inconvenient to the responsible class...you just send people out to the street to BEAT them into submission. But throughout the 20th century this has become less effective...largely in part due to democracy, freedom to assemble, freedom of expression...these things are spreading at a rate they never had before. So the people in positions of power had to come up with a new tactic...a new way to limit the parameters of people's thinking...while still making them BELIEVE that it was THEIR idea to hold the position that they defended and vote the way that they voted.

This was the moment that people in positions of power came up with an idea... that would change the course of democracy in the age of mass media. Noam Chomsky has a quote about this, he says "Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a

totalitarian state.”

The origins of this shift in strategy predate World War One...though Chomsky and Herman cite one of the big points of inception as Woodrow Wilson’s Creel Commission right around the TIME of the First World War...when working in coalition with the British Ministry of Propaganda they created a campaign to deliver specific messages... to a United States that at the time was not really that interested in getting involved in foreign affairs...they did this...to drum up support for a type of patriotism that aligned itself with US involvement in World War One.

Well, the US ended up getting INVOLVED in WW1 in a big way...and the strategy worked SO well for the people in power that we can see an example of the same tactics immediately AFTER WW1 in McCarthyism and in the Red Scare. In other words the interests of corporations, the government and large institutions at the time benefitted from us entering into WW1 and to have communism as a pejorative via the red scare, and to Chomsky and Herman this new strategy of propaganda worked extremely well all the way up to around 1935 with the passing of the Wagner Act. Most notably...that it allowed laborers to organize and vote in a collective way that just had never been possible before. Once the effects of the Wagner Act started to show up...Once laborers started getting small levels of power over the interests of large corporations and people started getting elected that were actually acting on BEHALF of these workers, people in positions of corporate power had to do something to try to get things back to the way they were. Not a coincidence that just two years later in the year 1937 is the first time we see a brand new innovation in these media propaganda tactics...something that came to be known as the Mohawk Valley Formula.

The Mohawk Valley Formula is a strategy where you use media to bust a strike. Meaning, that if workers have a problem with some policy that a corporation has because they feel like they’re being mistreated...and they use this new power to organize to strike against

that policy...the Mohawk Valley Formula is a formula...designed to align the motives of the strike with some message, that really has nothing to DO with the strike or the policy in question...that diminishes the support that the workers are going to get from the public. At the time it was popular to paint striking workers as Antiamerican. The motives of the laborers were against the interests of America and its future...so in other words they effectively switched the conversation AWAY from anything about specific policies that were being protested...and turned the conversation into whether you were FOR the interests of America or against them.

Now I'm not trying to make a point about unions or corporations or anything like that here...that's not what this show is...the significance of this when it comes to this series has less to do with Labor Unions and more to do with how we can see echoes of this VERY SAME strategy in the media landscape that we live in today. Sure you can remember turning on the news and seeing some organized protest being painted in a light good or bad that it really didn't deserve...the people painting the picture...probably a vested interest in it being painted in that exact way.

Consider also how common it is for campaigns of ANY variety to effectively side step the entire question at hand that has to do with specific policy...and turn the conversation into some sort of witch hunt against something...or fist pumping for something that's practically impossible to disagree with.

Just as a point of reference here... let's take a look at some popular slogans from US presidential campaigns that the whole family can enjoy! Keep America Great. Now what citizen...voting in a US presidential election...could possibly disagree with that statement? You could disagree with the policy behind that campaign...but that's not what we're talking about here. You could disagree that america is great in the first place...but there's a sense in which you could re-read that to mean that we should KEEP America great and get away from the way things are now. Point is...to disagree with this statement

is to be anti-American by default. So why even consider someone's opinion about who should be president if they DON'T agree with it? In other words, Chomsky would say...the statement is utterly meaningless. The statement is so vacuous that it's really not saying ANYTHING of substance...but it's not trying to say anything of substance ANYWAY...the REAL point is to switch the conversation away from the real policy that lies underneath the slogan...much like corporations would do so that people WEREN'T discussing what the laborers were actually striking against.

Another example: Hope and Change. What human being can possibly disagree with the idea of hope being a good thing? Like who sits around coming up with an argument for something like that anyway...no, I think we are better off if we all feel hopeless.

Change...what person is against change in the face of social unrest and an economic downturn at the time that left people immiserated. Once again...the point is NOT actually to say anything of substance here...the point is to subvert substantive conversations about the policy going on behind the catchy, vacuous one liner that only a lunatic could disagree with. The statement is shallow BY DESIGN to get people to think the question of this election is as deep as a kiddie pool...when in reality it's more like the depth of the ocean. But a bewildered herd of cattle can't last very long in the ocean...or they'd all drown.

How about slogans like "Support our Troops"? Not do you support the policies connected to the war in which they're fighting...do you support the troops? Well how can you NOT support the troops? To even start making that argument Chomsky says you have to START by saying, well I don't NOT support the troops and he says by that time you've already lost. What if you heard the slogan peace and harmony somewhere? Now, on one hand how can anyone ever disagree with that...meanwhile Thanos might be handing out t-shirts and buttons. The point to Chomsky and Herman is this is one propaganda tactic that uses media to drastically limit the parameters of a discussion, which in turn effectively, manufactures the consent of the herd...hence the title manufacturing consent.

But we can see how the whole thing is structured more clearly if we move away from things like presidential slogans and move more towards how consent is manufactured in the news media in particular.

Because here's the thing if this is all true we HAVE to ask the question: are people like Wolf Blitzer self-censoring for the sake of pandering TO these people in positions of corporate, government and institutional power? Like is W-Blitz coming to work everyday...choosing news stories himself...CHOOSING them because of direction he's getting from some cabal of corporate overseers that he has secret back room meetings with? How about EVERY anchor, journalist, reporter, editor, columnist, blogger...are these people ALL getting an email in the morning from the monopoly guy telling them what to report on? The answer to Chomsky and Herman is no...the problem is much more insidious than that.

Chomsky writes in his book media control:

“Journalists are not normally kept under control through top down intervention, but by journalists’ internalization of priorities and definitions of news-worthiness that conform to the institutions policy.”

But he actually says it even BETTER in an interview he did with a reporter in the 1970's...the reporter asks Chomsky do you really think that I am self-censoring right now? CLEARLY the reporter knowing that every day his ONLY intent when he does his job is to get to the bottom of what the truth is and NOT to peddle some narrative that's been given to him. Chomsky says back to him: I'm not saying that you THINK you're self-censoring...I'm sure you believe every word that you're saying. What I'm saying is that if you believed something different...you wouldn't be sitting where you're sitting.

What Chomsky was referencing here is the primary argument presented in the book

Manufacturing Consent. The news media is FULL of people that do their jobs really well. They can be ethical, hard-working, have a true desire to deliver the best news they can...they can be ALL THESE THINGS, but they will ALWAYS be operating within parameters that have been preset for them by people in positions of corporate, government and institutional power that have an inordinate amount of control over media outlets and USE that control to limit the narrative so as to keep the herd distracted and voting their way. In keeping with the view of society articulated by Walter Lippmann we talked about earlier in the episode...there are certain messages we need reinforced to the herd, that keep society moving forward in the correct direction and not at the whims of what they see as a bunch of toddlers. Media is the delivery system for those messages, and when you control the framework the news is delivered in, then anyone that falls too far outside the norms put in place... either... never gets a job reporting the news in the first place or doesn't last very long— not unlike the public officials we were talking about before.

Now the FIRST question you may have is how exactly are they accomplishing this? Seems pretty ambitious of them.

Chomsky and Herman lay out five primary filters that our news media has to pass through before it ever gets to us and begins informing our views about what's going on in the world. The first one is what they call media ownership. Chomsky says in an interview: make no mistake...the word media is another word for company. These are NOT public servants...this ISN'T St. Jude's Children's hospital...these media outlets are FOR PROFIT endeavors...and we should NEVER forget that fact. The same reason you'd never go into a meeting with your boss and read them off all the reasons you're secretly horrible at your job...if there was some hard hitting story or interview a news outlet could potentially run that was going to go directly against the interests of the company at large and maybe put it out of business...why would anyone ever run that story? Now on the other hand...let's say you come across a story that strongly goes against the interests of

one of your competitor stations...you might be more INCLINED to run that story than you ever would have otherwise been. This dynamic serves as a filter of the information we get to inform our world views.

The second filter our media has to go through is advertising. Now you may think this is similar to the filter of media control, but part of what's being referenced here is that there is not just one, single customer that a media outlet has. They have YOU as a customer...but equally they have advertisers as a customer...and what do they SELL these advertisers? You. Audiences. So if it serves the interests to curate an audience that corresponds with the values of some specific brand of toilet paper for example...so be it.

The third filter we need to consider is the massive influence held by what they call the media elite. This is an interesting one that's essentially saying that people in high levels of corporate, government or institutional power effectively DECIDE the STANDARD for what is news-worthy at all. Say there is some sort of large public relations scandal that the government has to deal with...well the government itself gets to appoint a spokesperson to give the official statement, journalists if they want a credible news story look to their sources on the inside of the government to try to get the scoop...in other words they are forced to maintain relationships with their sources on the inside if they ever want to get something newsworthy...and what happens if they don't play by the rules...if they leak a piece of information the source didn't want them to?

Well now they're cut off and can't GET to the official statements. Their name isn't going to be on the list of reporters that are allowed into the next press briefing. Their reporting gets TOO critical of things and often times they become slandered as PEOPLE...eventually falling into obscurity or labeled as crazy. This is the fourth filter called Flack. Your job as a journalist is to get the news...and if you had to follow a specific set of parameters in order to get it...probably wouldn't deviate too far outside them because if you did you wouldn't be very good at your job. We've been conditioned to

think that we see some sort of person on the street interview, hearing random people's opinions about things and we think well that's interesting and all...but when are we going to get to hear the OFFICIAL statement...the one worth remembering...the NEWSWORTHY statement.

When you are the SOURCE of newsworthy information...when you're the transnational corporation that controls a media outlet...when you have the power to push certain stories you like and not cover ones you don't like...when you determine who the resident expert is and can pick and choose which expert agrees with you...when you decide what is newsworthy you decide what journalists even have to look for in the first place. You decide who gets ACCESS to the news. You decide the lane reporters have to stay in. This is why otherwise totally ethical people who are good at their jobs could be participating in delivering information that manufactures the consent of the herd.

Make no mistake, the people in this way are being treated like a bewildered herd...the word Corral is often used. We need to corral the herd by corralling public opinion...and this is often done by reporting the news through the filter of fear...fear of some common enemy out there. This is the fifth filter Chomsky and Herman lay out and it's a big part of the reason people continue to tune in to the news every day and are willing to listen to ads about dishwasher tablets. We need to keep people afraid of some common enemy...popular ones that have been cited: communists, terrorists, illegal immigrants...maybe even democrats or republicans...but in all these cases the message is exactly the same: you need to stay informed about what this group is up to or it could be the downfall of our society...tune in tomorrow to get the latest scoop about their evil plans.

When we think of media as a plural form of the word medium. When we think of news media as a filter BETWEEN us and reality...instead of a group of public servants working tirelessly to tell us the objective TRUTH about what's going on...you can start to soften a

bit...you can start to see that enemy that you FEAR that's destroying the world...really are just fellow human beings that have lived a different life than you, with their OWN fears, with their OWN desires to save the world their kids will one day have to live in...you can start to question the very foundations of what grounds our social epistemology, at all. Which will be the topic of episode two of this series. Coming soon.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

On Media pt. 2 - Marshall McLuhan

Episode #149

So most of us live our lives not all that confused about the events of the world that are going on around us. I mean, why would you be, really? We watch the news, we stay informed, we read books...when something happens we got a pretty good idea of how the world works, we got a pretty good idea of human nature and how people are going to behave in reaction to that thing...we have a pretty good idea of what is possible to expect. But every once in a while, occasionally, something happens in the world that throws us for a loop. Something that challenges these ideas we have about how things work. This thing can seem so bizarre and unexpected that you can even start to wonder how any person could have EVER possibly seen it coming. This feeling can send someone into a bit of a crisis mode. Did I know as much as I thought I knew about people and the universe? How do you explain this thing that's happening...what does this mean for the world moving forward?

This can be a pretty uncomfortable place to sit for very long...people naturally want to get BACK to that comfortable place of feeling like they CAN predict the future. So a common strategy when someone's IN this place is to go out and seek out someone who SAW this thing coming who can give them answers. Now, historically when enough people ADOPT this strategy it creates a vacuum for some answer person to emerge. This could be a public intellectual...this could be a charismatic orator...doesn't really matter it just needs to be someone who can provide people with some clarity about the present situation. They usually do this by making connections between things that are foreign to the way people are used to thinking about things...usually by evoking concepts from MULTIPLE different highly specialized disciplines and synthesizing them into something that just makes good sense to people.

Now this may sound like an incredible position to BE in as a thinker. But what I want to do at the start of the episode here today is to ask you to consider the fact...that this person...and many famous popular intellectuals that you no doubt can imagine from your OWN life...these people are, in a way, STUCK in purgatory. This is a purgatory between the popular thought of the public who makes their fame possible, and the highly specialized academic realm who scoffs when they evoke concepts from a field they haven't dedicated their life to, and clearly don't fully understand. This person who's trapped can easily start to feel a bit frustrated...because on one hand...going on Good Morning America and being the token "smart person" or resident expert on a subject just because you can give a good sound bite can be deeply unsatisfying...almost like your TRUE message isn't really being fully understood. But on the other hand having academics turn their nose up at your work because you're not entirely singular in your focus...it can seem like what you're doing is not being appreciated the way it should.

Near the end of his life this is likely how the person we're going to be talking about today would have felt: Marshall McLuhan. Media theorist. Social critic. He's the dad at Christmas that carves the turkey while everyone else eats. Now for anyone that is trying to make connections between seemingly unconnected things...for anyone trying to bring an idea down from the heavens and place it in the lives of people like me...a really useful thing to be good at is to have a strong command of the metaphor. Metaphors act as bridges between the unfamiliar and the familiar. So for someone trying to make sense of a world that no one really knows how to navigate...it's no wonder someone like Marshall McLuhan would've used them often...and it just so happens that in my opinion the best ENTRY point into his work is one of his favorite metaphors of all time...used it thousands of times throughout his life...the metaphor is an allusion to a short story by Edgar Allan Poe entitled A Descent into the Maelstrom. He thinks a situation that the main character was in is a great metaphor for what it is often like to be someone living in the media and technological landscape we find ourselves in.

The short story begins with someone telling a short story. Edgar Allan Poe says it's going to be like story time inception up in here folks, welcome to the 1800's. There's a man and his two brothers and they're out fishing in the ocean. All of a sudden there is a horrible vortex that appears...pulling in water, moving, spiraling down into a black pit at the bottom of the ocean. Their ship gets caught in it. They're trapped and can't get out. They start spiraling down into the abyss. The main characters brothers aren't too lucky. One gets washed over into the waves...the other goes insane from all the chaos. The main character clings to the ship and begins his long descent downward. Now at this point he COULD just resign himself from trying, accept where ever the vortex wants to take him and try not to think about anything. But instead he pays attention to what's around him...he starts to STUDY the vortex. The details. The patterns. He notices some of the debris trapped with him in the spiral gets shot down into the blackness, some of it gets rocketed back up to the surface...and by studying the patterns he eventually times it, jumps off of the ship, grabs onto a barrel and is sent to the top of the ocean where he is safe.

Now if you haven't already guessed the person trapped in the vortex is a metaphor for the average person immersed in a media and technological landscape...and the vortex represents the powerful forces in play, forces we often don't even realize are effecting us in this landscape...by studying the details and the patterns of how these forces are at work in the world around us, we may be able to become aware of them, to understand them and maybe ride a barrel to the surface and eventually escape them.

But if we want to do this it's going to take an understanding of media and technology and their effects on the psyche's of individuals that McLuhan thinks just doesn't exist yet at the point he's starting to do his work. So he decides to make one. From there he wants to talk about the media and technology of HIS time, how things are changing, and how

what lies in the future.... may actually be a retrieval of something western culture lost thousands of years ago.

But let's take this step by step and the FIRST step...is to talk about his theory of media and technology. Now the very first thing that needs to be said is that throughout McLuhan's work the terms media and technology are sometimes used practically interchangeably. We're going to talk more about the distinction between the two later...but for the sake of this explanation OF his media theory he defines a medium at the beginning of his book Understanding Media as, "any extension of ourselves". This is alluding to probably the most important idea you gotta understand if you want to understand all the REST of Marshall McLuhan...and that is that any new technology that's invented or any new idea that we come up with is ultimately an extension of ourselves...an extension of our physical bodies...an extension of our consciousness...it is us extending something about ourselves further out there into world...the easiest way to explain what he means is just to give you a bunch of examples.

Telescopes...are an extension of your ability to see. Hearing aids...are an extension of your ability to hear. TV's...are extensions of your eyes AND ears...you can see things going on on the other side of the globe. The wheel...is an extension of your feet. Put a cart on four wheels and it's an extension of your arms and back being able to carry stuff. Phones are an extension of your voice. A knife is an extension of your fingernails and teeth. Point is in the beginning human beings didn't have ANY technology. They had their senses, their brains and the best ideas they could come up with on their own. But the INSTANT...that some creative human being came up with the idea of a hammer...and realized it was far more effective at breaking up rocks than slamming your forehead into them...life instantly changed in that moment...what it is to be a human being changed in that moment. All of a sudden we have this tool that performs this task we have to get done better than the physical bodies we were born into. We should pause here because this is a really important point that McLuhan would want to stress. See it's so common

for us to see a hammer, a telescope, a computer and to think these are merely pieces of technology that give us more options to explore as human beings, more capabilities than we had before. Who doesn't want more options...these things are tools at our disposal. But McLuhan would say try not to only think about the fact that we make the tools...think about how much the tools make us as well.

Once that hammer is introduced, once the telescope is introduced or the computer, how about a brand new type of nuclear weapon...some piece of what it is to be a human being changes in that moment. You know it's funny McLuhan once compared people that introduce media and technology into the world to a person in a plane dropping bombs on the villages full of innocent people below. He said this because whenever someone introduces media or technology into the world there is a similar level of distance where they don't often HAVE to see the potential damage they're doing long after they're dead...and many people introducing media and technology into the world are truly thinking about not only the full extent of consequences for introducing this into the culture...but also what former technology this is going to make obsolete, so as to remove some other part of what it is to be a human being, what future technology this might lead to that will have consequences. His point is not that we should all become psychics...his point is that generally speaking we are extremely BAD at predicting the unintended consequences down the road of introducing a new idea or invention. The world is too complex and dynamic to be able to, and yet people DO IT...everyday. Like with this podcast for example.

So this is McLuhan's big point that grounds his media theory. Media and technology are always extensions of ourselves out there into the physical world...and the media and technology at our disposal has a drastic impact on not only what we think of as being a human being, but also our very perceptions...what we perceive at all. To illustrate how much of an impact the media and technology of our time have on our perceptions, to show how we don't just make the technology the technology equally makes us...McLuhan

is going to turn to something that is pretty uncommon for people to THINK of as a technology...but to McLuhan it was something invented long ago that has had a drastic impact on the way people think about things...and that is, written language, and along with it...the phonetic alphabet.

The ability to take an idea that only exists in your head, pull out a piece of paper, visually represent that idea through symbols and convey it in a very linear way where one word follows the next in a proper format and syntax that other people can understand...this is just as much an invention that extends ourselves out into the world as a telescope is. Language, and written or printed language at that, allows us to EXTEND our inner consciousness out into the world. But this relatively new VISUAL form of language does so in a very unique way that allows ideas to have a level of autonomy they never had before. What I mean is: long ago for who knows how many thousands of years the primary means of communication or media was talking about things. We lived in villages or tribes, if somebody had an idea...they didn't write a book about it...they spoke about it. If somebody wanted wisdom from the past, they didn't go to the library...they asked someone more experienced than them and they would get stories and lessons passed on down through the generations through this oral tradition. But McLuhan thinks in the relatively recent past, just a few thousand years, we've been going through a stage of human development that has been centered around literacy. Just as when you introduce a technology like a computer into a culture... and it changes the entire way people perceive their reality...written language is an invention as well...and the thinking of a person within a culture, to McLuhan, is highly effected by the dominant means of communication WITHIN that culture. So what happens when the dominant means of communication transitions from a primarily spoken word tradition to one that is highly visual, symbolic, structured, ordered and linear? Well to McLuhan it's going to lead to what he sometimes called the "Gutenberg way of perceiving"...which is an allusion to the Gutenberg press, the printing press that revolutionized the alloy of metal that allowed for printed words to last on the page at a level that made mass dissemination of books to the

general public possible. The Gutenberg way of perceiving is an over-indexed, overdeveloped tendency towards the visual, the structured, the linear. He says at one point this may be part of the reason historically we've had such a narrow, linear view of things like time or history or identity.

You ask people that question what would you rather be? Blind or deaf? And 99% of people say they'd rather be deaf...because our culture is so visual in terms of how it communicates. But how might that sample size change if a new media or technology was introduced that communicated primarily through audio? You know, McLuhan once said:

"We don't know who discovered water but we know it wasn't a fish. A pervasive environment, a pervasive medium is always beyond perception."

The big point to McLuhan is this: the messages that these media of written language are sending to us...go far beyond the actual content or subject matter of the thing that's being written about. There are latent messages being sent that as fish in the water we just don't perceive.

Let's give another example McLuhan loved of how when you shift this primary means of communication it shifts what is possible for people within the culture. So when you're living in the tribal culture and the oral tradition we talked about before...when it comes to introducing radical new ideas or scathing critiques of the current way things are being done...there's not much room for that. There's not much devil's advocate in a village...there's an understanding that if you open your mouth and give an opinion about something...there's at least SOME connection to that idea that's in your head and your beliefs and identity. There's very little room for someone to be an individual, rogue agent that just thinks the rest of the village is stupid. The reason for this is that ideas in the oral tradition are inherently connected to the person that uttered them. However...during the era of written and PRINTED word, McLuhan says, all of a sudden we have the ability...to

put ideas down on a piece of paper, slap a pseudonym down as the author, and we have the unique position of allowing ideas to exist independently. You can't refute these ideas by getting rid of the author...they're still going to be there tomorrow on the pages of the book that's now being mass distributed. This period of literacy allows people a level of individuality that never could've EXISTED in one of these small villages. This is just one example of hundreds of how the media of written language changes the lives of the people living in the cultures it is prevalent in.

Now, McLuhan takes this one step further. He doesn't want to just stop with written language and the effects it has on people...he wants to examine ALL forms of media that communicate ideas and the effects they have. Because yes, reading printed text in the newspaper is going to have ONE type of effect on your reality...but what if you don't read the newspaper? What if you watch TV? What if you listen to the radio or podcasts for your information? Keep in mind that it's not just information media...roads, airplanes, clothes, any extension of ourselves...these are all media as well...that to McLuhan send similar messages and contribute to our way of perceiving the world. But by the word message... he's not talking about the specific content of a podcast, for example, or the specific image that a particular outfit is setting off. Just like written language...where the message that's being sent goes far beyond whatever specific thing is being talked about at the time...it is far bigger than that...so too with things like TV's, podcasts, newspapers...and yes ALSO with things like roads airplanes and clothes. When Marshall McLuhan says his famous line at the beginning of Understanding Media when he says "The medium is the message." Whenever we have a medium, any extension of ourselves...the message that it delivers is SO MUCH GREATER than just the immediate content we might be receiving...just like with written language...it's BIGGER than that...he describes the true MESSAGE of a medium as the change of "scale or pace or pattern" and then how those factors IMPACT life as a person within that culture. He's more concerned with the human experience or effect that using a medium is going to have than whatever MEANING the immediate content may have.

We've already seen an example of this with language...not too big of a leap for people to think the same thing is happening when they turn on the TV. But what if this extends to ALL media...even things like roads...or clothes. What would that mean for us?

Marshall McLuhan breaks down media into two very broad categories. Hot forms of media and cool forms of media. Let's use examples of information media because it's going to be more straightforward in understanding his greater point. Keep in mind these are not hard and fast definitions. McLuhan is not trying to rigidly define terms...he's just trying to offer some basic guidelines of organization, which he realizes cannot work perfectly. Hot forms of media, McLuhan says, are generally low in audience participation. They provide people with a lot of information and data, he describes them as mechanical and uniform. It's very one way...one party is GIVING information and the audience is RECEIVING it...and that's pretty much it. Examples of this would be things like books, pictures, radio, podcasts that don't take callers and informational videos.

Cool forms of media, on the contrary, require a good DEAL of audience participation. They generally give less information than hot forms of media...so it requires the audience to do what McLuhan calls "filling in the gaps" of the story. Examples would be something like a skype or zoom video discussion group where people can ask questions, storytelling...where many of the details need to be filled in by the listener and they can ask clarifying questions...call in shows, cartoons...phone conversations. Getting your information through these COOLER forms of media is far different from the experience you're going to have getting your information through hot forms of media.

So again the message, the effect for having used a medium or the experience that a person has within a culture is going to come down to the media that is predominantly used BY that culture. People living in cultures that favor cooler forms of media will have

an entirely different experience than those living in cultures that favor hot ones. Now let's go back for a second to the different eras of communication. McLuhan would say notice how the village cultures and one's immersed in the oral tradition of communication leaned much more in the direction of cool forms of media. Much more of a group effort. Whereas the literate societies tend to lean towards individualism and hot forms of media. Once again, wouldn't be a surprise to McLuhan that when the types of media a particular society favors change...so to do the patterns of human life within those societies. Once again, yes, we make the tools. But the tools make us as well.

What happens though...when the media and technology that is introduced changes society in such a dramatic way...that the people living within it have a hard time knowing how to navigate their lives. Remember the beginning of the episode...people generally feel like they can predict what is going to happen next and how people are going to respond to it...but what happens when an unexpected technology gets introduced and it changes things to such an extent that people go out seeking answers from people that saw this thing coming. Marshall McLuhan was that person for a lot of people during the dawn of what you could call the electric age. We have the age of spoken word in our villages, we have the age of literacy with Gutenberg...McLuhan was living during the development of TV's, telephones and other instant electronic communication, electric automation, widespread international travel, the list is endless and the point is that the world was quickly changing into something that didn't resemble the age of literacy in the slightest bit. The people on the front lines LIVING in this brave new world...didn't have a guidebook to help them adapt. They were the beneficiaries of an education given to them by people that wrote letters to each other...they were people that valued the ability to read because they knew it would be the primary means of communicating important ideas that they needed to know about. But as I've asked on this show before and I've gotten ZERO responses which makes me KNOW I'm right...who reads anymore...really?

Clearly joking. The answer's me...eight hours a day. But there's actually a kernel of truth

in that joke that touches on a strong belief of McLuhan. Marshall McLuhan believed that eventually, if left to play out long enough, people living in this new electric age would no longer value literacy. Being able to read in this new era was eventually going to be about as valuable as it was in the early tribal societies before written word existed. Now think about that. If written word is a technology...then it seems the electric age is introducing a NEW technology that makes that older technology obsolete...much like the invention of the automobile that made the buggy whip obsolete.

He describes exactly what that new medium is in this famous passage:

"Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as we have already extended our senses and nerves by the various media. Whether the extension of consciousness, so long sought by advertisers for specific products, will be 'a good thing' is a question that admits of a wide solution."

He actually says a LOT there. So if a telescope is an extension of your eyes...and a TV is an extension of your eyes and ears...then the best way to describe electric media to McLuhan is that it's an extension of our entire nervous system. This new world is practically indiscernible from the world we lived in during the age of literacy. You want to talk to somebody? You write them a letter. Month from now...getting a response to a basic conversation will be the HIGHLIGHT of your day. Age of electricity you just pick up the phone. Instant communication. These days you are constantly available on demand to any person that wants to talk to you, anywhere. Back in the age of literacy if you wanted to travel across the country...you buy a couple oxen and wagon axles and embark on a three month long journey where you have to decide whether or not to ford the river and hopefully not die of typhoid. Age of electricity you just buy a plane ticket and are in a new city in a few hours. Back in the age of literacy you could build a house,

lock the doors, live as an individual with privacy locked away in a box. Age of electricity that's not possible and it's only going to get more difficult. In fact, Marshall McLuhan would want us to consider at this point just how many similarities there are between our present existence and the existence of the villagers immersed in the oral tradition of communication.

You want to talk to someone in a close-knit village? You can find them in about ten seconds. Same with the telephone. You have very little privacy in a small village. Becoming more the case for us every day. Your life is constantly on display in a village and everybody knows what's going on with you...we volunteer that information over social media. The parallels between the life of a villager and our present day lives wouldn't have been a surprise to McLuhan at all...in fact he predicted it. He believed that electric media would extend our nervous system, the final phase of the extension of man...he believed it would allow for communication at such a level and extend collective human consciousness at such a rate that we would eventually find ourselves in what he called a "global village".

To McLuhan...the age of literacy has been a great experiment, and an age that led to the development of human beings that has no doubt been beneficial. But in the scheme of human history and generations that are yet to come, the need for written language will never be as important to people as it was for these last few thousand years. Whether our new global village will be a good thing or not to McLuhan remains up in the air. There are times he is for it and times he is against it. But his goal wasn't really to be making value judgments about it anyway. His goal was to get people to think about what effects this new form of media was going to have on the lives and psyches of the people. That's it. Should also be said, no matter what you think about the global village it too, one day, will be over-indexed and overdeveloped and IT will come to an end as well.

Regardless of where you stand on McLuhan's media theory...he is responsible for an

entire branch of contemporary media theory that honestly wouldn't exist if it weren't for him. Some say his ideas are nostalgic and old. Some say they were far ahead of their time and that the longer technology develops the more we'll see how many things he got right. For me, personally, I don't really care either way. The value of Marshall McLuhan to me...the true takeaway that I think he would've been most happy if someone got from his books and lectures...is that we should pay attention. Be aware of the things that are going on around you. Try to be aware of media and the effects it they're having on human affairs. Don't just cling to the ship and ride the vortex down into the blackness. Look at the details. Try to make connections. Try to find patterns. Because it's only by paying attention that we can EVER hope to step outside of the landscape we inherited at birth against our will. In the immortal words of Marshall McLuhan:

"a fish doesn't know what water is until it's been beached."

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School - Erich Fromm on Love

Episode #150

So Erich Fromm in his 1956 book *The Art of Loving* famously wrote this about love:

“Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.”

But what did he mean by that? See that’s how I do this show. I ask YOU a question. I interview YOU. You can’t answer...and then I answer the question. See I’m going for a level of narcissism and self importance here that is TRULY legendary...but seriously, what did he mean by that? Well, I think the best entry point into understanding what he meant would be to look at the two most philosophically loaded concepts in that statement and that would be one, love. What did he mean by love? And two, What does he mean when he says the fundamental problem of human existence?

To put it very simply...what Fromm is referencing when he says the fundamental problem of human existence...is separateness. Human beings are conscious beings...and that consciousness allows us to be aware of what he calls a type of “existential loneliness”. We are aware that we are ultimately separate from every other human being that’s out there. We are aware...that no matter how much of a support system we have...if the right confluence of events came to pass...we ultimately only have ourselves. And that self by the way...is consciously aware that it feels separate from the entire rest of the universe! We’re aware that we are one tiny pixel in a universe that is so large it’s difficult for our brains to fathom...we are blips on a time scale that is so large it seems impossible to even comprehend. This reality of the human condition, for Fromm, is a big reason why people often want to find a way to connect to something greater than themselves...to ALLEVIATE this separateness. By the way it should be said that for Fromm, as a member of the Frankfurt School, this is also going to come along with a pretty big critique of the

way modern SOCIETY alienates us from each other. The example we gave on the last Frankfurt School series was about boxes...we live in this thing that looks like a box, away from everyone else. We drive to work in a box. We work sometimes in a cubicle...Root word cube which is actually a...just a box. How about the social boxes we exist in. Many more examples, but the point is: we are alone...and the worst part to Fromm is that we realize it.

So again to combat this separateness from everything there are tons of strategies people have used all throughout history to try to connect to something greater than themselves. Religion, Philosophy sure, but really our desire to connect to a tribe in general is connected to this existential loneliness. The desire to become a great painter, or write a legendary novel or even make a mediocre philosophy podcast...ALL of this is just a desperate attempt...by me...to quell this feeling of separateness. But Fromm says in our modern societies how practical is it really for the average person to try to become a painter that is so good they live on beyond their lifetime? They gotta work! It's impossible...and the people realize that as well. So one of the most COMMON strategies people use is to try to harness various different instantiations of love. Very common one is for people to try to find romantic love...or a partner they don't have to feel so separate from.

Finding romantic love becomes one of the most important things in the plans people make when starting out their lives. People want love so bad they watch movies and TV shows about it...they listen to SONGS about it. They read STORIES about it. To Eric Fromm it's as though the people are STARVED of love. And who in their right mind could blame ANYBODY for putting in so much effort trying to find it. I mean, who WANTS to die alone! No WONDER we work so hard, constantly honing our strategy to find love...or do we really?

Fromm would probably want to preface this section by saying consider how many

relationships fail and NOT for reasons where you're FORCED by circumstance to go your separate ways?

Like if you're listening to this...and you're not CURRENTLY in love...then barring certain exceptions for MOST of us...EVERY SINGLE attempt you've made at love has failed. Why should this be the case if we're supposedly putting in so much effort to have enduring love in our lives? The ANSWER for Fromm is that most of us are using a horrible strategy.

And the SLOGAN for this strategy if there was one...is that to find love...if you're NOT in love...become more lovable. Go to the gym, advance your career, buy some cool clothes, learn to play the ukulele...that always works. But are these things that are going to increase your odds of finding love? Fromm thinks all you've REALLY done here is turn yourself into a product to be consumed on what he calls the "personality market".

And HOW FITTING, to Fromm, that in our modern capitalist societies we would be so inclined to turn our love lives and the love lives of other people into commodities to be marketed, bought, sold and traded. You improve something about yourself you increase your value within the market. You look around at all the options, pick the best one you can get with your current stock price, and then you enter into a mutually beneficial transaction with this other person where you receive in return a rush of emotions and endorphins and feels and all of a sudden, in a fleeting moment you just realize...it HAS HAPPENED. I am in love. In other words, love is something that HAPPENS to you...we say things like I FELL in love. You become as lovable as you possible can...and then love finds YOU...you don't find IT! Haven't found it yet? Wait around for a while and it will find you! Finding love is a passive process for most people.

But Eric Fromm would say this is a perfect example of something he would call a type of "immature love". Which is to say it's a type of narcissistic love. A transactional love

where two ultimately needy people decide that they're going to set up an arrangement where each of them appease the insecurities and weaknesses of the other. Let's team up our egos. In other words the type of person that I would fall in love with would have GONE to the gym, would have ADVANCED their career, would have played the ukulele like Kermit the freakin frog. Finally I've found someone who makes me feel this way. Love is a feeling. Love is a noun. Wait Kermit the Frog played the banjo, didn't he? Doesn't matter the point is: how many of you out there have ever felt like someone has only loved the IDEA of you, rather than you. Well Erich Fromm thinks in these kinds of transactional relationships the intensity of the infatuation with each other is often connected to just the intensity of loneliness the people had experienced before that. But this isn't love. This is what can you do for me and what can I do for you in return. In other words you have essentially turned the person you "love" into a product to be consumed that provides your ego with some tangible benefit...and in turn you have turned YOURSELF into a product that has a similar exchange value.

So when we consider the rate at which relationships fail. When we consider how often things run their course, or people get bored of someone...Fromm would say: well if the two of you are essentially just consumable products of a similar value on the personality market...OF COURSE you're going to get bored of them when you see them in this way!

Let me explain: say you got into board games and you go down to the store and you buy Monopoly. You go home, you play it, you love it. You play it again the next day...you do this week after week and you play it so much that the little shoe thing has been eroded down by the oils in your fingers. How long can this go on? How long until you get bored of Monopoly and want to go out and buy another game to play? How long until what you initially got out of Monopoly is no longer something you need anymore, or what you initially got from it you now get BETTER from something else like paddle boarding or something. This is a reality of our modern consumer lives...we buy things, we enjoy them for a while and then we get bored of them and either donate them to someone else or

throw them in the trash. When we commodify our love lives and choose to love people in relation to what benefit they can provide for us...we essentially turn our partners into that game of Monopoly. This is why Fromm would say no WONDER so many relationships forged by this strategy fail.

When you structure your love life around the ethos of you scratch my back I scratch yours...well have you ever had someone scratching your back...and then they scratch for too long? What at first was a very welcome service they were providing for you can become very annoying in a short period of time.

What's interesting is that there's going to be strong parallels between the way Fromm sees this strategy of treating the people we love and his views on authoritarianism and how it flourishes within a society which we're actually going to be talking about next episode. For example, consider this quote from one of his other works:

“Domination springs from impotence and in turn reinforces it, for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralyzed.”

Notice how this same idea could be applied to our strategies for love! See remember, all of these strategies to have LOVE in our life came out of the need to get RID of this existential loneliness.

So if we can get someone else to serve, if we can get somebody to make us feel LESS alone and LESS anxious...silence some of these insecurities about which weaknesses of ours our partner SHOULD be compensating for...then we can effectively not have to feel any of the negative feelings that might OTHERWISE get us to take action to do the work to improve ourselves.

Fromm thinks the solution to all this is actually kind of ironic. We engage in this mutually beneficial transaction with another person to try to ESCAPE the feeling of being alone...when the SOLUTION to be able to actually love someone in a real capacity is to learn to BE alone. See whenever we fail, whenever a relationship ends, we often adjust our strategy for the future by saying...oh, well THIS time I'm going to search even HARDER for the perfect person...I'm going to work even HARDER to become more lovable. We spend so much time doing this and so LITTLE time questioning the very foundations of how we see love in the first place. Like, where'd you get your ideas about what love is or how to find it anyway? Was it in a YouTube video or something...where'd we get all these deeply rooted ideas about it...and if it IS something that is so important to us, why do we spend so little time REALLY trying to understand it?

Fromm says that one of the big mistaken ideas people have about love is that it is a thing. But HE says love is not an object it is a faculty. Which put another way is to say that love is not a noun...love is a verb. Most people think their problem is not BEING loved...their REAL problem is their ability TO love.

So knowing all this here's how Fromm describes how he sees the faculty of love:

“Love is a relatively rare phenomenon and its place is taken by a number of forms of pseudo love.”

Later he writes in reference to this idea that love is something that happens to you...or an emotion or a noun in any sense:

“Love is a passionate affirmation of an “object”; it is not an “affect” but an active striving and inner relatedness, the aim of which is the happiness, growth, and freedom of its object. It is a readiness which, in principle, can turn to any person and object including

ourselves.”

So hearing this definition and understanding love as this “active striving” that Fromm is talking about the question becomes: why do so many of us have such a hard time developing this ability?

Well notice a key difference between the transactional model of love and Fromm’s conception of love. Fromm’s idea says NOTHING about even CONSIDERING what the other person can do for me. This leads him to one of the most important ideas in the entire book *The Art of Loving*...that you will never be able to love ANY one person...until you can love everyone. Because you will ALWAYS be picking and choosing the people you love in terms of what benefits they can provide to you...Fromm says this kind of love more resembles symbiotic attachment or enlarged egotism than anything that has to do with love...this also explains his point of why he says it’s not UNTIL you can be alone that you can truly love...because it’s only from that place of not having some needs checklist you’re trying to complete that you can see people and things for who and what they are and not what they can do for you.

Love is not something that happens to you. There doesn’t need to be some external cue that CAUSES you to have love for someone. They don’t have to look a certain way, they don’t have to do something nice for you or compliment your shoes the right way or admire your career at a certain level...love...is a choice YOU make. It is active choice to shine love outward to everything and every one. Again, he says if you truly love someone you love them for who they are...not who you want them to be...otherwise you’re just making them an extension of your own ego; your own desires and expectations.

This is why love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to this feeling of separateness from everyone and everything. This is a connection that isn’t reliant on any external factors...it’s a connection to give to others that you choose yourself. And that’s the thing:

if you choose NOT to give love to others then you won't be seeing it anytime soon yourself...you know he has this really great line in *The Art of Loving* where he essentially says that if you're somebody that goes around your life and you're not interested in anything...then you're never going to find anything interesting. Well in the same way if you go around your life never projecting this love outward into the world...you're probably going to be living a pretty loveless existence.

But Fromm would say as easy as this is to understand the shift in theory that is necessary for finding love...putting it into practice is much easier said than done. Love is a relatively rare phenomenon because it's very difficult to master and even MORE difficult to sustain. This is not a part time job. In fact, if Fromm had to give love a category to be a part of...he'd have to say that love can best be described as an art.

He says:

“The first step to take is to become aware that love is an art, just as living is an art; if we want to learn how to love we must proceed in the same way we have to proceed if we want to learn any other art.”

We'll talk in a minute about the specifics he gives for how to proceed from here, but it's important to understand why Fromm is going in this direction at all. Why, of all things, would he refer to love as an art?

Here's what he's getting at: think of any person that dedicates themselves to an art, true masters of what they do. These are people that have given themselves over to this artistic process...people who have dedicated their lives so much to their craft...that they actually perceive the world in a different way than other people. An illustrator sees a park bench differently than someone just walking their dog in the park. A musician hears the noise on the subway different from someone sitting there on their way to work at a bank. To

become a true master of an art requires an immersion that is with you 24/7...not just when you feel like doing it...it is so much part of the fabric of who you are that it has become inseparable from you. Now think of those people, for example, that tell people oh yeah, I'm a writer...and they've written three things in the last six months. Fromm would probably ask is that person really a writer just because they can write letters down on a piece of paper when it's convenient...or at moments when they feel particularly inspired? Who ISN'T a writer at that point as long as they know the alphabet. Applied more generally, to call yourself an artist in ANY capacity has to run deeper, for Fromm, down into the very way you live your life. Art is a part of you and you of it...it's not something you just pull out of the closet when you have a little extra free time.

Well so too with the art of love. Once again, love is a full time job. In many ways love is a promise, Fromm says. Otherwise how could you possibly vow to love someone forever? Love is not about searching harder and finding the right person...love is about improving a skill...so how do we achieve mastery of that skill? Well one interesting thing Fromm asks us to consider in this pursuit is that just like many other forms of art like we talked about before...modern society ALSO works against people pursuing a mastery of love.

Why is this? Well, remember his definition of love! Love is an active striving for the growth and happiness of the loved person rooted in one's own capacity to love. We're supposed to immerse our lives IN this active striving...but what does modern society tell us to actively strive for? Fromm says success, prestige, money and power...ALL of which run contrary to this love process. So in a way...if you're EVER going to love in a truly artistic fashion...you are necessarily going to have to be counter-culture as well. So if the amount of effort and concentration and patience required to love well wasn't enough of a barrier for you...here's a cultural barrier we can tack on there as well.

Nonetheless let's say you're not deterred by how difficult this is going to be and still want to pursue love as an art to alleviate this separateness. Fromm thinks the process of

improving at loving is very similar to the process of improving at other forms of art. He talks about four main things you can focus on. Humility, courage, faith and discipline.

So the first one is humility. One of the main things he's referencing here is that we need to try to avoid the siren songs of the ego. To become a truly great artist...you need to approach the process of growth with humility. Because if you sit there as though you already know exactly how to do things and project your own expectations or desires onto the craft...you're always going to improve less quickly than you otherwise could...because you're not going to be open to all the lessons making themselves available. Well so too with love. We need to try to have objectivity about loving people. Because if you only choose to love people you already think are worthy of receiving it then you're already sabotaging yourself.

The second one is courage. Getting better at ANYTHING is an uncomfortable process. You're faced with roadblocks, puzzles, hostility from others...but a necessary part of improving is to keep going THROUGH this discomfort with a bit of courage. Fromm says you're going to run into similar problems when trying to cultivate this capacity to love and you're going to need a similar level of courage.

The third one is faith. To master a really difficult piece of music...you may have to sit down at the piano 1000 times, making mistake after mistake, no doubt frustrated at times because it seems impossible. But the people that stick with it and end up mastering the song are the people that had a sort of rational faith in the process...they didn't try to play it five times and just assume it was impossible, they accepted their failures with faith that it was going to be possible in the end. So too with the art of love. You are not always going to be great at nurturing the growth and happiness of every single person...but the ones who eventually GET there, Fromm thinks, will be the ones who had a level of faith.

The last one is discipline. This one should be obvious by now. Love is NOT a passive

process or something that happens to you. Love is something you do. You do it every single day. The same way you would practice any OTHER art every single day. Fromm says:

“The capacity to love demands a state of intensity, awareness, enhanced vitality. Which can only be the result of a productive and active orientation in many other spheres of life.”

What is he talking about here? There I go interviewing myself again. What he’s getting at is that love is ultimately about giving...and the thing you are giving to the other person is yourself...and no matter how much time you spend trying to develop yourself as an artist...the quality of that art can ONLY be guaranteed if you take care of yourself in many other areas of life. To give a simplistic example just imagine a musician who practices 16 hours a day but they never take a shower and they get some flesh eating bacteria that eats off both their hands! You can’t play the saxophone with your feet, people. Let that be a metaphor for the fact that in order to be the best you can be as a practitioner of love as an art...you need to love yourself first.

Because part of loving your fellow humans and part of loving that special someone is loving yourself enough to be healthy enough to show up and put this theory into practice. Now I could drone on about airplanes and oxygen masks here but I would much rather leave you with it being written beautifully by someone about ten times smarter than I am: Eric Fromm, The Art of Loving

“Love of others and love of ourselves are not alternatives. On the contrary, an attitude of love towards themselves will be found in all those who are capable of loving others. Love, in principle, is indivisible as far as the connection between objects and one’s own self are concerned.”

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School - Erich Fromm on Freedom

Episode #151

So last episode a major through line when discussing The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm...was that love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the fundamental problem of human existence. The fundamental problem being...that we are separate from everything and everyone else. That we are alone. That we exist in a state of what he called “existential loneliness”. But what some of you out there maybe did is you heard that diagnosis...you looked to your left saw people you cared about...looked to your right and saw people you cared about and turned back to Fromm and said look Erich Fromm...you’re saying that every body is alone out there...and I understand what you’re saying I think you have some good ideas but let’s be real: you don’t KNOW ME! You don’t know how alone or not alone I am. The real question is why are you so insistent on convincing me that I’m alone all the time?

What Erich Fromm would say is that you are among the most independent and isolated human beings that have ever lived in human history...and what you can THANK for this reality...are the very modern set of social conditions that you were born into...that themselves only exist because of a long, multi-thousand year process of what he calls the individuation...of human beings.

Something that will be a recurring theme throughout this episode is that sometimes there are parallels between the stages of development within our personal lives and the stages of development on a more macro level when it comes to the way citizens behave politically within a society. THIS is no exception. Fromm would liken the development of human beings from the Stone Age until now to the development of a child from a fetus into an adult. Also sometimes called the process of individuation...let’s consider the metaphor of the child for a second.

Think back to what it was like when you were a fetus. Now I don't know about you people, but I remember it being like a five star resort. You don't have to lift a FINGER, as a fetus! Everything is included. You can lay around all day. People feed you like people feed you grapes at a resort. You don't have to make any decisions; you don't have a CARE in the world as a fetus. But eventually you have to get born. You're not born capable of taking care of yourself...so you're still in a slightly less inclusive luxury resort. You have some more autonomy now, but you still eat what your parents tell you to eat and go where ever they tell you to go.

Now this pattern continues. As the years go on you slowly can do more and more things for yourself and desire greater levels of freedom to be able to run your own experiments. The distance between you and this family unit that at one point you could've never survived without...becomes greater. This goes on until you turn 18...and for your 18th birthday you get luggage as a birthday present. You move out, you're on your own, you find a place to live, you think about going somewhere and you pick up your phone to call your parents to tell them and you realize...in this moment...for the first time ever...you can go somewhere...and you no longer need to call and ask for their permission anymore. You can go where ever you want to. Now remember this moment of our hypothetical fetus all grown up into an autonomous adult. Let's talk about the parallels Erich Fromm draws to the development of humanity...and then we'll come back.

So pre-civilization human beings did not see themselves as separate from nature. Why would they? Every aspect of their lives was dictated by nature. They didn't have any agonizing choices...they didn't have to make decisions about whether today they're going to study particle physics or botany...no, nature gave them everything that they ate and decided everything that they were going to do. They didn't have to think for themselves fully...of course they thought but the key point is that it was a reaction to things that were

happening to them dictated by nature. We develop civilizations...little bit further away from nature but still greatly at its mercy almost like being born. We develop class systems...we believe in teleologies...people are born and they fall into a role and a set of actions within society that is GIVEN to them, almost like it's by their parents. The best part is that this role gives them security...it lets them be a piece of something greater than themselves. Fromm says think of someone that's part of the peasantry during the Middle Ages. You're born and you're GIVEN a family unit and a village and a profession you will inherit and a church you are a part of and tons of other things and like we've talked about in former episodes while this doesn't really give you a lot of freedom of choice...at least you know exactly who you are.

This process of individuation continues. Turning point, Fromm thinks is right around the Renaissance. We start to see ourselves as separate from nature...look at the art from around this time. Nature can now be painted onto a canvas and viewed purely for the sake of aesthetics. Little after that we have the Protestant reformation...the work of Martin Luther and John Calvin...there is a new set of theological interpretations that view human beings as individuals before God not REQUIRING the intermediary of the church and its authority. Capitalism starts to become the dominant economic approach...much more of a focus on the individual economically. Fromm says we're living in an age where so many of the former chains of the past have been removed...we exist in a period of economic liberalism, political democracy, religious autonomy, and individualism in personal life...and this long process accentuated by this recent past in Europe and American to fight...for this new level of freedom and individualism in people's lives...has led to a place where the citizen has become individuated. Metaphorically speaking for the first time citizens are choosing what they want to do, picking up the phone to dial their parents, and realizing they don't need to ask anyone permission anymore.

Both the young adult from our example before and the citizen of modernity are in a

similar place to Erich Fromm. They are free now. They are the person at the helm of the ship with a lot of different directions they can go. When you finally find yourself in this place...seems like things would have to feel really good for you. So why is the book by Erich Fromm that we're covering today called *Escape From Freedom*? Why would anybody want to escape from freedom? Freedom is one of those things...what person DOESN'T want freedom...pretty commonly considered to be a universally good thing. Fromm makes the case that for both of our examples here today, this initial state of freedom that we're born into can be both a good or a bad thing....because on one hand...becoming an autonomous free individual certainly gives you a new level of independence, a new level of rationality because now you're making the decisions, a new level a responsibility for the things you decide to do...your parents aren't making the itinerary you have to follow anymore...you don't have the chains of a village or a profession or a particular church...and all this is great! But on the flip side what comes along with that is that now YOU are responsible. You know sometimes kids can't wait until they're a grown up so that they can make decisions for themselves...but once you're an adult what you realize is that sure, you can decide to eat a half gallon of ice cream at 9AM if you want...but you ALSO are the only one that has to deal with the consequences of that choice. You choose your own adventure now...but now you're RESPONSIBLE for the adventures you choose. To quote Kierkegaard anxiety is the dizziness of freedom...so no wonder...when you finally find yourself individuated and free...in this new place...you naturally feel more anxious about decision making than you did as a child. You feel more alone and isolated...because now you don't have a village or something greater than yourself you're attached to...you're an individual. For Fromm there is always this trade off going on between you having higher levels of freedom and lower levels of security. Having independence can mean both that you have greater levels of freedom and greater levels of isolation all at the same time.

So this place that we find ourselves in whether in our personal lives as young adults or in the social conditions surrounding us...this place where we have more options than ever

before in terms of freedom...this is a place that Fromm calls unbearable. Lot of people are MISERABLE in this place. This is not how a human being is supposed to live...and what's MISSING for Fromm is that while no doubt generations have FOUGHT for this freedom so valiantly over the years...they've really only guaranteed one HALF of freedom for people...and WE as INDIVIDUALS are responsible for the other half. What this is referencing is the classic way of dividing freedom that we talked about in our episodes on Isaiah Berlin...Positive freedom and Negative freedom.

Negative freedom is typically described as freedom from. Meaning...this is the type of freedom we experience when the chains and tethers imposed by external forces are removed from our lives, freedom FROM those things. We experience negative freedom when we're no longer under the rule of a totalitarian regime, we experience it when we get a new assistant manager that isn't taking their childhood out on us anymore...but most importantly for Fromm here we EXPERIENCED it...when we no longer were born into a world that CHAINED us to an economic role, a voiceless political position, obedience to the church, and a collective place within a village or family. We are living in a place of unprecedented levels of negative freedom.

But Fromm thought all the negative freedom in the world was USELESS if you didn't combine it with a healthy dose of positive freedom...or what is typically called freedom to. You can cut off all the chains that are holding you down but if you have no where you want to go...then what's the point? To practice positive freedom is to connect to the world in a way that is spontaneous...meaning that it comes from within...not from any sort of external force...it is self chosen. To connect in ways that are a positive outlet for energy...to connect through things like love and productive work and using our freedom to help other people DO things based on their OWN self-chosen growth and happiness...the opposite of chaining people down like negative freedom is trying to alleviate. Think of the parallels to the way we often treat our partners from the episode we just did on love.

But I think it's important to take a second here and really examine the importance of this connection when it comes to how we should be utilizing our freedom. We all find ourselves at some point in this place of on one hand being free from the chains of the past...but on the other hand totally independent, responsible for ourselves, isolated, anxious and lonely. And it's once we're IN this uncomfortable place, to Fromm, that we have to find a way to alleviate this isolation and RECONNECT with the world around us. You know Fromm explicitly says when we're in this place we have to find a way to "connect to the world without eliminating our individuality." How we reconnect to the world REALLY is an absolutely CRUCIAL pivot point in our lives AND in the discussion Erich Fromm is trying to have in this book. Once again: when we find ourselves independent, isolated and alone...how do we connect to people and things around us?

To Fromm you have two choices. You can embrace freedom...or you can escape from freedom. To embrace freedom is to find a way to use this positive freedom, this freedom to, to once again in a spontaneous, self-chosen way to connect to the world willing the growth and happiness of yourself and others through love and productive work. To escape from freedom is to connect to the world through one of a number of different strategies...but all of which share the very same characteristic. They are a retreat...AWAY from freedom...back to the old chains of the past...back to the womb. This is a REVERSAL of the process of individuation. This is a SACRIFICE of our individualism, this is finding a new set of chains to voluntarily lock ourselves into so that we don't have to deal with the pressures of thinking for ourselves. This is a way of reconnecting to the world by giving up your freedom, reestablishing that security...and sacrificing your individuality.

Before Erich Fromm ever wrote this book or arrived at this thesis...he was doing sociological research on the German people during the interwar years in the Weimar

Republic. He asked people to answer a series of questions about their political beliefs. What he found was that around 10% of them had what he called “authoritarian leanings”. 15% of them were democratically minded. And around 75% of them landed somewhere in the middle of the two. Now, later...decades later it would come out that the conventional wisdom at the time was that... let’s say there is an authoritarian leader that tries to ascend to power and has the backing of that 10% of people...the 15% of democratically minded people would serve as the necessary political opposition to be able to fight back against the authoritarians. But what Fromm wondered is what if the 75% of people in the middle were unable to deal with these new social conditions they were living in and incapable of embracing freedom as a solution during a potential fascist takeover? Well we all know what happened. He wrote later about the contrast between the hundreds of years of FIGHTING for this negative freedom before and then its immediate reversal as soon as people had it.

“We have been compelled to recognize that millions in Germany were as eager to surrender their freedom as their fathers were to fight for it. That instead of wanting freedom they sought for ways to escape from it.”

The world saw Hitler ascend to power. People at first were confused as to why the German people could ever get behind a fascist leader the way they did. Something that was common at the time and something that is still common to this day when trying to explain political motivations...is to give too simplistic an explanation for why people supported an extreme candidate. For example, Fromm says at the time some people tried to give a PURELY political explanation for the rise of Hitler...I believe he says that THEY said that it was by sheer, brute political FORCE that the third reich came to power. Too simplistic. Some people tried to say it was purely the socioeconomic desperation of post war Germany, too simple...some people tried to offer PURELY psychological reasons...that the only way these people could’ve possibly supported Hitler is if they were crazy, or brainwashed, or dumb, or evil. Too basic. Fromm would say that’s not a good

enough explanation, in fact, it's downright dangerous if you do this sort of thing. Because if you don't understand the true reasons behind why people supported a leader like that in the first place and you say, well they must've just been dumb. You will never TRULY understand why people tried to escape from freedom in this way...and you'll never be able to prevent it from happening again in the future.

So AS a psychoanalytic sociologist...naturally Fromm is going to try to describe people's motivations in terms of a MIXTURE between psychological and sociological factors. When people find themselves in this place that many German citizens found themselves in...newly individuated, in possession of negative freedom, but overwhelmed by the pressures of EMBRACING their positive freedom in a productive way... Fromm gives three primary ways that people will typically use to ESCAPE from freedom. One is Authoritarianism, Two is Destructiveness and Three is Automaton Conformity. We're going to talk about all three of them right now and Authoritarianism is up first.

Now remember the central question to consider when we're in this isolated, uncomfortable place is how are we going to RECONNECT ourselves to the world. When Fromm says that someone escapes from freedom by adopting an attitude of authoritarianism...he is NOT just talking about the actual authoritarian leader that ascends to power. All of the people who SUPPORT an authoritarian power structure are equally authoritarian as well. Someone who uses this strategy reconnects themselves to the world through what Fromm calls a type of sadomasochism. Two words there: Sadism and Masochism. Sadism being the desire to control others...to dominate, exploit, or steal from others. Masochism being the desire to submit to some power and BE controlled or dominated. The authoritarian is Sadistic in the sense that they want to support an authoritarian setup so that other people and groups will be controlled, but they are MASOCHISTIC in the sense that they themselves want to SUBMIT to that authority as part of the process. Both of these are a direct sacrifice of their freedom and individuality. See as a Sadist...you cannot exist unless if you HAVE somebody else to control. You're no

longer capable of being an individual at that point...and as a masochist...you cannot exist unless if there's someone out there to control or dominate you.

But consider this: Freud said and Fromm agreed that you never really see sadism in a person without some type of masochism attached to it...and vice versa. He says Hitler was an EXTREME example of somebody who was sadistic...but he was ALWAYS masochistic towards his position within history and the ideas of fate and chance. People with this authoritarian mindset will often escape from freedom by looking around them and finding out where the power structures lie...they're VERY GOOD at searching out and finding where there is a concentration of power. Then masochistically they insinuate themselves INTO that power structure. Become one small PART of this power structure, something they see as bigger than themselves, compensating for their weaknesses as a scared individual...and then they will USE their position as a foot soldier of that authoritarian to then take out their sadistic tendencies on other people in the name of this thing they have submitted to.

The point is this: in this state they are no LONGER individuals...they are no longer free...they have retreated back towards the womb, back to a set of social conditions that tell them how to live, what to think, who the enemy is and they spend their days limiting the freedom of others, creating chains for people. Notice this is the OPPOSITE of the people that EMBRACE freedom. They might spend their days finding ways to project love to others...striving for the growth and happiness of others...respectful of their OWN self-chosen, spontaneous ideas of how to use their freedom to. These people would nurture that in others. They might find ways to CONTRIBUTE to society in a positive way through productive work. Politically...they're not in the business of creating new chains for people to operate in... they're in the business of helping other people DO the things they want to DO...that they've decided... without any coercion from the outside, so long as they don't HURT anybody.

But the authoritarian is the ENEMY of this person...both interpersonally AND politically, Fromm says. People who embrace freedom are ALWAYS going to be hated by people who are actively trying to destroy it in others. We all know somebody that HAS this type of personality. Somebody that seeks out power so they can submit to it and then use their new position to sadistically control people around them. You'll see this person where ever there is a power structure to take a little piece of for themselves. They are drawn to power like podcasters are drawn to horrible guests, they can't help it. You'll see this in the government. You'll see this in police departments. You'll see this in mid level management at a chain of restaurants.

See in a normal, healthy relationship, Fromm says, you strive for the integrity of the other person, you preserve the equality between the both of you and you strive for your mutual independence because it protects your individuality and freedom. But again if your goal is to sprint in the other direction from this individuality and freedom because it's so uncomfortable...the sadomasochist doesn't respect the integrity of themselves or others...they're either submitting or controlling...which also DIRECTLY goes against the idea that both people in a relationship are on equal footing...when everyone is equal then how do we find out who's in power to submit to...and you can't POSSIBLY be respecting mutual independence...because the sadomasochist is ALWAYS dependent on the other party for their existence...which again is ONLY made possible if you have somebody to control or somebody to submit to. Fromm calls this a symbiotic relationship...this is the answer to HOW they reconnect to other people. See if the world is a whale then these people become a really toxic barnacle living on the side. Yes, part of something bigger, but really not contributing much of anything.

The second way that people escape from freedom is what Fromm calls destructiveness. Sometimes this person is just called the destroyer. So if the person that embraces freedom creates order in the world in an emergent way, NOT based on some rigid

authoritarian system, but by the synthesis of the collective self chosen expressions of positive freedom by everyone...if this person is CREATING...then the opposite of this person is someone who is destroying life. When people are free...life takes on this quality of being emergent and unpredictable...there is a constant state of movement and change in how the world plays out. The authoritarian tries to control this unpredictability by imposing order from the outside...the destructive person tries to control it...by destroying life in various ways...they destroy the very thing that they can't control. They sacrifice their individuality...because the only way they can feel significant or in control or safe is if they are actively hurting someone else, destroying something, attacking someone or even killing someone. Fromm calls these people necrophiles. They fixate on death and destruction because if for no other reason at least it isn't the life and creation that makes them feel so insignificant and anxious. The interesting part ABOUT this particular escape from freedom is that they're STILL reconnecting with people in the world. Because in some sick way...by making it your mission to destroy people and the world around you...you still have more of a connection to things than you did when you were a free individual doing nothing.

The last way to escape from freedom is what Fromm calls Automaton Conformity.

Fromm says:

“Modern man still is anxious and tempted to surrender his freedom to dictators of all kinds, or lose it by transforming himself into a small cog in the machine, well fed and well clothed, yet not a free man but an automaton.”

So if you're feeling the pressure of being an individual...a really good way to get rid of any semblance of individuality is just to conform to the way everyone else acts around you. Now, what Fromm would want us to consider about all THREE of these strategies, but something that's particularly prevalent in people that conform to the beliefs of the people around them...is that they often don't even realize WHY they are trying to escape from

freedom in the first place and to THEM...they often don't even see themselves as conforming to anything. They think these beliefs are theirs...a set of values that they've painstakingly created and come up with over the years. They lose any form of individuality because they blend into the crowd so much there's no telling where they end and the next person begins...if we're all the same...then there's no ROOM for individuals. Fromm calls this type of thinking pseudo thinking, because you aren't really thinking for yourself...you're just believing and saying what other people have told you to believe or say.

Fromm thought this strategy of automaton conformity was extremely effective even in modern democratic societies. Because that's the thing...common rebuttal to these ideas might be, hey I got a solution! I have a way to prevent people from creating new chains for people to live in and from imposing order externally...let's just have a democracy! Then EVERYONE gets to choose what happens. But Fromm would say BE CAREFUL! Democracy is NOT a guarantee that people are going to remain in possession of their freedom. People can be just as easily be controlled by advertisements as they can be by the sword, and the insidious part of this democratic automaton conformity is that most people that are participating are going to think everything that they believe was their idea. You can see how this work starts to compliment some of the OTHER ideas we've covered that were important to the Frankfurt School as a whole.

Whether you agree with everything Erich Fromm has said or not...I think one theme of this book he wants us to consider that is practically irrefutable is the idea that freedom...can sometimes make your life better...and sometimes make your life more complicated. Freedom is not a panacea or some ultimate virtue that is unquestionably good. There's a reason Sartre says that we are "condemned to be free". And when you're in this place...devoid of the chains of the past...trying decide where to go...maybe politically you don't know exactly which cause to support or where to best spend your time...maybe interpersonally you don't know how to treat people...maybe in your love life

you have something you want to go for but there are so many options and you're scared about what might happen if you pick one and use some of that freedom to. Having your chains cut but not knowing what adventure to choose next can be a trap you stay in for your entire life. And, you can live in fear of all the bad things that might or might not happen...you can be lost in the finite, lost in the infinite until you're old and grey, but I think what Fromm would say...is that we should try to understand the tremendous gift that we have, right now. A gift that the vast majority of human beings could never even aspire to. He'd probably say that if you're not moving because you're worried about not using your freedom properly...maybe the best piece of advice to start with is this: There is only one meaning to life...and that is the act of living it.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School - Walter Benjamin pt. 1

Episode #152

So Walter Benjamin is notorious for being one of the most elusive thinkers of the early twentieth century. His work is a combination of influences so varied it's almost funny...it's a mix of ideas so seemingly disconnected the act of connecting them is almost as impressive as the ideas themselves...he'll go from Kant, to Marx, to 19th century German Literary criticism, to Jewish mysticism...he'll go all over the world... and needless to say what results from all this... is a very interesting critique of 20th century culture. The man's work is often referred to as difficult...sometimes people even go so far as to say it's downright incomprehensible. This is no doubt...part of the reason why there is such a lack of representation OF his work in the world... which is part of why I wanted to cover him here.

Sometimes when reading Benjamin, he can say things that on the surface... seem to be completely irrational or completely counterintuitive, But I think the biggest barrier... in trying to understand what he's saying... is, in a weird way, understanding what he's trying to say...but that said, I don't think you can just begin the discussion with Walter Benjamin's most famous work called *Art in the age of Mechanical Reproduction*, as some people do...I don't think you can just cannonball in to talking about his critique of modernity, as some have in the past. *The Arcades Project*. *Phantasmagoria*. *The Crisis of the Novel*. No, I think there are a few extremely important things we need to understand about Benjamin's thought before we can even HOPE to start covering these more complex topics. And I want to start today...in true Benjamin fashion...by talking about something that is going to at first seem completely random, but will ultimately end up being a piece of a larger critique we'll excavate over the course of the series...and that is...by looking at one of his early essays called...“The Task of the Translator”.

So the title of the essay is actually really good if you wanted to describe what the essay's all about. When somebody is translating something from one language into another...what exactly is the job...of that translator? What is the task of the translator?

Now, at first this may seem to some like a pretty strange question to ask.

Translation...seems pretty straight forward...you have a text written in one language...you speak ANOTHER language...really seems as simple as just saying what they said in one language in another language and the end result will be that its readable to a whole other group of people that didn't have access before. Who wouldn't want that?

But this is a work in the area of translation theory...and to people who think about translation a LOT... this would be a pretty oversimplified way of looking at the whole process that's going on when we translate something. There's a reason we don't just copy and paste entire texts into Google translate and call that a translation...because it's a blurry mess...because sentences will read in a way that doesn't make ANY sense...because there's often words or sayings in ONE language that there just isn't a word for in another language...because languages don't line up perfectly. There are thousands of different ways you could translate any single sentence...thousands of different sets of criteria you could use when determining what exactly the best way to do that is. And considering...that people often SWEAR by one translation of a work over others...they'll say things like THIS translation of Meditations by Marcus Aurelius is the best one and all the others are a waste of time...these sorts of value judgments necessarily imply that there must be better ways to translate than others.

This is part of what Walter Benjamin is interested in getting to the bottom of...and if you wanted to find out what the best way to translate something is...seems like a pretty good place to start would be to consider what the task of the translator is at all. Benjamin writes about a couple answers to this that are EXTREMELY common that he thinks are

completely incorrect. The first one is that the task of the translator is to make the translation as accessible as possible for the reader in the new language. That when choosing between the thousands of ways you could translate a sentence...your job is to choose the one that expresses what is being said in the way that most EASILY allows people to get ahold of it. Walter Benjamin thinks this is wrong...and he begins making his case by underscoring the fact that if we want to find the task of the translator...we have to remember that the translator... is always doing their job...while interacting with what is ultimately a piece of artwork. When you are translating a book of poetry you are translating a work of art. When you translate a great novel...that is art. Even when you are translating a work of non-fiction was the author not poetically or artistically trying to weave together ideas into a tapestry that is undeniably art? So in KEEPING with this...when considering the task of the translator we need to consider the nature of art itself...and on this topic Benjamin says the following:

“No poem is intended for the reader. No picture for the beholder. No symphony for the listener. In appreciation for a work of art or art form consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful.”

Now if this seems like a weird thing to say because of our unique position in 2021...give Benjamin some time here. He’s making a point about the way art has typically been done historically...and what he’s getting at is that we don’t necessarily create works of art with the audience in mind...nor does a work of art NEED an audience to be considered a work of art. Like when you were 16 years old in your room writing poetry in your own blood about how the security guard at the mall is really mean to you...did you expect or even care if anyone read those poems? When you’re singing in the shower...or doing some sort of interpretive dance completely alone in your room...are you doing those things because of all the people in the future that might hear or see it? No, says Benjamin, and that’s because art is not about the audience...art at its CORE is the ultimate form of self expression. So if we’re trying to translate the full MEANING BEHIND a work of art...the

reader or beholder...shouldn't really matter at all.

Okay...so let's not consider the reader...let's just consider the text. What is actually inside of this book that we're translating? In other words, the task of the translator is to engage in this purely technical exercise of taking the contents of one thing and dumping it over into another language as perfectly as possible. But Benjamin would ask is this REALLY all that translators are doing? Take this as an example...Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture. Song about the war of 1812. Powerful song. Now imagine I take the sheet music...sit at home with an orchestra full of instruments...with enough time...playing all the notes exactly as they're written on the page...I might be able to produce a recording of the 1812 overture that is indistinguishable from the recording I'm trying to emulate. But have I recreated the extent of the MEANING behind this work of art? Something I made in the year 2021 in my condo...cannot not POSSIBLY capture the meaning behind this work of art WHEN it was created, WHERE it was created, HOW it was conveyed...the point is: no matter how PERFECTLY you reproduce the raw DATA in a work of art, no matter how PERFECTLY you translate the contents of a text...there will always be something MORE you are missing when it comes to accessing the entirety of its meaning.

Now this isn't an episode about translation theory...this is ultimately an episode about art...and it's these two major points about works of art that are gonna be massively useful for us when it comes to understanding the rest of this series. For anyone interested: the one sentence version of the task of the translator for Benjamin is that it's derived from the Tower of Babel, that in the beginning there was one language that is now many different fragmented languages and that the task is to build bridges between these different languages that share a certain kinship, always striving towards but never actually achieving that ideal of the unified language in the beginning. So much more to it. Definitely recommend reading the essay if you're interested. But again, these takeaways about art from this essay are the things that are going to help us, again, understand what he's saying by understanding what he's trying to say. We'll reference back to them as we

need them.

Now another initially confusing thing we need to understand about Benjamin's thought...is why he would be so interested... in something as random... and oddly specific... as late 19th century German literary criticism. Why would this matter to him so much?

Well in a letter to a friend Benjamin once claimed that during his time in Germany literary criticism was not a serious genre...and that if anyone ever wanted to SERIOUSLY have a future in it...they would essentially have to recreate the genre.

One thing to note right off the bat is that when we hear the words "literary criticism"...we are not just talking about criticism...of works of literature. Certainly literature is part of it...the literature of the time... affects the culture of the time. When you ask someone for examples of things that helped shape their experience of reality...often times they'll respond with some really powerful BOOKS that they've read. But in the sense that books...are collections of symbols that denote a particular meaning. Couldn't you say that the world around you is JUST AS MUCH a collection of symbols that you are constantly reading that denote meanings as well? For example they tear down a building... and they put up one that uses new technology...new doors, new windows a whole new design, instead of a single story rambler with a back yard now we have a high rise apartment building. There's fences, there's a security shed, stop signs, there's even little trash cans for people to stockpile their dog's discarded waste.

Does the introduction of this new building...this new technology...this new symbol that people are reading...does this in any way change...the experience of the people who read it? Does reading the world around us have an effect on us at the same level that reading a book does? Interesting question. One of the things Benjamin is interested in the most is how the introduction of technologies shapes the experience of people. One of the most

famous examples that he WRITES about...is the technology of photography.

For the sake of us listening to this in 2021 let's think of photography as any sort of photo depiction of reality, so it's not like video is something that's exempt from this discussion. What is the technological predecessor to the photograph? There were of course many minor inventions that can be seen as just trying to do what the photograph eventually did better than all of them. But the TRUE predecessor to the photograph when it comes to creating representations of reality...is the painting. If you wanted to look at a picture of a landscape...or a person...or even some noteworthy political event that took place like a final dinner of some sort, idk bad example. Point is if you wanted a visual representation of reality for the longest time the painting was all that you had to look at. Now, consider certain realities about the technology of the painting...they were produced one at a time, they needed to be done by somebody VERY skilled, they were expensive to produce, to see them for most of history you had to be in the exact same place that they were, and they were always produced through the lens of the interpretation of a particular artist. Someone didn't deliver a stack of paintings to your front doorstep every morning showing you what was going on around town...so for most of history your VISUAL understanding of what the world is and your place within it really came down to what you immediately SAW around you. Another thing to consider Benjamin says is that for the longest time because paintings were so expensive and time consuming to produce...it was only the rich and powerful, most of the time members of the aristocracy that could ever afford to have their likeness painted. Which means... for the common person for the longest time...they didn't have a right to own their own likeness.

But along came the photograph and all of this started to change. Benjamin says it's no coincidence that the first photographs you see are all people taking pictures of themselves, their families, their loved ones. But as we all know there is a big difference between being face to face looking at someone...and seeing a picture of someone. There's some degree of loss that occurs. I mean there's a reason people find it far more satisfying

to travel and see things than to just sit on Google images and look at pictures of landmarks. Once again there is some degree of loss there. Well what are we losing? Benjamin says that a good place to start looking is to consider the fact that as these people who were among the first to ever gaze into a camera lens to record their likeness...wonder if any of them ever noticed that the camera wasn't gazing back at them. What did he mean by that?

Remember back in the Task of the Translator when we were talking about how the raw CONTENTS of a piece of artwork are not tantamount to the entire MEANING of that piece of artwork. In the example I recreated the 1812 overture...and no matter how perfectly I photographed that work by Tchaikovsky there would always be something missing between what we could call my photo depiction and the original work. Think of the difference between being in person, witnessing and experiencing the one and only Mona Lisa...and merely seeing a picture of it. We recognize SOMETHING has been lost in the photograph...Benjamin would say what we're noticing is missing...is what he calls the "aura" of a moment or a piece of artwork. He describes the concept of aura here:

"A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour become part of their appearance— this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains or that branch."

So I don't know if any of you feel the same way and I hope I'm not sounding like a crazy person here but I'm kind of a fan of the moon...you know as a celebrity in MY life. Like have you ever looked up at the moon on one of those nights where it almost doesn't even look real...in my opinion it can be one of the most beautiful things out there...and there have been with no exaggeration AT LEAST ten times in my life I've been looking up at one of these incredible moons, almost like you can reach out and touch it and I pull out

my phone and I take a picture and I'm so excited and I go to the picture so I can send it to all the friends I don't have...and I look at it...and I'm GLAD I don't have friends because it just looks like a tennis ball floating in the sky.

There is no picture out there...that could POSSIBLY capture...the aesthetic experience of being present with that moon, in that moment in space and time. As Benjamin's describing with both the mountains and the branch in that passage, there is an immediacy to my experience of the moon, because we are subject and object co-existing at a particular moment in space and time, but on the other hand there is a distance between subject and object...and it's this distance that allows for the aesthetic experience not possible on my camera. What's true of my experience of the moon is true of works of art all throughout history...and this is something Benjamin calls the "aura" of a work of art. This is why it feels so different to see a picture of the Mona Lisa as opposed to flying to Paris and seeing the one and only Mona Lisa.

And this one and only quality has been important for experiencing art in the past...this unique experience that someone can only have if both the subject and object are existing at the same moment of space and time...but it should be said: as a technological intervention into the experience of people...this is EXACTLY what the photograph allows us not to need anymore! The whole selling point of the photograph is that we can visually capture reality and it CAN exist outside of space and time. If the aura of a moment or piece of artwork requires that distance to allow for the space needed to reflect on it aesthetically...then Benjamin would say we HAVE to consider the fact... that the key function of the photograph (or the video)...is to REDUCE that distance.

Benjamin would say that during his time the world is entering into an age where visual representations of reality aren't limited to how many paintings you can produce...basically anyone with functioning hands can point a camera, take a picture of something and then mass distribute it to everyone. Yes, this decreases that distance...it demystifies reality...people can now take as many pictures of themselves as they want.

But in the same way you'd rather travel than see pictures of landmarks...this demystified reality comes with a degree of loss.

Yeah, you don't have to fly all over the world anymore if you want to see the Mona Lisa...but with every silver lining comes a cloud...and the cloud here, to Walter Benjamin, is the destruction of the aesthetic experience of the past.

Remember when we talked about German Literary criticism? And how he's interested in figuring out how technology that is introduced into people's lives changes people's senses and experience of the world? We are living in an age...where the technology that has been introduced...has made practically everything about our lives mass reproducible. This is why he's concerned with the dead genre of literary criticism in Germany...because he actually thinks that technology has changed the experience of people SO MUCH...that the critical tools that were used in the nineteenth century to analyze culture and the world, were so outdated that they didn't even work anymore. We have technologized our way into a place... where we lack the tools necessary to even critique the world around us. It would be like trying to take a mortar and pestle and using it to grind up steel. The tools from a former era DONT WORK with our current technology and experience. We needed a new set of tools. In his words, someone needed to recreate the genre, and as we'll see throughout the series DOING this...will become a pretty considerable piece of his work.

When taking a picture people gaze into the camera but the camera doesn't return their gaze...meaning there is NOT a subject and object co existing in a moment of space and time, meaning that the photograph, reducing that distance we talked about, demystifying reality...leads to the decline of the aura. Benjamin writes about it here:

"The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense of the sameness of things has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness by means of its reproduction."

Once again, there is a difference between flying to Paris and seeing the one and only Mona Lisa and seeing a picture of the Mona Lisa that has been mass produced by technology. Just as there is a difference between looking up and witnessing the moon and seeing the tennis ball in the sky on your phone. Not only the photograph, but the technology introduced during the age of the mechanical reproduction of things has, as Walter Benjamin beautifully puts, “divested the uniqueness” of things. Consequentially what is happening is we are destroying the aura of ourselves, the world and works of art. More importantly we are changing the very definition of what a work of art is at all. Task of a translator: see we no longer need to CARE about mass producing merely the contents or raw data of a work of art...the destruction of the aura makes it so that now there's not even anything MISSING if something is mass produced, distributed and commodified. We have CHANGED the aesthetic experience altogether. We no longer need to CARE about CREATING art for the sake of the consumer on the other side...because art is no longer the ultimate form of self expression...I willfully sacrifice my OWN unique self in this era of reproducibility. Let me explain further.

Whenever we take a selfie...we are essentially turning ourselves into a PICTURE of the Mona Lisa, rather than the real thing. We mass reproduce, distribute and commodify OURSELVES. We divest OURSELVES of our OWN uniqueness and instead make our likeness into one of an infinite number of copies. Tell me, if the intervention of technology like a BUILDING can change the experience of people and the way they see themselves...what might something like THIS do? What if the critical tools of the past were incapable of seeing it?

This mass reproducibility of everything...including of our own likeness...divested of its uniqueness...Benjamin would say it is NOT a coincidence that this technology has corresponded with a rise in mass culture. Mass production, Mass transit, Mass

distribution, Mass psychology, Mass consumption, Mass communication.

But an important question Walter Benjamin would want to ask here, and something that is going to be really important once he creates this new method of criticism and starts looking at what the world has become...once again fascinated by how the introduction of new technologies affect the experiences of people...with ALL of these new forms of communication available...what happens when you can turn on the TV or the radio, and you can see or hear crowds of people gathered at a political event, or a concert, or a sports game...what happens, when for the first time in human history...the masses...can come face to face with themselves?

Thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

The Frankfurt School - Walter Benjamin pt. 2 - Distraction

Episode #153

So something important to consider about Walter Benjamin that maybe isn't as much the case with a lot of other thinkers we've covered on this show is that his work in many ways is just as relevant today as it was when he was writing it. Philosophers, obviously, always do their work within a particular historical context. This context often shades the questions they think are worth asking. So when they come up with ANSWERS to these pressing questions...as INTERESTING as their work is...as much PRACTICAL value you might be able to get from it if you study it...the world sometimes passes their work by in terms of relevance.

The work of Walter Benjamin is not this way though...because as we talked about last time...one of the main things that concerned him was this relationship between technological innovations and the sensory experience and subjectivity of people. You change the technology that surrounds them you change the person. That's what we're going to talk about today...so when he's giving examples he's going to be referencing things like film and radio and TV, probably all three things that are on their way OUT in our modern world. But the way he thought these affected the individual subject and the political subject can be just as easily applied to different technologies things like the internet, smartphones or self driving cars. When you consider the fact that new technology is introduced faster than it ever has been...and how much influence this technology has in mediating our entire relationship with reality to the point you can almost think of us as cybernetic...maybe the work of Walter Benjamin has never been more relevant than right now.

To make the case for why I want to begin by doing my best impression of completely hacky content that's out there. And here I go: I want to tell you all a story today.

We have to go all the way back...to the beginning. No, ironically it's a story about stories. Storytelling. But maybe a better way to think about it is that it's a story about the

mythology of different points in history. The unverifiable stories that people feel connected to and use to help navigate their existence.

Now it used to be that the stories and mythology were passed down generation after generation by story-tellers. These people had great memories, great performative abilities, and they would tell the stories sometimes to small crowds of people. Few important things to consider about this early age of storytelling though: one, these stories were received collectively. This was a group activity people were engaged in. Some might say team building. Another thing: these stories were told many times, sometimes to the same group of people. But an important point is that they were NOT reproducible. You could generally tell the same story, but it would not be an exact copy, there would be variations, different details, most of the time if you're a really good storyteller you base these adjustments on your audience. Point is the collective process in which people received their stories...MIRRORED the collective societies that the people were a part of. But as you know time went on, Gutenberg Press, socio-economic reality changed and Benjamin illustrates how at this point our stories, our mythology started to take form in print. We saw the rise of something called the novel. Now, reading a novel, in contrast to the oral tradition from before, is not a collective activity. People don't all gather around the same book and wait to turn the page until everyone's done. This is an individual, sitting down, reading a book. Benjamin says even the story lines of novels almost always are about an individual protagonist, conquering some sort of challenge. Not a coincidence that the novel becomes the most popular form of storytelling during the extremely individualistic, solitary lifestyle of the industrial middle class. One more important point about novels. When you have this sort of individual relationship with a story...what Benjamin thinks it starts to promote is a type of what he calls concentration or deliberation about the novel. This skill of concentration becomes an EXTREMELY important skill to have not only when gleaning wisdom from a story, but also when it comes to formulating your political viewpoints. You generally sit down, weigh all the options and deliberate until you can choose the one you like the most.

But again, the world goes on...and during the time of Benjamin what he starts to see is

the rise of mass forms of storytelling, mass forms of communication with the introduction of film and radio. Well we heard his thoughts on photography and how it can alter people's subjectivity...but when we introduce ANOTHER technology...the technology of moving images on a screen...how much of an effect is THAT going to have? Benjamin famously describes the cinema as a sort of training ground for the citizen of modernity. Let me explain what he means by this...when you go to the cinema...you are once again receiving a story or a mythology in a collective way. This isn't like the individual experience of the novel this is much more like the era of storytelling where you become part of an audience of observers and listeners. When you think of film as a work of art...there isn't ONE copy of Gone With the Wind where you need to fly across the world to see it...millions, BILLIONS of people can all view the same moving images at the same time if they wanted to. That is to say that film is LIKE the age of storytelling in that it's received collectively, but UNLIKE storytelling in that exact copies of the story are now mass reproducible.

Wanna pause for just two seconds and say that a really important thing to remember here is that in this NEW age of the mass reproducibility of art...Benjamin thinks that this changes several key premises about art that the artist always has to have in the back of their minds now if they want to survive within a capitalist society...which in turn changes what art is altogether. So an example of this would be...within a capitalist society if you're going to mass reproduce a piece of your artwork... you always have to in some capacity consider profit as an end goal. Which in turn leads you to consider the greatest number of reproductions for the lowest cost. Which in turn...leads you to consider not just art for the sake of the merit of the art alone...now you have to consider what sort of art is going to be the most reproducible, distributable and sellable. When the relationship between the observer and the artist becomes filtered by making art into a commodity...there are real consequences for both parties and we're going to see these present themselves in this new era of moving pictures on a screen. But first a couple more things about the sensory experience of film this was important to Benjamin:

Benjamin compares something like a painting to something like a film. When you look at

a painting...the image is standing still...there is time to observe, concentrate, deliberate, to have that individual moment of aesthetic reflection. But with a film, the images and sounds are coming at you so rapidly...things are changing so quickly...there's never any point where you can have a reflective moment because by the time you start on one it's already moved on to a completely DIFFERENT set of moving pictures. The result of this is that the default state of subjectivity when you're consuming artful stories made up of moving images and sounds on a regular basis...but also when consuming many OTHER forms of art in this age of mechanical reproduction...the default state is for a person to absorb the art in a constant state of distraction. Two different modes of thought: we have concentration on one hand...and distraction on the other. Benjamin describes the difference between concentration and distraction here:

Distraction and concentration form polar opposites which may be stated as follows: A man who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it. He enters into this work of art the way legend tells of the Chinese painter when he viewed his finished painting. In contrast, the distracted mass absorbs the work of art. This is most obvious with regard to buildings. Architecture has always represented the prototype of a work of art the reception of which is consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction. The laws of its reception are most instructive.

So again this is going to be a really important distinction that Benjamin makes about different ways to experience art: someone who concentrates on a work of art is absorbed by it...whereas a distracted mass of people ABSORB the work of art. So as a point of comparison think about someone experiencing art during the era of the novel ...when concentration and deliberation were really important modes of thought: A person sees a painting, for example. They stare at it. They dissect it. They're in a contemplative state where their entire aesthetic experience is rooted in a type of focus ON the painting.

Benjamin says in this way they are ABSORBED by the work of art. But don't mistake him for being somebody that is saying that this is way better than being distracted all the time and that we need to return BACK to doing things this way. He actually talks at one point about how this art that requires us to be ABSORBED into it to have an aesthetic

experience is kind of an aggressive move by the artist if you think about it. The artist is essentially holding the aesthetic experience hostage...they're basically saying that if you don't surrender to me your undivided attention and a million dollars in unmarked bills...you're not going to get ANYTHING from me.

But in our modern world...with the new technology that has been introduced...concentration and deliberation have become outdated modes of thought. Being able to concentrate is just not as useful of a SKILL in the metropolitan societies we live in today...and this not only LEADS to the crisis of the novel as Benjamin puts it...you know, people are no longer able to relate as much to this TYPE of art to get their mythology...but it also leads to the strategy that is more USEFUL in today's world...which is of course to live your life in a constant state of distraction. Let me give an example of what he's talking about:

Think of life in a modern metropolitan city. You are constantly being bombarded by fleeting images, sounds, smells, textures...look, you may be walking down the street and you see a flashing ad on a screen for a bottle of shampoo...you're interrupted by the sound of a car horn honking...but then someone tries to hand you their mix tape because they're trying to get their music off the ground...then someone walks past you talking to themselves and you mistake them for talking to you...but then you pass a restaurant and smell the food and look at their logo to see the name, but then someone shoulder checks you because you're in the way.

So on the off chance you're not a monk wearing an orange onesie all the time...for the average person...trying to concentrate or deliberate on the experience that you're having in modern metropolitan life not only would be overwhelming but downright impossible. The modern subject exists in a state of distraction because they have to or else they won't get anything done at all. Think of distraction by the way not ONLY as your visual senses being fragmented interrupted, your eyes moving from one thing to the next. Benjamin would say this is not the ONLY way we pay attention with our senses. He says you could JUST as easily BE in a state of distraction because you are constantly getting fleeting inputs across a multi-sensory landscape.

This is important because he's going to say that during the era of the novel things were way over-indexed in terms of the visual components of things. Sight became this monolith of our experience. People would sit down in a quiet, calm place so they wouldn't get too distracted...so that they could concentrate on what they were reading. When you go into an art gallery...you probably don't expect to see a mud wrestling tournament going on in the lobby...and that's for good reason. Visual things are important...But there are things you just cannot communicate through the single sensory communication of writing that you can ONLY communicate in a multi-sensory way, as the storytellers of the past well understood.

The constant sensory bombardment and lack of stillness of modern life REQUIRES a DIFFERENT mode of thought to be able to absorb it properly. Once again, the world no longer absorbs us into it...we absorb the world as members of the distracted masses...and film and videos...serve as the ultimate training ground... for someone who has to live immersed in this distracted reality while still needing to passively absorb meaning as they go about their life. So in the same way the salons and cafes in Europe earlier in history would train the political subject through reading, discussions and debates, the cinema becomes the training ground for the modern subject.

This is what he's referencing when he talks about architecture which he ALSO considered a form of mass media. Sure, you could theoretically stop, look at a building, over-index on the visual and really take it in for the work of art that it is. But Benjamin points out we are NOT tourists! Because in our cities, when going about our daily lives, do we stop and view everything visually and start to freak out about it? Oh...this airport bathroom tile is so, so amazing guys you HAVE to see it! Come in here! Quick No, we don't. How could you possibly do that? You'd be like Bob Ross with a smartphone...if Bob Ross never had anything to accomplish with his day. We couldn't possibly do that, which is why our aesthetic experience is realized in the mode of distraction, by absorbing bits and pieces through our use or perception of the world.

Distracted masses of people within a capitalist society are not getting their mythology

from deliberative concentration about things...they usually appropriate things based on habits that they form, usually without ever even realizing that they're FORMING those habits or why.

He says:

“Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction first proves that their performance has become habitual.

The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception.”

By living in a state of distraction, we appropriate the world in many cases based on the habits that we happen to form. One of the main ways we appropriate the world around us is by having a particular world view. Benjamin is clearly very concerned with these new possibilities of delivering what he saw as bourgeois ideology to the masses through the medium of moving pictures...most prevalent during his time, in the realm of the cinema. Don't get him wrong! Especially in comparison to his counterparts in the Frankfurt School he's actually very optimistic about this new technology and its ability to have emancipatory potential for the masses...he just doesn't think it's being used for the purpose. Again, you combine passive spectatorship with film and video's ability to promote a story or mythology that is in line with a particular political ideology...this is a far cry from the storyteller passing down wisdom from other generations...this is far from the novel from the age of concentration...this is a mass reproducible delivery system that keeps people distracted and absorbing a story that could at best pacify their discontent with their place within society...and at worst render people foot soldiers in the regime of a mass murderer.

Not to mention when you combine all this with capitalism...you have to also consider the filter always present between the film and the spectators...that the film NEEDS to be funded by someone. And Benjamin wants us to always keep in mind...that the very people that serve to benefit from keeping the masses distracted, absorbing an ideology that keeps things the way they are...just happen to be the very people that have the capital resources to be able to pick and choose which films to fund at all...or videos to

produce. All of this segues pretty well into his next big point: that the combination of this new sensory disposition of the subject, that we're distracted all the time, plus the new role of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, plus the introduction of new mass communication technologies...all of this creates a sort of fertile soil that seems to inevitably lead...to fascism.

See art throughout history has typically been connected to some sort of religious underpinning or ceremony or tradition. Once again, the ROLE of art was NOT to be mass reproduced and sold. But now that it is...yet again Benjamin is going to say this comes with both some good and some bad. The good...is that now the MEANING of a work of art can take on any shape you want it to. Ultimately the distracted masses are the critics in this new world, so now so more than ever...what the art means to YOU...actually matters. But once again: every silver lining has a cloud...and the cloud here is that now art...in the sense that it can be appropriated in any way we want now and that it is now mass reproduced: art has moved from what Benjamin refers to as the cult work of art to the exhibitionist work of art. Art in our new world is created primarily to be displayed...and whenever you display a piece of artwork...that makes it take on the form of being intrinsically political.

Put another way the technology being introduced during this time has made it possible to politicize and mass distribute art in a way that has never been done before. So if you're an aspiring fascist leader...this becomes an incredible weapon in your arsenal in this age of the distracted masses. Because back in the age of the novel...the political subject relied on concentration and deliberation to make their political decisions as well. They would find a good quiet place to think, consider all the options, deliberate about which the best one is, tell their local representative and then reflect on their decision.

Benjamin thought we are no longer in the era of deliberative politics. More than that...representative democracy was in crisis and seemed like it was on its way out if for no other reason than how people in power are now able to communicate directly to the masses themselves.

The relationship between the political subject and the president or ruler used to be

mediated by representatives in a representative democracy. Now it is mediated by technology...as is our entire experience with reality and what's even going on in the world. The representatives still exist...they still show up to work and go to some parliamentary meetings...but to Benjamin these representatives have become spectators almost like the audience at a cinema. They are quickly becoming an obsolete part of the political process. In other words the decline of the Aura even extends to our political leaders...leaders can now put their voice on a radio or their face on a screen and directly communicate with masses of political subjects. Works of art, propaganda, films, radio programs, books, videos, songs...can now be mass reproduced and distributed TO those masses. These masses...through images on a screen...through photographs from above can now come face to face with themselves. They can see themselves as a collective subject. At this point identifying yourself as one of the masses becomes easy. Consider the fact that as the masses come face to face with themselves...as people see the masses depicted in a particular light...could those images be producing the subjectivity of the masses themselves? Now if this were true, which Benjamin thought it was...then the implications of that are that we are essentially just living in a completely mass produced existence. Not only all the obvious reproduction of material goods and art and basically every way you can express yourself as a supposed individual...but we're even now mass reproducing people.

Benjamin at one point talks about how just think about the fact...that things like film and TV and video lend themselves so much to political theater...or political spectacle and propaganda. When you're shooting a video of any variety and you point a camera at a scene you want to capture...there is only ONE perspective from which that scene gets delivered in that way. Shot from another angle you would see all the cameras, the sound people, the strings attached to the performers that allow them to fly. You'd see not the image that has been DESIGNED for you to see...but the world through a wider lens. Now imagine if there was a direct line of communication between the people in ultimate positions of power through an online medium that only allows you to get your point across in 280 characters. Just imagine a TWEET has to encapsulate your thoughts on a

matter. What's funny is that people do it all the time essentially conceding to the point that there is zero nuance to whatever issue they're commenting on. Can you really communicate ANYTHING other than ideology in 280 characters? So doesn't the platform itself filter out nuanced points of view by default? When the only things that can ever get upvoted and shared are things you can write down on a fortune cookie...is that really the way we want people in positions of power to deliver messages to the political subject? Especially considering the distracted masses NEED easy to grasp messages to absorb anyway?

Benjamin says this in one of his most famous passages:

"Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses — but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to change property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged."

Technology mediates everything that we do. Today we mostly exist in a digital ontology that we use to make sense of the physical ontology we actually live in. More so than ever one of Benjamin's greatest points starts to come abundantly clear: that as time goes on...the communicability of our experience seems to become more and more difficult for us.

Now we're going to talk about this concept more, but in a very general sense it's interesting to think about one of Benjamin's examples here. He says that when soldiers went away in WW1 and came home...you'd expect them to return with all sorts of stories about what their life had been like during the conflict. But he says what you typically see, because of the new, sometimes brutal technology that mediated their experience there...what you see are people that clearly have a lot to say, but have a really hard time communicating any of it. There's always a pause. There's always a searching for the right turn of phrase to put someone in their experience who wasn't there. Well what if the technology that progressively mediates the life of a civilian has a similar effect? How alienating would it be to have a host of experiences that you'd like nothing more than to

share with the people you love and care about...but that language and communication has atrophied to such an extent...that it will always be impossible for you to actually tell them about it.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Pragmatism and Truth

Episode #154

So if you've listened to this show before you probably know that the late 19th early 20th century marks a period in western thought where thinkers are grappling with a new set of problems surrounding the concept of certainty. Think about that...for thousands of years...picture the Athenian agora. Socrates wakes up every day...wraps a table cloth around himself, marches out into the middle of town and argues with people all day long trying to get just a little bit closer to certainty or truth. Descartes... toils away in solitude trying to figure out what we can know for certain...the only one left to tell about his findings was his good pal wilson the stove. Hegel creates one of the most elaborate systems EVER trying to get to the truth...and shortly after many thinkers started to become downright pessimistic about this entire pursuit...about every thinker so far when it comes to whether or not they're actually doing ANYTHING that is actually getting us any closer to certainty.

And while these thinkers couldn't be certain that we weren't arriving at certainty, it certainly seemed that way. So what followed was a rigorous critique of the way things had typically been done...and several different paths forward emerged and we can delineate these different approaches to solving the problem into different groups. So one group of people...you could say they thought we just weren't trying hard enough...the problem wasn't that certainty is inaccessible...it was in our methodologies. Think the logical positivists...think many of the Phenomenologists...the problem lies in the TACTICS of the past not in the project itself. Another group of people went the other way...maybe we'll never be able to ultimately verify the integrity of our philosophy...but it is still undeniably useful or necessary. Sometimes people talk about these two groups RESPONDING to this issue as one of the major forks in the road at the beginning of what would become the continental and analytical divide in the 20th century. But a school of thought emerged when trying to find some sort of middle ground between these two

different types of thinkers. Thinkers like Charles Sanders Peirce...William James...these guys and people like them would later go on to become known as the Pragmatists. But something interesting I want to consider here at the start is that we should ALL remember...is that none of these thinkers set out THINKING of themselves as pragmatists. To them, they were among, again, many other thinkers that were looking into this problem of certainty...they were all undergoing a radical critique of the past...they just arrived at a unique end point. Now to get to this end point here today...I want to put ourselves in the shoes of someone like Charles Sanders Peirce and to do that let's just establish for sake of the episode that we're continuing on from here with the assumption that maybe the ways of doing things in the past has been fundamentally flawed. Certainty is impossible to ever have access to.

Now that we've established terms a bit, let's think about it from the perspective of someone during this time....so IF certainty is impossible...then our concept of truth within human affairs cannot be directly connected to certainty. Yet... we say things are true and we say things are false all the time. One of the questions that would have concerned Peirce and William James would be if that is true...then what have we humans REALLY been up to for thousands of years?

Well a couple things we do know. One, certainty has generally been the ideal to strive towards when it comes to the validity of an idea. We think we know things, new information emerges, and an idea is more "true" if it seems to correspond with reality in a more accurate way than the old idea. Philosophers have spent LIFETIMES creating ideas that can stake a claim to certainty. All throughout the history of thought you can see several times they think they did the job. So if you're Charles Peirce or William James and you're trying to figure out what we've actually been up to...maybe a good place to start would be to look at a few of these attempts by thinkers where they thought they got it right. Because if you're a pragmatist you are highly skeptical of this imperative towards certainty altogether. Why is being CERTAIN about things so important anyway? Three big attempts at certainty they're going to reject are solipsism, the correspondence theory of truth, and foundationalism...and they're going to get to the bottom of the

presuppositions we've been making about truth that led to these mistakes in thought. So let's start with solipsism. The solipsism bumper sticker would read I think therefore I am. You know, the tradition of Descartes and John Locke. Remember Descartes' point when he says that...the only reason he's thinking about his individual consciousness at all is because he's trying to find SOMETHING we can be ABSOLUTELY certain about. He stakes a claim to certainty... by saying well the very fact that I'm thinking means I must certainly be a thinking thing. Maybe we can't know ANYTHING else for certain outside of that...knowledge of the world may ALWAYS be fallible...but it is impossible to deny that I am having thoughts. Descartes of course built things he thought were certain on top of that, but we can see the machinery he's trying to use to GROUND knowledge of things in certainty. So it seemed like Descartes had done it. Certainty had been achieved and balance had been restored to the universe.

But it didn't take long for thinkers to find flaws in his reasoning. And people like Peirce and James would be the beneficiaries of that critique. In fact, to them...not only had Descartes NOT arrived at certainty...he succeeded in getting many thinkers after him on this delusional QUEST for certainty completely over-indexed on the importance of the individual consciousness. First of all, they would say...we have NO reason to assume that anything I claim to know about my consciousness is any more reliable than my knowledge of the outside world. So if we can't ever have complete certainty about the outside world...we can't ever have certainty of the internal world. We are always INFERRING things about our individual consciousness...which is to say it is always inferential. One thing to make clear here is that the brain for someone like William James is FAR too complex to ever understand fully, let alone consciousness. How can we ever use it to stake a claim to certainty and still be responsible thinkers?

So this led to another strategy by thinkers. They said, ok maybe it is true that consciousness is inferential...which means that we experience things and often infer things about them in order to make sense of them. We plug them into this inference framework that gives them meaning to us. Okay. What if as a SOLUTION to that we tried to just look at the raw, base experience before any sort of inference has been made at all?

I mean if we are self aware of the fact that we are MAKING these inferences about things...then hypothetically couldn't we spot them when we see them? Lot of thinkers tried their hand at figuring out a way to do this, but when you're Peirce and James and you're looking for the presupposition that deceived all these people...it would be this belief...that they believed that we can actually gain access to some deep, fundamental level of experience that exists independent of these inferences of the mind perceiving them. But Peirce rejects this idea completely. See to him it is impossible to use thought to access an object... WITHOUT making these inferences. The inferences are the mediator...they are the necessary bridge between thought and objects in reality. In a way, for peirce...cognition itself REQUIRES inferences about objects to even get off the ground at all.

So if you're really sitting around saying, "Im gonna be a philosopher today and solve some problems of the universe, today...I'm gonna get rid of human judgements...I'm gonna create a system that just removes all judgments, inferences, relations, every cognitive faculty I have...and then im just gonna sit here in my front room naked and just let the photons wash over me..." if you really believe that Peirce might think...well he'd probably think you need to get a new hobby...maybe quilting or something...but he'd ALSO say that all you've really succeeded in doing there is to create a new set of inferences. There is no essence to a thing if you're a pragmatist...to understand something is not to access some foundational essence rooted in the universe...to understand something is to know all of the ways that thing has consequences on behavior or human action.

So here's the big point! Once again we evoke the concept of truth all the time and CLEARLY certainty is NOT what we're getting at...then what is the meaning of truth? What really makes something true or false?

Pragmatists are going to lean heavily towards something called the "convergence theory of truth" or the idea...that something is deemed to be true...because take any issue you want to know the truth or falsehood of...the truth is the conclusion that all the people looking into it will CONVERGE upon given enough time. The GROUP of people

rationally trying to get rid of false ideas and converge upon true ones...THAT is the true determiner of what is true. This convergence of minds and inferences is ALL the we have to determine what we call truth..and more than that it's all we've EVER had. We just THOUGHT we were trying to access certainty...but this is a social process. For Peirce the MEANING of your actions isn't located up in your brain somewhere, but in your public acts. Actions speak louder than thoughts I guess.

So in this way truth is a tool, not some piece of reality that we're uncovering. For William James a true statement is going to be one where when you believe in it... or act as though it is true...there are good results. So for example say you believed that cars don't really exist. The truth about cars is that they are just figments of your imagination...hallucinations that can be ignored. For William James this is false...not because we ran an experiment that proves it to be otherwise beyond a shadow of a doubt...not because he began from some foundational place like descartes and built a system that proves it otherwise...but simply because when you actually play the tape out on that belief...the first time you test the truth of that and moonwalk into the middle of the intersection grandma beatrice is going to have a new hood ornament. And for William James turns out that hood ornament was wrong.

This is why societies tend to gravitate towards trying to make decisions that move us AWAY from false ideas and towards true ones. The true ideas are determined by which ones are producing the most favorable outcomes...of COURSE we'd gravitate towards them. See once again social action is the place where we find meaning. Not in some individual consciousness...again Descartes and Locke wanted to make that the foundation of where we can get to true statements...but to the early pragmatists that individual consciousness and all of the inferences it makes are social products. Meaning is to be understood through action. Now.

This action is an important part of this whole scheme. See for James as we develop as people...we mature towards a greater and greater level of intentionality in our actions. Another way to put that would be to say at that lowest level of development...we're just a collection of instincts, but once again as we mature as people we develop increasingly

powerful levels of free will.

Free will is going to be an important concept for James...and what is even more interesting is how he thinks the way we THINK about free will will be largely shaded by our overall personality.

So I believe on the episode we did on William James earlier in the podcast I talked briefly about his concept of categorizing people in terms of them being either healthy minded or sick souls. Wanted to go more in depth on that today...and while TALKING about these different ways of orienting yourself with the world...maybe notice the parallels to the two different ways philosophers oriented themselves in the continental analytic divide we referenced earlier. When talking about writers he read during his early life he describes it like this:

"One can but recognize in such writers as these the presence of a temperament organically weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger, as those of opposite temperament linger, over the darker aspects of the universe."

People "weighted on the side of cheer" as he said are the "healthy minded". He talks about these people at one point as though they were born with a bottle of champagne with their name on it. These are people that value "courage, hope, and trust...and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry and all nervously precautionary states of mind." So basically they wouldn't like your boy Steve. But the other approach is that of the "sick souls"...and try not to infer any sort of negative connotation that comes with the word "sick" as though William James is trying to say those people are weak, or flawed in any way. He thinks some of the greatest people ever have been of this "sick" predisposition...it's not any worse than the healthy minded approach. He just uses the word "sick" to denote a malaise that comes with an awareness of the evil present in the world...and an unwillingness to ignore it. The healthy minded person says well of course there is evil in the world...but I'm going to focus on, preserve and generate all the GOOD there is out there. Positive thinking. The sick soul says you can't just buy a self help book that tells you the power of positive thinking, ignore the very real twisting knife in the side of the world and feel good about yourself. The healthy minded say in a world where you

can choose to focus on anything...why not focus on the good rather than ruminate on all the negative? The sick soul says in a world where you can focus on anything...the good will take care of itself...the issues that warrant our attention are the ones where there are problems for us to solve.

James says:

"...we can see how great an antagonism may naturally arise between the healthy-minded way of viewing life and the way that takes all this experience of evil as something essential. To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. To the healthy-minded way, on the other hand, the way of the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased. With their grubbing in rat-holes instead of living in the light; with their manufacture of fears, and preoccupation with every unwholesome kind of misery, there is something almost obscene about these children of wrath and cravers of a second birth...

These two approaches clearly are not a binary opposition. They exist as poles on either side of a massive spectrum. People fall all over this spectrum but may tend to gravitate towards one side or the other. But the good news is that there's mobility across this spectrum. James says for anyone that finds themselves, say, on the sick soul side of things and wants to change it about themselves...there is hope! He believed you definitely COULD change the way you orient yourself...the same way the positive thinker has to be vigilant and make sure they act with intentionality towards the optimistic, the idealistic, the monism of their life...or else they might find themselves slipping across the spectrum a bit...so too can the pessimist direct the intentions of their actions and change as well.

"[W]hat are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one's attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of

its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one's self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth..."

His larger point overall here is that he's giving a Pragmatist take on the variety of ways people have religious experiences. To him, he's not just talking about major religions like Islam or Christianity...those are great and all...but what they are at their core are attempts at codifying a very real religious experience that human beings have in relation to whatever they think is divine...human beings have these religious experiences, these major religions are attempts at explaining this phenomenon...and to be clear...sure you could have that religious experience where you feel deeply connected next to an almighty creator, fine...but James wants to point out how you could JUST as easily have that experience about skateboarding...or the love of your life... And he thinks whether you look at these experiences through the healthy minded or sick soul lens will DRASTICALLY impact what sorts of religious interpretations you prefer. He says this towards the end of that same work, for the record it is *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 1902:

"The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed. Buddhism, of course, and Christianity are the best known to us of these. They are essentially religions of deliverance: the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life."

Now, think about the fact that BOTH of these different ways of orienting yourself with reality IMPLY the possibility of action. This instantly inspires a follow up conversation about free will and determinism. Where do the pragmatists generally land on that issue? Well it's complicated and varied, but James makes a REALLY interesting point in the conversation. Pragmatism, once again, generally is going to look for a middle path between the two options or some version of compatibilism.

He says consider this: when you look at the entire history of the world...that history can be explained by BOTH determinism and free will. You could believe that through intentionality we have created our history...that trillions of decision points have interacted to create a confluence of events that has led to this moment. You could ALSO believe that a completely predictable, complex process of trillions of sensations has played out and that we are the marionettes doing the heavy lifting. Both theories can account for the past. BUT William James says...when looking into the future...your belief about whether you have free will or not is EVERYTHING.

You ever hear someone that hears about determinism for the first time and their response is to get depressed and say, “oh well then I guess that means I don’t have any control over my actions anyway! Guess I won’t even try anymore about the things I’m passionate about!!” Well, first of all that’s not at all what determinism is saying. Second of all William James is advocating for a belief in compatibilism...some middle ground between these extreme positions. In order to take action on anything...or responsibility for yourself in any way...you need to believe in at least a degree of free will or autonomy. Certainly helps moving into the future if you don’t hold the belief that everything you do is out of your control...and if we can’t have certainty ANYWAY about how things unfold...then pragmatically...it makes SENSE to believe in intentionality.

Just think about that. Think of how our beliefs about what possibilities we have in life...when truth is connected to the ideas that yield favorable outcomes for us...think about how much believing that you have no control over anything...tied to the back of the cart by your hands being pulled in one direction...think of how much what we believe about free will determines the quality of our lives. Think about being in THAT place...believing you have no responsibility for your future actions is a FAVORABLE outcome for that person. Really makes you start to think...WHY is that such a favorable outcome to that person?

The best way I’ve heard it described was something like this: imagine you’re being chased by a bear...you’re running and you come to edge of a cliff where there’s like a six foot gap

between you and safety on the other side. You have to try to jump. Can you make the jump there? What William James is saying is that forget whether you can or can't...consider for a second...that if you believe the TRUTH is that you will NEVER make it...then you will never even TRY to jump and get eaten by the bear. But if you believe there's at least a possibility you CAN...and then you jump and the favorable outcome...the TRUTH...was that you actually CAN make the jump...consider this: the truth never could have been realized without you BELIEVING it was possible. In this way...in a world where the truth about things is often thought of as us uncovering something latent in the cosmos...inquiring about the way that things are...what we think is possible has a HUGE impact on what the truth ends up being. A scientist that believes a hypothesis is impossible will never run the experiment. And in the case of the person that believes it's out of their control on a deterministic roller coaster...imagine being a scientist that refuses to run an experiment and sees that as a favorable outcome. William James said that the first act of free will is to admit that your will is free. Thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

Emil Cioran pt. 1 - Absurdity and Nothingness

Episode #155

So, I wanted to begin today by giving a bit of a disclaimer about the thinker we're about to cover. Emil Cioran—born in Romania, 1911, most of the time categorized as one of the great existentialists of the 20th century. And as an existentialist, not a surprise he's not going to spend a lot of his time talking about things like metaphysics, building elaborate systems, talking about epistemology, aesthetics. No, in fact, even more so than other existentialists out there, he actually thought all these things were mostly a waste of time. What Cioran wants to talk about is existence, the human condition, more specifically, the dark, inconveniently ugly aspects of existence that society often tells us to sweep under the rug, but nonetheless you find yourself sitting there on the couch after work on a Tuesday in your front room and at some level you know that those things are still there, under the rug hidden, but always still present.

Because of this, we have to talk about some pretty dark stuff this episode. Not a surprise, but his fascination with this protected class of dark topics is going to cause a lot of people to label him a pessimist. And he no doubt was in some respects. But the point of this disclaimer at the top of the show is to let you know that, yes, 95% of you are going to disagree with the way he thinks about the human condition. But just know that my ambition as someone trying to present his ideas is that by the end of this, hopefully what I can get across is that despite what might seem on the surface like a very dark, pessimistic outlook, beneath the surface, Emil Cioran might be one of the most optimistic thinkers I've ever had the pleasure of studying.

I guess the best thing I can say to prime us for talking about Cioran's work is that it's far from depressing. You know, sometimes when you have a problem in life, you want somebody to come in and give you advice and fix the problem, so it'll go away. You want a philosopher like Plato to come in and give you an answer for how to live with more wisdom. But sometimes when you face problems that you just have to endure and deal

with, problems that clearly aren't going away anytime soon, sometimes you don't want someone to fix it. Sometimes you just want someone to listen, someone who's been there before that can relate to you. That is, in my reading, the essence of Cioran's work. He makes you feel a little less alone in these inevitable darker aspects of the human condition, and he makes you feel if only for a minute that you don't have to hide them for the sake of being polite.

Maybe the best way to give some perspective as to how unique of a thinker he is is to talk about a group that to history became known as the Gnostics. The basic idea is this: the world is flawed in a lot of different ways. In a religious context, this might be described in terms of the world certainly not being heaven or paradise, right? In philosophy, the world is but an earthly shadow of the world of forms. Tons of examples. You get what I mean. So, if the world being flawed is a common concept within human thought, different groups throughout history have tried to come up with theories as to why this would be the case. The Gnostics believed that the world is messed up in a lot of ways because it was created in a messed-up way.

God, however you want to envision it, could have created the world however it wanted to. It chose to create a world where we have to, for example, consume life to live. It created a world where there are blizzards and volcanoes and hurricanes and everything else that causes hardship. It created a world where suffering is a crucial part of the process. It created a world with clamshell packaging. That's just—only a malicious God would ever create clamshell packaging. And to the Gnostics, only a malicious God would create a world where we could recognize and be aware of the suffering required of existence all the time.

Now, it's because of this suffering that the Gnostics would arrive at a position which is much more commonly thought of in today's language as anti-natalism, which in one pronounced form is practiced by refusing to have children or even practice making them out of an extreme aversion to knowingly bringing any more unnecessary suffering into this world. Now, enter Emil Cioran for a second. He once said that we all flee the tragedy of our birth, the reality of being cast into an absurd, meaningless world against our will.

But as if that wasn't bad enough, on top of all that, we are consciously aware of that reality. He said, "Better to be an animal than a man, an insect than an animal, a plant than an insect, and so on. Salvation? Whatever diminishes the kingdom of consciousness and compromises its supremacy."

But here's the thing. Ciaron would ultimately even reject the Gnostics and the anti-natalists for many reasons, but one of the more telling ones is the simple fact that they even tried to systematize their conclusions. He rejected previous attempts by philosophers to try to neatly package things together like that. He actually rejected a lot of ways people have been doing things. He even rejected traditional formats in literature. He wrote in fragments in his work in this aphoristic style that's impossible to nail down. To put it bluntly, I guess, as he often did, you don't have to have some codified, official description of reality to realize that we are failed projects as people. Humanity itself is a failed project. Pray to whatever God you want, but to Emil Ciaron, whoever or whatever that God is, one thing's for certain, it kind of messed up on this particular project. Now, from here, not going to be a shocker to many of you, but Ciaron arrives at the conclusion that maybe, ultimately, everything is meaningless. And starting our discussion from this place, here's the point he might make here to start. It's that when you consider the utter meaninglessness of life, the sheer absurdity of existence, the suffering endured on massive scales daily simply for the sake of subsistence, how can anyone say that this is a beautiful creation? Now, you could make the argument, oh, well, it's beautiful in its own flawed way. How can we pigeon-hole the definition of beauty like that? But his point is this, what omniscient, omnipotent deity makes this as an art project? I mean, to Ciaron, this is the equivalent of when a preschooler glues a macaroni smiley face to construction paper. And of course, he's not actually considering the possibility of there being a God responsible for all this. He's just laughing at the absurdity of it from that specific perspective, which he did a lot in his work, by the way. See, Ciaron thought that—let's say you do believe in some creative force behind the universe. If you really were dedicated to whatever God you think is up there planning all this, you sometimes have to be prepared to live without all the promises and safeguards

that your God has to offer you. And he says that when you take a second and just listen, when you take a second to stop groveling at God's feet asking for security, when you stop asking for answers, what you hear is what he calls the one true only reality: silence. What do we hear when we "let ideas be declared void; beliefs, trifles; art a lie; and philosophy, a joke?" When we stop trying to rationalize and make sense of the world around us with religions or philosophy or any other method, we instantly come into contact with the reality of the universe: silence.

He said, "For animals, life is all there is; for man, life is a question mark. An irreversible question mark, for man has never found, nor will ever find, any answers. Life not only has no meaning; it can never have one." Now, to 95% of you out there, so far this may just sound like the ramblings of an angry dude that just doesn't have the depth of character to have found a way to connect with the universe or people yet. But the thing that makes Cioran so interesting is the direction he's going to take all this.

Let me start here. Look, there are very real, tragic, painful elements of human existence that we all experience at some point in our lives. That is to say that there are things about life that just plain suck sometimes. Practically everyone listening to this at some point has experienced some level of despair, depression, melancholy, failure. We've all made missteps in life that have cost us big opportunities. We've all had our hearts broken. You name it. And yet, how interesting, Cioran would say, that all of these and many more fall into this sort of privileged class that we have of dark topics, a set of real experiences that we all seem to be having that we're not supposed to really talk about.

For most, life consists of constantly curating an image where you aren't feeling any of these things. We're supposed to be smiling in every picture. We're supposed to be happy about exactly where we are in life and excited about our future. But this image many of us project is not the reality of our internal experience. There's a sense in which we're just supposed to keep certain feelings inside and not talk about them. Because when a friend comes up to us and they tell us that they're feeling depressed about the meaninglessness of life or when they say they're feeling despair about the lack of control they ultimately have over things, how interesting, Cioran would say, that we often meet that person with

a look of concern. That's the default. We may try to fix them as though they're broken or something, broken for acknowledging reality on reality's terms.

But Cioran would say, why does it have to be this way? His point isn't that we shouldn't try to help our friends if they're feeling bad. I mean, of course you should, if that's what you want to do. His point is more that these negative internal experiences are a part of the human condition sometimes. Shouldn't we be able to talk about reality? And why is it something that makes us so uncomfortable when people do? I mean, take any other aspect of reality. $1+1 = 2$. When your first-grade teacher talked about that aspect of reality, were you sad? Were you concerned? Was that the forbidden equation or something? No, of course not. So, why these parts of experience in particular? Why the taboo?

To Cioran, the answer is simply because talking about them makes us feel uncomfortable. This point that he makes reminds me a bit of Heidegger's point in his concept of being unto death. Heidegger makes the point that many people spend their lives doing anything they can to not consider the absolute, total reality that one day they're going to have to die. We even structure our societies around the denial of that reality. We hide death and disease and illness away in these cordoned-off, distant facilities so that we never have to really look at it: cemeteries, hospitals, retirement homes. And no matter how uncomfortable it may make us to acknowledge this reality every day, ultimately, if we lived with a constant awareness of death, our lives would be lived in a much higher resolution. Well, so too with Cioran. These darker moments of our experience make us extremely uncomfortable. And by not vocalizing the way we feel and by making people feel damaged or broken when they do, it helps us in our quest to do what most people do in this life in his eyes, to live in a constant state of denial.

Now, although there are more, three primary strategies people use to try to get rid of these bad feelings. The first one is that through various methods they try to just reason these feelings away. This is probably the most common method that has been used historically. This could be a religion. This could be a philosopher and their ideas. This could be a self-help book. This could be one of those weekend motivational seminars

where everyone suddenly thinks it's a good idea to jump around, wave their arms like one of those two people outside the carwash. I mean, to Cioran, it doesn't matter what it is. This is anything where we come up with some sort of narrative that aims to get away from these feelings.

By the way, this is one of the things that makes Cioran such an interesting philosopher. He doesn't even like philosophy. And he saw all of these attempts by thinkers to create these rationalizations for these feelings as a waste of time. This, no doubt, won't be a surprise to many of you. Knowing that he's doing his work in the early to mid-20th century, coming out of the Enlightenment, reason is not exactly everyone's go-to when it comes to solving the problems we face as people. I mean, conclusions about biology and psychology are being highly scrutinized as are many of the other sciences. Language and its instability is under attack. Relativism, nihilism, historicism—these are becoming the primary ways we direct our morality, not something some dude happened to reason to in his basement one day.

Cioran's point is that when you try to reason away these feelings of dread and melancholy about existence, all you are really doing is being intellectually dishonest. You don't like how uncomfortable these feelings are, so you try to find some rationalization about life that allows you to feel more optimistic. But what you are simultaneously doing there, he says, is chaining yourself to a doctrine of false hope about higher things. Now, again, at surface level, this may sound like he's trying to be a downer. And someone might come away from that point with an attitude like, "Well, then, what's the point in doing anything?" But at a deeper level, what Cioran is saying here is just think of how many possibilities are made impossible to you by chaining yourself to some optimism cult.

When you don't have any chains and you accept the aimlessness of things, the flipside of that is that now you can go anywhere. When you accept the dangers of the Savanna, for example, you don't have to stay crammed inside of that armored car on the road watching things from a distance. But just like any great attraction that's worth seeing, it comes with a cost. And the cost of this type of existence is melancholy, dread, and all the

rest of the feelings that come with intellectual honesty.

The second way Cioran thinks we try to get rid of the feelings is to distract ourselves away from them. This is a really common one in today's day and age because we have so many tools that help us do it so effectively. Netflix, social media, video games, things that get you intoxicated, fantasy novels—there's no shortage of things to distract you away from these feelings if that's what you choose to do. But Cioran would say that if you choose to ignore these feelings, you do so at your own peril. Because here's the thing, you can't be on a constant IV drip of Netflix your entire life. These feelings of dread and melancholy—they're coming.

And it doesn't matter how comfortable you've been or how long it's been since you've experienced failure or tragedy, life will eventually throw something your way. And when it does, do you want to be comfortable dealing with those feelings? Or do you want those muscles atrophied? Do you want to face something that's going to be a trying time, but you know you're going to get through it? Or do you want potential catastrophe? Yes, just like reasoning things away, distraction may work in the short term, but it doesn't solve the problem and, ultimately, just serves to rob you at some other point with an experience.

The third common way people get rid of these is to just accept them as reality. We see this in things like stoicism, obviously in many eastern traditions. The idea is that if we can just learn to accept that things are ultimately out of our control and be fine with it, then all those things, no matter how uncomfortable they are, will no longer have any power over us. Now, that sounds great in theory. But Cioran was pretty skeptical about this hypothetical person and how much they really accepted these things or whether this was just yet another way of creating a rationalization for the sake of disarming the power these feelings have over us.

You know, he has a quote that man accepts death but not the hour of his death. I think part of what he's getting at there is, look, we can accept the fact that one day in the future a meteor the size of Canada is going to unexpectedly slam into earth and end life as we know it. We can go about our lives caring about all kinds of things, never worrying about

that potential meteor because, honestly, if it comes, what could we have done anyway? And if it doesn't, then, hey, don't I look wise for never having worried about it? But good luck when you actually see a rock the size of Canada raining fire on everything you've ever known and loved. Good luck having a look on your face like you're waiting in line for a sandwich.

But let's set that aside for a second. For the sake of argument, let's just say that these people have learned to completely accept everything that is out of their control. Cioran would say, mere acceptance is not enough to be a functioning human being. In a universe that is meaningless and filled with absurdity, to have reasons to get off the couch and do anything beyond eating and sleeping, you necessarily need to evoke, as he says, moral, aesthetic, religious, social, and many more reasons for doing it. No doubt, even those who have acquired this level of acceptance have made what Cioran would see as intellectually dishonest leaps in other areas, educated by the moral, aesthetic, religious, and social.

And here's where he's coming from. The main premise of Cioran's work is nothingness. He says, "When all the current reasons—moral, esthetic, religious, social, and so on—no longer guide one's life, how can one sustain life without succumbing to nothingness? Only by a connection with the absurd, by love of absolute uselessness, loving something which does not have substance but which simulates an illusion of life. I live because the mountains do not laugh and the worms do not sing."

Here's what he means. Consider this for a second. Like we said before, reason can certainly pacify you. Reason can give you temporary relief from feelings of dread and melancholy. But another way of looking at that is to say that in doing so, you chain yourself to a doctrine and limit the possibilities you have in life. That's an alternative way of looking at the merits of reason. Well, couldn't we also say that a person that doesn't have a pacifier of reason or distraction or acceptance disarming these uncomfortable feelings—couldn't we say that a person filled with this feeling of despair is in some way full of life in a way all the other ones aren't? I mean, if despair and melancholy are parts of life at times, then couldn't we say running from them seems to be a denial or a

negation of life in some way?

You know, it's from this place that I want to look at this claim that Cioran is a pessimist a little bit closer. From his perspective, he is faced with the same reality as everyone else—the tragedy of our birth against our will into a universe that we quickly realize is meaningless and absurd. Now, most people at this point run in the other direction. Once again, they pacify—reason, distraction, acceptance—but from his perspective, none of these have actually solved the problem. The universe is still absurd, and no rationalization or distraction has changed that fact. So, from the perspective of most that use one of these tactics, yes, Cioran is going to look like an ultimate pessimist because he's being negative about their optimistic outlook. But from his perspective, he's not being pessimistic; he's just calling it how he sees it. And he certainly doesn't advocate sitting around, lamenting the fact that everything is meaningless and the world is absurd all the time.

What makes him an interesting thinker is that his tactic is to steer into the absurdity, to run into the burning building that everyone else wants to run away from, to learn to love the world, which is pure absurdity, simply for the sake of itself and not for the sake of what meaning it can give to us—to be able to connect with pure uselessness. Remember, as he said, to be able to love something which does not have substance but which simulates an illusion of life. By steering into the absurdity and embracing it, we affirm life. By running from it in all sorts of creative ways, we negate it. Can we say that this embrace of the human condition—both the dark and the light sides of it—can we say that this is a type of optimism?

But make no mistake, if you wanted to embark on a journey like this, it certainly isn't going to be easy. This is a lifestyle that without question will require you to accept these feelings of melancholy, dread, failure, loneliness, and all the rest. But by embracing the true absurdity of the world and the reality of the emotional variance of the human condition, your reward will be to have access to the limitless possibilities that lay before you.

And we'll talk about it more on next episode, but Emil Cioran would go on to say that he's

never had a friend who didn't get real and steer into the absurdity of things without a pacifier. And you can kind of see where he's coming from. When picking your friends or when trying to understand yourself, when trying to get to know anyone, do you want a super distracted person talking to you? No, how do you even get to know them? Do you want someone just parroting some book they read or rambling about what Nietzsche said on a topic? No, I'd rather just hang out with Nietzsche, personally. Do you relate to someone who masquerades around as someone who has transcended all of us other feeble human beings and our feelings of sadness? See, it's only by contending with the true possibilities available to us that we have access to ourselves and to others.

Cioran has a quote in his book *On the Heights of Despair* where he asks a question. He asks, "Who is more unhappy? He who feels his own loneliness or he who feels the loneliness of the world?" He's saying a few things in this quote, but one of them I think is a perfect way of thinking of what many see as a paradox that lies at the foundations of his work. See, on one hand, he's the thinker that's going to go there. He's the thinker that is dark enough to bring up the cosmic level of loneliness of the human species, a loneliness that everyone feels. But just by bringing it up, talking about it, unpacking it, making fun of it at times, agonizing over it, and ultimately not accepting it to somehow diffuse it of how it makes us uncomfortable, but by embracing it, steering into it—when we do all these things, we feel less alone after reading his work because we feel not only that someone else is feeling the way we do sometimes on our worst days, but also that everyone is feeling this way sometimes. And that makes you feel like you're at least a part of something.

Now, he does this with every one of these feelings that we talked about today. He steers into them. He's fascinated by the most dark and taboo things to talk about in so-called polite conversation. Two of his favorites, though, that he spent a lifetime absolutely fascinated with were the concepts of failure and suicide. His thoughts on failure are as interesting as they are hilarious. His favorite people in life were complete failures. He would revel in his own failures in life and thought they should be embraced. We'll talk about it way more next episode.

Suicide, on the other hand, was a bit more of a complicated issue. I want next episode to be exciting, so I don't want to give too much away here. But what I will say is that Cioran did not think suicide was an answer to uncomfortable feelings. He himself did not commit suicide. In fact, it might be tempting to picture Cioran as some emo-looking dude at the corner of the bar—"Craft beer is meaningless!" No, on the contrary, remember, his whole message is to embrace life, which to him is necessarily to embrace melancholy, dread, failure, etc. There are several people that write about meeting Cioran, and they make it very clear that he may have been one of the most jovial people they'd ever met.

To leave you something to think about and to foreshadow what we'll be making a case for next episode, I leave you today with this. "The fact that life has no meaning is a reason to live—moreover, it's the only one."

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

Emil Cioran pt. 2 - Failure and Suicide

Episode #156

So what Cioran liked to do after he clocked out for the day...when his feet hurt, his back hurt, his eyes were tired...when he finally got home after a long day of navigating the sheer absurdity and meaninglessness of absolutely everything...what Cioran liked to do is sit down at his desk and just write. The result of this was certainly plenty of books, *On the Heights of Despair*, *The trouble with being born*, *A short history of decay* just to name a few. But one thing we have to clarify to be able to truly understand the man behind this work is that his intention in writing all of these things was never to give you answers. It was never to construct a narrative, never to write a story. He wasn't writing these as long form persuasive essays to try to get you to think the same way he does. In fact part of the beauty of Cioran as a writer is that he really doesn't care WHAT you think about his writing. He won tons of awards writing in French, not EVEN his first language...rejected almost every one of them. He didn't care. See, he was writing for a different reason on THIS day. Today, he was writing for a personal reason.

Writing... to Cioran was something to be a practitioner of. Writing to him was the greatest form of therapy he ever came across in his life. Whenever he wrote something...the intent behind it was always first, to express something. Because, as he said, whenever you express something that you're feeling inside it instantly makes it far more bearable to live with. When you understand that THIS was ultimately his first priority...you can clearly see that writing to him wasn't about being in the New York Times...writing to him was a matter of life and death. It was a way that he could work through tragedy in life, insomnia (which he struggled with), it was a way to contend with the melancholy and dread we talked about last episode...writing a book was, as he said, "suicide postponed".

So knowing all this about the guy...not a surprise that the stuff he generally chooses to write about are going to be these taboo, dark feeling states that we're not allowed to talk

about in polite society. Also makes sense that he would write in fragments...instead of following some cookie cutter plot arc with a beginning, middle and end...he's not building an argument for his way of seeing things piece by piece...he's just writing...and writing beautifully for the record...don't believe me just go to his page on wikiquote and spend half the day scrolling down reading all of the quotable one-liners he produced during his time here.

But an important thing to note is that because he's never limited by traditional literary formats it becomes a good news bad news situation for the reader. The bad news is if you're somebody foolish enough to try to nail him down and define him...it's impossible. I mean what kind of idiot would you have to be to try to make a podcast episode about this guy? But on the flip side it's GOOD news if you're looking for an unbridled exploration of the absurdity of existence. The best anyone can EVER do is break down his fragments into general themes...concepts that he visits and revisits over multiple works and always seems to have something new to say about them. Themes like melancholy, dread, depression, but more importantly the ones we're going to focus on today: failure and suicide. Now it should be said...even trying to deconstruct his thought into themes is a losing battle as well. He often completely contradicts himself in his work. Even within the same book sometimes he'll say one thing, and then something almost diametrically opposed to it a few pages later. We should all understand though that, once again, writing was ultimately therapeutic to Cioran...not instructive. When someone called him out for contradicting himself he'd be like, who cares? That wasn't the point of the writing anyway. I wasn't on some crusade to indoctrinate you into a way of thinking about things. To Cioran... contradicting yourself is just part of being an honest person who is alive, learning, growing and participating in life, and maybe even an indicator that you're more tapped in to the true absurdity of reality.

Following this general theme it won't come as a surprise that Cioran saw in his biggest failures... elements of beauty and success...and in his biggest successes, winning every award, widespread critical acclaim, he often found a way to see these things as failures. Because if we're just looking at the theme of failure that he's fascinated in when doing his

work...what you might come away with after having READ his work is a completely different perspective about how you might interact with failure in your life.

Failure is yet another example of one of these taboo subjects we talked about last episode that we're not supposed to bring up in polite conversation. Like if you were at a party...and you saw somebody that you hadn't seen in a long time but you knew they tried to open up a vape store recently and it failed miserably...how messed up would it be for you to lead the conversation with...hey so how'd that vape store work out for you? You, uh, you selling a lot of mango flavored smoke these days? How's your vaping portfolio doing? No, you don't say that to someone...you're not supposed to ask people about their failures. It's rude. It's intrusive. We're supposed to only talk about nice things.

But what Cioran would say is picture that exact same party...say it's a five year high school reunion. Who do you want to talk to more, really? The guy that married his highschool sweetheart, went to college for accounting or something and everything worked out exactly the way he planned when he wrote that note in your yearbook on the last day of school? Or... do you want to talk to the person that failed. Do you want to talk to someone that wanted to become an engineer...but it backfired...so they found themselves hopelessly in debt, and out of desperation they took a job at a meat packing plant in germany and...once again...they failed miserably at packing meat. Like they just couldn't find a way to get the bologna into the container. So out of further desperation they tried to become a yoga instructor...but here's the thing: they don't know anything about yoga! They just tell people to do cartwheels and dance around with ribbons and stuff...when you consider all that this person went through...at the end of the story...honestly, Cioran would ask...who is the better conversation? Who would you rather talk to at that party? The failure or the success?

Tolstoy famously says in the opening line of Anna Karenina:

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."

Both Tolstoy and Cioran are touching on similar themes here. People that are successful generally aim for the same things related to security...and that outcome is usually very

predictable. They all ultimately look like the same person. But when you fail...and fail spectacularly...sometimes it can be like an art project that took on a mind of its own. It can be chaos. There are so many more ways to fail than to succeed and to Cioran, failures are just far more interesting...and not to mention... funny. So why do we make such an effort to run from them, or not talk about them? What would happen, in theory, if instead of avoiding failure, we steered into it? How would that change the way we make decisions in our life?

Some of you are probably thinking, hey I think I see where Cioran is going with all this. Similar to last episode when he recommended that instead of running from these inconvenient aspects of existence like dread or melancholy...instead of finding a clever rationalization that defuses the power these feelings have over us...Cioran recommends that we steer into them and embrace them. Because for all we know they are the most important part of the human experience...who are we to negate any of them? Well maybe... he's doing the same thing here with the concept of failure...and that what he's ultimately going to say is that we should embrace failure because it's only through failure that we end up growing as people.

Well yes, that's PART of it. But more accurately it's a very small PIECE of what he's saying about failure. Failure, to Cioran, was something much bigger than something that can be relegated down into a self-help maxim like that...failure was something that pervaded what it is to even be human...something that runs so deep in our lives that you can almost see it at a metaphysical level...that is... if making metaphysical claims was REALLY something Cioran was interested in doing. See, his goal here wasn't to rationally explain the universe through the lens of failure...his goal was to get us out of this silly holding pattern we're stuck in where we can't talk about failure in polite society, and in doing so, miss out on just how important of a resource failure potentially is for us. So let's build his case from the ground up...at the level of metaphysics. Remember Cioran muses in a tongue in cheek way that the world is messed up because whatever amazing deity that's apparently responsible for all of it must have created it in a messed up way. God failed on this particular project. Humanity itself is a failed project. In other words,

even before getting started on whatever projects we decide to embark on in life...we're already at best building on top of a foundation of failure. Failure is written into the equation. But consider this: even once we DO decide how to spend our time in this life...our relationship with failure is a very special one as the years go on...because failure has a special kind of omnipresence that other aspects of life just don't have. See, friends and loved ones may come and go. Successes and triumphs are temporary. But failure, to Cioran....failure sticks with you. Every failure is a scarlet letter that you carry around with you. People around you know about your past failures. They remember them. And while they may not say anything for the sake of being nice and going along with that societal taboo...your collection of failures is a companion that follows you no matter where you decide to move or how you decide to dress.

So where Cioran might begin is by asking: since we know that our failures are a companion that is going to stick around with us...would you rather be friends with that companion? Or enemies? Do you want failure to be an embarrassing acquaintance that you have to dance around talking about in conversations? Or is it possible to make it a friend...that you're proud of...that you draw inspiration from...given that failure is SUCH an integral part of this whole process...how do we not run from it or rationalize our failures away with some story...but instead steer into it?

To do so will require us to completely reframe the way we look at failure...and maybe the best place to start doing that is to consider just how much Cioran thinks failure is responsible for the entire trajectory of the human species. Let me start here.

Whenever anyone makes any important decision in life they do so in consideration of failure. When you decide what relationships you want in your life...when a scientist decides what experiments to run...when a country decides their foreign policy...we all make these decisions doing our best to get to what we see as a successful outcome. But whenever you're aiming for success as a target...you're naturally trying to aim AWAY from potential failures along the way. So in this way...our level of comfort and familiarity around the concept of failure directly impacts any important decision we make in life...even on the level of nations and the global community. When failure is something

that we can't talk about. When failure is something we avoid reflecting on, when we don't fully understand what we're trying to avoid and why we are never able to aim for success as effectively as we otherwise could. Having a close relationship with failure, ironically, is one of the best places to be if you want to succeed in anything. Because in a universe that is full of absurdity and devoid of meaning...a failure has the exact same exchange value as a success. Why would we throw out such a valuable resource at our disposal?

Just like last episode, the answer to this question to Cioran is a simple and obvious one.

Failing and recounting our failures makes us feel extremely uncomfortable. But in the interest of us reframing how we see failure on today's episode...something we have to get to the bottom of is what exactly IS so uncomfortable about acknowledging our failures?

Well part of it... HAS to be that by acknowledging a failure you are also simultaneously acknowledging at least a minor lack of self-awareness. Written into every failure is a formula. You wanted to do something. You thought you were capable of doing it, you aimed for success, and then were smacked in the face by reality when you hit some limitation of your abilities that caused you to fail. Point is: you wanted to succeed.

Doesn't feel good to be made aware that you're not good enough to do something. And it DEFINITELY doesn't feel good to be REMINDED of that fact or asked about it at a party.

Cioran understands all this, but I think he'd say hold on a second let me ask you something. Whenever you fail at something...what is it that you ALWAYS get from failure that you absolutely NEVER get from success? One thing failure NEVER fails to do...is to give us an honest picture of who we actually are.

Cioran says it well here...failure is:

"Always essential, reveals us to ourselves, permits us to see ourselves as God sees us; whereas success distances us from what is most inward in ourselves and indeed in everything."

For example, picture some middle aged dude that after work everyday drives down to the elementary school with his exercise headband on and takes on all the fourth graders in a friendly game of basketball. He's posting them up, ripping the ball away from them, blocking all their shots, trash talking...this dude is 183-0 in basketball games against

elementary school kids. He's the best in the business. Well here's the thing...if LeBron James goes down to the exact SAME elementary school HE TOO would BE 183-0 against those kids. So if this was the only sample we had to go off of...how can anyone really know who the better basketball player is? How can the middle aged dude ever TRULY know how good he is at basketball until he dares to challenge himself enough to fail and SEE where his limitations are?

Failure in this way is one of the best friends you could ever possibly have. Failure is the gateway to truly knowing who you are...not just whatever story you have up in your head about who you are. You may be 183-0 in life because you've never actually challenged yourself. Lot of people out there that think really highly of their abilities with perfect batting averages that are pretty lost when it comes to where to go on the map of life. But really, even if you have the best compass in the world...how can you ever know how to get to where you want to go on the map if you don't even know where you're starting from? Cioran once said that it's only:

"In failure, in the greatness of a catastrophe that you can know someone."

To Cioran, failure has a unique ability to show you EXACTLY where you are right now in a way success just can't do. Cioran once said that he wanted to have a "existence constantly transfigured by failure." Transfigured meaning to transform into something more beautiful or elevated. See, he truly saw failure in this positive light. Failure is a voice of reason that keeps us honest about who we really are. He said he actually AIMED towards failure throughout his life, and he wasn't being sarcastic. Because to be able to look back at a life that was frequently punctuated by failure says a lot about a person. Not... that they were a failure as some people might conclude...I mean, to Cioran of course they were failures...we are ALL failures. No, someone who lived a life with a lot of failures also lived a life where they were courageous enough to push themselves and go for it. They misjudged their abilities and aimed too high at times, sure...but at least they DID something. Worse than being a failure, to Cioran, is to be someone so terrified of failure that you sit around and never do anything with your life.

Sadly though, this is where a lot of people end up. People develop a relationship with

failure like it is a schoolyard bully. They live in fear of it. Avoid it at all costs. Go out of their way to make sure they never cross paths with it. When they finally have to face it they see the entire interaction as a negative, painful experience. They're embarrassed to talk about it and so they never do. Remember to Cioran...being able to express something makes it a little more bearable to deal with. These people don't even have THAT as an option when it comes to their failures. They're left to pretend and act as though their failures and this bully doesn't even exist.

But just like last episode with melancholy and dread...Cioran is going to ask: Why does it have to be this way? What if we embraced failure...steered into it? Saw it as beautiful, unique and interesting as Cioran did? Imagine never being scared of failing at anything...Not because you're dumb or something but because you saw failure as the only way to truly see how far you've come since the LAST time you failed. You saw failure as an opportunity to get a one on one personalized lesson for how to adjust your strategy for success next time. You saw failure not as something to avoid, but some of the only evidence that you're actually living a life where you're not just playing fourth graders in basketball all day long.

Cioran deeply admired people who were failures. Sometimes calling them outright losers. Aside from the fact he thought stories of failure were far more interesting and beautiful than stories of success...he genuinely admired people who lived lives that resembled failure...because who else other than people who choose everyday to wake up and they just decide to be a failure...who more than that person is really embodying how meaningless and absurd existence is?

Cioran grew up in Romania...and at the time he saw his country as a prime example of absolute failure on the world's stage. So when he left Romania to go to school in Bucharest he had a keen eye for people who he thought were complete failures...and he gravitated towards them...endlessly fascinated by their lives.

He said:

"In Bucharest I met lots of people, many interesting people, especially losers, who would show up at the cafe talking endlessly and doing nothing. I have to say that, for me, these

were the most interesting people there. People who did nothing all their lives, but who otherwise were brilliant.”

To Cioran, failure was, if nothing else, way more interesting than success. Every failure is like a runaway art project...and every person embodying failure was a painting that required explanation from the artist. Cioran embraced failure so much...that he even lived his life RESEMBLING a failure even though he was far from it in actuality. He once said, “the big success of my life is that I’ve managed to live without having a job.” He also said, “I preferred to live like a parasite rather than to destroy myself by keeping a job.” He bragged about being forty years old and that he was still enrolled in school eating at the student cafeteria. He wore this image of failure around like a badge of honor.

Reminds me of something Hemingway said once, not about Cioran he was speaking more generally here but in a world... where so many people want to wear the medals around in public...but they don’t want to do the work to EARN the medals in private...here is Cioran...a shining example of the opposite...here is a guy... whose work is getting widespread critical acclaim, award after award, and he rejects all of them and instead chooses to live his life RESEMBLING a total failure.

The overall point is this: to Cioran...here is this MASSIVE concept...failure...and we’re not supposed to talk about it. We’re supposed to be embarrassed of our failures. And we could theoretically live a life where we never actually try anything and therefore never experience failure...the same way we can rationalize away feelings of dread and melancholy. But to Cioran sometimes we need to “push” ourselves into existence. We need to reach into areas where we could potentially fail...just to make sure we know we’re still moving in life...and worst case...even if we fail we at least we know who we truly are... at this moment. The trick, I guess, is being able to realize that failure is NOT the worst case scenario. In many ways, constant success would be the worst.

Quick aside...some of you are probably wondering how someone so sold on the idea that the world is meaningless and absurd could even speak in terms of success and failure. How does he even decide what to spend his time on if there’s no rulebook to follow? Well Cioran was so dedicated to the cause...he was so committed to the world being

meaningless that he actually lived as though there actually WAS meaning to things...he lived this way...just so that he could protest reality and undermine the design of whatever God created this whole thing.

Another taboo subject that we're not supposed to talk about that fascinated Cioran throughout his life is suicide. Look, talking about all these unfortunate aspects of being a person and the solutions we conjure up to try to deal with them...doesn't take much creativity to arrive at what seems like the ULTIMATE solution to these problems...to just end your life. Well Cioran obviously realized this...and he didn't think this was the right answer for several reasons, but it should be said that even after arriving at that position...it didn't stop him from continuing to reflect on suicide as yet another aspect of existence, that is everpresent, that we are not supposed to talk about. He wants to ask...no different than all the other forbidden subjects we've touched on... what are we potentially missing out on by putting suicide into this category? And I think the best way to understand where Cioran is coming from here is to think about suicide NOT as something that is actionable. Try for a second to NOT think about suicide as actually something that you're going to do as a last resort...try to think about suicide in the third person...almost from the outside...try considering the IDEA of suicide as something available to everyone as an aspect of existence...Suicide is an option...an option just like all the other options you have in life. Like for example you have the OPTION to drop and do twenty pushups right now. That is an OPTION AVAILABLE to you. So Cioran might ask...why don't you do it? Let's say you decided to do it...one thing for sure...the only reason you're doing twenty pushups right now is because you have a goal you are aspiring to... where twenty pushups actually gets you closer to that goal. Thinking about it in this way...Cioran would ask...what problem is suicide really getting you closer to solving?

Cioran thought suicide was both a temporal problem and an error in understanding about life. These are the two main ways you can think of his argument AGAINST suicide. It's temporal in the sense in that...well, he says it best that "you always commit suicide too late". Meaning that you've already experienced the inherent pain of existence...you have no idea what the future holds...so ending your life to solve a problem that has

already come and gone doesn't actually solve the problem. The other, more interesting argument he has against suicide is that someone who considers suicide as a solution to a problem is almost always someone that has not thought through the nature of existence at a deep enough level yet. They're always still at some rest stop along the way of their journey of understanding reality and coming to terms with it honestly.

He said:

"Only optimists commit suicide, optimists who no longer succeed at being optimists. The others, having no reason to live, why would they have any to die?"

Now, of course here he is referencing the optimism we talked about last episode. When you are confronted, by the sheer meaninglessness and absurdity of existence...common tactic is to join one of these optimism cults that allow you to feel connected to something higher than yourself. To Cioran, it's only someone immersed in one of these clever rationalizations of meaning that would ever even think to be disappointed when they confront how disinterested the universe truly is. A totally neutral party would be confronted with meaninglessness and wouldn't have any reason to think one way or the other about it. Once again, as he says...if your reason to commit suicide is that there's no reason to live...why are you assuming there is some reason to die? Now, someone might respond back to that and say, well there's tremendous suffering associated with continuing to live...why not end it? But not only does suicide NOT solve the problem of the suffering you've already been through...I mean, you're already at this point...just by SAYING that ending it is a good option... you are not being intellectually consistent. You are claiming that the universe is entirely absurd, and yet you are making value judgments that your suffering is something to avoid...the implication being that the alleviation of that suffering would cut the legs out from your entire argument.

Here's the point: to someone TRULY tapped into the absurdity of things...just as a failure has the same exchange value as a success...a moment of suffering has the same exchange value as a moment of bliss. And just as feelings of dread and melancholy may be a absolutely crucial part of being a human being...suffering may be something that grounds us in ways that we don't always fully understand. This is why at any one moment

you may choose to commit suicide...Cioran thinks you are both making a temporal error and an error of understanding, because once again, you always are committing suicide too late...and you are clearly are still bringing a delusional type of optimism about what existence entails.

Now keep in mind this argument IS NOT supposed to be some catch-all antidote to these feelings! This is just the BEGINNING of his look at suicide AS A CONCEPT. And as a concept...this is a philosophical rebuttal...NOT necessarily a PRACTICAL rebuttal at all...this is a philosophical rebuttal to using the OPTION of suicide as an ultimate solution to a problem. This is an important point to emphasize...because if you truly were one of these people that could steer into the meaninglessness of life without fail...besides just your own interest in the subject matter...what reason would you REALLY have to think about suicide at all?

So most of what Cioran says ABOUT suicide is most USEFUL TO one of these optimists, somewhere along their journey of coming to terms with the human condition. To these people...of which he was one...I think Cioran would say something along the lines of: just never forget...that you too...are on a journey. It's both tragic and hilarious...but you are a type of creature, that seems to naturally desire to seek meaning and write stories to make sense of things...and you are on a journey through an absurd realm that is completely devoid of meaning. Once again this would be funny if it wasn't so problematic to so many people. So maybe AS one of these people you decide to attach yourself to one of these stories and rationalizations...you feel better for a while and generally get through life pretty good...but every once in a while you hit rough patch...where the reality of the universe isn't something that is as easily brushed under the rug with a bedtime story. Maybe you start to entertain the idea that suicide is an option because what's the point? And maybe his argument of: well what's the point of suicide in a meaningless world isn't compelling to you. I think what he might begin with is to say: okay then...well then what's the rush? Truly though, suicide may be an option, sure. But explain why it is such a pressing option right this second. Why does it need to be done...right now?

Once again, think of suicide in the third person...think of it as an idea or an option that's

available to practically every human being that has the opportunity to exist. When starting from this impersonal place...Cioran began to think of suicide as a concept that he thought was more connected to freedom...than to some sort of last ditch effort to end suffering in a moment of pain. Cioran once said, "What really saved me was the idea of suicide. Without the idea of suicide I would've surely killed myself." See, there's that separation! That distinction between the IDEA of suicide and the actual act.

Suicide to Cioran was something that brought him comfort...just knowing...that no matter what he isn't TRAPPED here. He said that suicide, "ends subsistence as a nightmare." He explicitly says that he could've never endured life if it weren't for this freedom available to him...this option that comforted him because it is always there...so it allowed him to continue to exist however he wanted to...so the question becomes NOT whether or not it's the right decision to commit suicide from some moral standpoint...the question a person HAS to answer...is simply...why right now? As Cioran said: what's the rush? Because if there is some sort of rush associated with that decision maybe it's not being made for the best reasons.

I mean, as we've covered you're certainly not trapped here...and you can't undo what you've already been through...you're already here...in this moment...so why not stick around and and at least spectate the absurdity of it all...try to find pieces of it interesting...try to enjoy the absurdity not because it connects to some greater overarching rhizome of meaning that you're a piece of...but simply for the sake of the absurdity.

Suicide may be an option. But it's an option tomorrow morning after you've slept on it. It's an option a week from now...it's an option six months from now after that thing you're looking forward to. For almost everyone: life is NOT constant suffering and subsistence is not a nightmare. So once you're confronted with reality why not stick around, enjoy your time, enjoy your family, enjoy those sporting events you like so much, enjoy staring at your phone, enjoy it all immersed in this lucid dream where apparently...nothing really matters.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.

The Creation of Meaning - Beauvoir

Episode #157

So if there's anything we can say with confidence about Emil Cioran so far it's that he was a defender of what he saw as intellectual honesty at the highest level. He wasn't the guy to be scared of bringing up some of the darkest recesses of the human condition...he didn't shy away from writing about personal failures and shortcomings...he even joked and laughed about this ridiculous plight of being a human being the entire way through his life and and he did all of this beginning from a place... where he took it as practically a self-evident fact...that there really isn't ANY objective meaning to ANYTHING in the universe whatsoever.

We are born, and we are quickly smacked across the face with the cold, hard reality that we are a creature that seeks out meaning in the universe, and no matter how hard we look...no matter what method we try to utilize...no such meaning actually exists out there in the universe to be discovered.

Now, maybe you'll remember...the first episode we did on Cioran... I said that 95% of you probably wouldn't agree with this depiction of reality. But no doubt 5% of you probably did. 5% of you out there are feeling pretty philosophically vindicated right now: Ayy it's Cioran. Welcome to the club. Where you been all my meaningless life?

But something that's important to consider is that...knowing this audience...and the level you people CLEARLY think about things...it's NOT JUST the 5%...dare I say almost everybody LISTENING to this...100% of you have considered at some point in your life this idea... that ultimately...isn't it possible that nothing really matters at all...nothing really has ANY meaning...at least on the level of the universe.

We've all ENTERTAINED this worldview before. We've all no doubt at some point been faced with the question what if there IS no objective moral POINT to enduring the inherent suffering of existence? More than that...why DO anything...if nothing ultimately MEANS anything, on the level of the universe? Why not sit around and just do nothing?

Why be Sysiphus pushing the rock up the hill everyday... just to construct something that is ultimately going to be sucked into a black hole one day? See if your expectation was to ask these questions and get a text back from the universe with some clear, solid answers to them...then this is going to be a pretty uncomfortable place to sit and continue on with life. We know this is the case...and this has been Cioran's entire point from the start: The history of human thought has been filled with these stories, religions, philosophical doctrines, gurus, self-help books...what we've referred to so far as sort of, optimism cults...stories that we delude ourselves with to get away from this uncomfortable reality that everything is meaningless.

But to start the episode today I want to consider a different possibility...and that is that isn't it possible...that someone could be attracted to this idea...that everything is totally meaningless and absurd...but they're attracted to it for reasons that are equally as narrow and self-indulgent as the reasons someone might adopt one of these stories throughout history...hypothetically... couldn't someone immerse themselves in a philosophy of meaninglessness and absurdity...just to get certain fringe benefits that are useful to their own prejudices?

Put another way...just as someone that has an intuitive sense that there IS meaning to things or there IS some benevolent creator out there...and they might gravitate towards a story, neatly packaged together for them that conveniently reinforces that fact...couldn't someone that has an intuitive sense that things are meaningless...couldn't they also gravitate towards a dishonestly charitable reading of a smart guy like Cioran? Because hey! He says everything's meaningless! That's what I already thought! Here's the philosophical justification for everything I already had a feeling was the truth! Sounds right to me!

Somebody might say back...well sure that's entirely possible. But there's a problem in your logic there! Why would ANYONE work so hard to reinforce a worldview that's so pessimistic? I mean, who really WANTS everything to be meaningless? What possible benefit could they be getting from that? Well one answer to this question is that when everything is meaningless...and nothing really matters...then you never really have to

grow up and accept the responsibility of the moral weight that you carry with every decision you make simply by virtue of being alive. To a philosopher like Simone De Beauvoir...someone can easily turn towards a worldview where meaning doesn't exist...because living in consideration of your actions and how they affect yourself and the people around you can be an extremely uncomfortable place to be in as well. In the same way Cioran thinks people adopt a story to escape the meaninglessness of existence...Simone de Beauvoir thinks that people adopt these same stories to escape the meaning of existence.

Now, both thinkers are starting from a similar place here...there is no meaning written into the intrinsic structure of the universe...okay, but does that necessarily imply that meaning itself is a lost cause? Remember everyone listening to this has considered this idea before...and a good percentage of people live their lives feeling some meaningful connection to the world and their actions. So how did they do it?

Well one way is that there's a percentage of people out there that just concede certain points...you know, maybe there is no meaning prescribed to reality by a God...maybe a philosopher can't sit around and reason their way to an objective moral code...maybe the secret ISN'T actually manifesting anything except for more youtube channels about the secret...but none of this is really disappointing because that wasn't these people's expectation anyway. They understand: meaning is a human created concept. These people might think some variation of the following: OF COURSE everything I deem to be meaningful is ONLY meaningful within some narrow, human-centric framework...and if what we're looking for... is MEANING as it exists at the level of the universe INDEPENDENT of human affairs...then OF COURSE everything is meaningless. Of COURSE my relationship with reality is random and absurd. But just because meaning doesn't exist at the level of the universe doesn't mean the concept of meaning itself doesn't exist OR that there are no legitimate grounds to ESTABLISH that meaning. The question then becomes what ARE the legitimate grounds for establishing meaning? Because as we know, Cioran is going to say all of these attempts throughout history to DO so have been philosophers writing unintentional philosophical fiction.

This is an important point to emphasize because Simone De Beauvoir is going to make a similar point, but she is going to view it from a different perspective that will have RADICALLY different implications about the history of philosophy.

Put yourself in the shoes of any one of these philosophers throughout history that have come up with these narratives and stories. They were all born into an uncomfortable place just like anyone else...and for whatever crazy reason they got a degree in philosophy...I mean, sorry bout it...but they graduated and got a job and their first day on the job as a philosopher they looked around them and they tried to find problems to solve. Just like a plumber looking for a leaky pipe...just like a janitor looking for something to scrub...these philosophers quickly realize that one problem that needs fixing...is that they were born into this uncomfortable place. How do we fix it? There's no objective meaning to anything...which means there's no rulebook to follow...hey... as a philosopher...maybe I'll try my hand at DISCOVERING that meaning hidden latent within the universe.

What it's important to consider is that...this feeling of discomfort, discontent, dissatisfaction...this is the essence of so many examples of where creativity comes from in the world. Written into practically every creative act is a tacit acknowledgement that the world is not good enough the way that it is. Something about the world is lacking, something needs to be created in order for the world to become a better place. This could be why so many enormously gifted creators are also sometimes tortured as people. This could be why people who are genuinely happy and content with their life sometimes lack that engine of discontent required to bring things into the world that they think will change it for the better. Regardless though...it's important to realize that there would be no reason for any of these philosophers to write any of these stories trying to impose meaning upon the universe if there wasn't some level of discomfort that they were trying to alleviate.

Cioran is going to say that discomfort comes from meaninglessness...Simone De Beauvoir is going to look at it from a different angle and say that the discomfort all of

these thinkers have been trying to solve is what she calls the ambiguity of existence. You may remember this from parts two and three that we've already done on Simone De Beauvoir, but a common way for existentialists around this time to make sense of things ontologically is by thinking of existence in terms of an interplay between subjects and objects. Common view at the time and throughout the history of philosophy was that to exist as a human is to exist as a subject that is navigating a realm of objects. Subjects have the ability to make free choices, to act upon objects or other subjects. Objects have traditionally been seen as the inert matter or entities that can be gathered, stockpiled, manipulated, transformed...essentially the raw materials available for subjects carrying out their freedom to choose.

The feeling of discomfort we've been talking about...this ambiguity of existence...is the state of constant tension, that we live in, as people... trying to keep balance in a constant push and pull between polarities... LIKE subject and object, but also lots of other stuff... self and other, mind and matter, individual and group identity, free while also being in chains, there are THOUSANDS of them...and Simone de Beauvoir points out that yes, human beings may TEND to create these binary oppositions in an attempt to make sense of things...but one thing's for sure: your existence and everything it is to be YOU could NEVER be quantified by just one side of these binary measuring sticks...and yet...let us all notice...that this is EXACTLY what philosophers have done...time and time again throughout the history of philosophy!

Let me explain what she's saying here. So let's go back to the philosophers from before that throughout history have tried to discover meaning. Have you ever been reading philosophy... and had the thought cross your mind that this person you're reading without a doubt seems undeniably smart...but that it seemed like they were using their intelligence to justify a position that seemed to be missing a larger picture.

Simone de Beauvoir writes about the strategy used when trying to write ethics in the past...she says:

"It was a matter of eliminating ambiguity by making oneself pure interiority or exteriority, but evading the world of the senses or by being engulfed by it, by attaining

eternity or by enclosing oneself in the pure instant.”

Have you ever SEEN one of these thinkers, born into the ambiguity of existence...trying to write philosophy to fix that state of discomfort...but to be able to accomplish that they have to completely over-index on one end of these polarities while practically ignoring the value of the other? For example...maybe a thinker is all about the primacy of the individual and they completely ignore group identity...or maybe it's the other way around...maybe they put people into broad categories and have an outlook that is far too collectivist, completely ignoring individuality. Now it should be said, BOTH of these outlooks certainly simplify existence...but are they looking at ALL of existence?

Another example, real world example! There was a guy...from right around the time when Simone De Beauvoir was doing her work...and this guy had a HUGE crush on her...and she was nice and she let him bounce his ideas off of her every once in a while and she'd try to give him some inspiration for his work...God bless the little guy his name was Jean Paul Sartre...and a common criticism of even HIS work was that he goes far too extreme in the direction of the subject... without giving enough time to the OBJECT side of the polarity between subjects and objects. Once again, Sartre has certainly simplified existence here...but we have to ask: has he done so only by favoring one side of this binary opposition, dishonestly...and then further subordinating the unfavored side to the whims of the favored side?

This breaking up the world into binary oppositions and then heavily favoring one side of it has been done for a long time in the history of thought. Plato, Descartes, Kant...we've written these stories throughout history to get rid of this uncomfortable feeling...but that uncomfortable feeling is NOT that things are meaningless...it's that existence is far too complicated to be objectively quantifiable. Which means it's going to require being in a constant state of ambiguity to grapple with. You can't DISCOVER a meaning written into the universe, grab onto it, nail it down and teach it in schools. She says, “Morality resides in the painfulness of an indefinite questioning.” Morality is not discovered...morality is created...and it can ONLY be created to Simone De Beauvoir from within that state of

painfulness and indefinite questioning. No matter how convenient it would be: you can't reduce existence down into pure subjectivity or pure objectivity.

We are both subjects AND objects. We are both creatures that act AND creatures that are acted upon. And being a woman during her time Simone De Beauvoir was uniquely qualified to notice how the objective cultural parameters limit a person's subjectivity.

We talk about this more in the episode we did on her work *The Second Sex*, but it's important to restate because this makes a LARGER point about the tactics we sometimes use to escape the true ambiguity of existence in our PERSONAL lives. See living in a culture where feminine traits were defined NOT as exercising your subjectivity.... and going out into the public sphere and acting upon the world...femininity was to be passive and self-effacing, it was to be modest. In essence, masculine traits largely embodied the subjective side of our existence...and feminine traits embodied those that objectified people. She wrote in her autobiography that to even be able to use your subjectivity as a woman during her time, as she did...to even be able to do that required her to "abdicate her womanhood". In other words, she needed to act more like a man did... to be able to actually do something culture championed as valuable. Because qualities that were traditionally defined as feminine traits, were just not given the same cultural value as masculine ones...and to Simone De Beauvoir...there was no necessary reason WHY this had to be the case. Both served valuable roles to society...society couldn't possibly function as well without ANY ONE of these things. But just as we can see in the ethical approaches by religions, philosophers, economic systems of the past...we picked one side of this binary opposition...favored it and then subordinated the other side to the whims of the favored side.

To Simone De Beauvoir, the first step of living honestly is to accept that you are BOTH a subject and an object... simultaneously. To deny any one side of that for the sake of feeling more comfortable...is to deny a fundamental piece of your very existence. The fact of the matter is that you are not just an object...hopelessly going to work everyday, being used, warehoused, manipulated, acted upon like raw materials...you're not just a slab of limestone carved out of the side of a rock that someone is going to make a countertop out

of...no, you possess subjectivity, and think about what that means...before you even start TRYING... to talk about whether things have meaning or not...PRE-MEANING...a fundamental element of your existence is that you have the ability to make free acting choices and to stand up for yourself and if you spend every day DENYING that subjectivity...you are denying part of what it is to even exist.

People out there will try to take away your subjectivity. Whether that's the government...a boss, a company, your parents, drugs, video games, advertising...all these things are selling you a product that will make your life a LOT easier... and get rid of this tension that you otherwise have to CONSTANTLY feel...that maybe you should be doing more than you are. You know you should be doing more...and you may be like the religions and philosophers of the past...maybe you create your own philosophical fiction, this complex narrative that allows you to sacrifice your own subjectivity...because at least it is comfortable... being just an object. Comfort should be your #1 goal.

Marcus Aurelius has a quote from meditations that I think about every once in a while that goes something like...was this your purpose? To sit warm under the blanket at home? Never experiencing things? In other words, when you look at yourself...when you consider all your strengths and weaknesses and what you were put on this planet to do with your time here...is that what you think? I was clearly put here to just be comfortable and watch things. Watch people around me do things that matter to them, watch the world go by, watch Youtube. My purpose was to just feel "nice" all the time...to NEVER feel the discomfort of DOING things...to deny your subjectivity so that you don't have to feel the ambiguity of existence. Culture may present certain obstacles that are in your way that you have to overcome, sure...but just think of the self-imposed obstacles that are part of a self-imposed culture that allows us to objectify ourselves.

But make no mistake the tension goes the OTHER way as well! You can watch a ton of motivational videos, drink 17 energy drinks and do a line of folgers instant coffee and escape the reality of your existence by over-indexing on subjectivity as well. This person may have the best intentions in the world...they may say: don't let anything get you down... anything is possible...no matter HOW crazy it may sound...and I'm going to

prove it to myself and everyone else out there! Yeah! Just hope they aren't saying that as they're jumping off a cliff flapping their wings.

Because once again...the fact is you are not PURE subjectivity. Anything is NOT possible. You are also an object. You have a physical body that, turns out, does NOT have feathers and a beak and it carries with it a built in limitation that you cannot fly...most likely you are going to fall and it's NOT gonna be with style. The physical, cultural, economic, historical limitations that you exist in dictate the parameters within which you can exercise your subjectivity. Not acknowledging this very real piece of your existence is one, again, to deny a fundamental piece of your existence, two, might sabotage your efforts because honestly you might not be utilizing your subjectivity very effectively if you're shooting for goals that are CLEARLY unattainable...and three, going in too hard on the subjectivity side of things can cause you to subordinate the object side of existence in ways that are destructive.

Raw materials may become just building blocks for your evil empire, forget where the materials come from. People can be turned into objects and used as just cogs in a machine that help me carry out my vision. Not having to consider the ethical weight connected to the manner in which you act upon objects in the world around you...that may make YOUR life a lot more comfortable to live in. But again, it is a denial of the ambiguity of existence, you have outsourced your decision making to an egoist cult of pure subjectivity, and in that sense you are not free.

So uncomfortable as it is...the ambiguity of existence is NOT something Simone De Beauvoir thinks we should be complaining about. We should be THANKFUL to be in this place...because it's only from this place of not knowing, of the tension between different parts of our identity, from this place of discomfort...this is the only honest place that values can be created at all.

Meaning is created... not discovered. And to live is to be in a constant state of creating and recreating yourself and your values. To do the work of taking everything on a case by case basis. Understanding that decision making can never be relegated to moral principles that are ALWAYS correct...nor can it be reduced to something so absurd that

it's impossible to be confident in certain beliefs. Like Cioran, she thinks that an honest existence REQUIRES us to BE in a state of discomfort...yes, but LIVING in that discomfort is the ONLY thing that allows us to affirm the part of our existence that is free. Which for Simone De Beauvoir will require us to not just will our own freedom and subjectivity, but to will the freedom and subjectivity of other people that we share the world with. Creativity may come out of a feeling of discomfort...but maybe that is a good thing in this case.

You know...when you consider the scope of existentialism as it compares to all of the other methods of establishing meaning that have been laid out by thinkers over the years...when you consider the sheer dominance of things like Christianity and Marxism during the time of Simone De Beauvoir...you can really appreciate just how ambitious a work like *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was. Forget about the challenge to subvert narratives that were dominating the culture at the time...let's just set that challenge to the side for a second...just continuing to think of things in terms of an interplay between subjects and objects...MANY people from around her time saw Christianity as the end all be all ANSWER to any confusions you might have about how to handle the subjective side of existence.

The idea is: I'm an individual that has the freedom to make any number of choices in this world. What should those choices be? Well...what would Jesus do? When it came to the realm of objects...how we should think of material resources...people as resources...how these resources should be managed or distributed...answers in the socio-economic realm were thought by many to be solved by Marxism...and here's the point: one of the MANY concerns of Simone De Beauvoir in her work...was that if she was going to be consistent...she couldn't relegate herself to one side of this binary opposition...the *Ethics of Ambiguity* attempts to find, among other things, the moral bedrock from which we can honestly create values for BOTH the subjective and objective realms...two realms that are NOT separate by the way! Simone De Beauvoir thinks if you ever try to separate these two realms to try understand reality better... you ultimately end up understanding nothing. You'll remember from our episodes that transcendence and immanence are two

sides of the same coin. You only exercise your power as a subject in relation to the objective limitations and parameters you have to navigate...and you only recognize your status as an object while considering your subjectivity...the free choices that are available to you that you are not making.

So to bring us back to the beginning...maybe it is the case that things are meaningless at the level of the universe. But I hope we can see that it is at least possible to construct an honest moral framework that allows us to continue on living. And maybe you think even the framework of Simone De Beauvoir is ultimately a story that inappropriately assumes freedom to be some ultimate virtue...that it doesn't anticipate later structuralist and post-structuralist points that reveal it to be a cultural discourse as well...but let me tell you something practically speaking here: whether you believe it's all meaningless or not...people ARE, CURRENTLY discovering and imposing their moral frameworks onto the world.... and the world becomes the sum total of how all those different world views intersect.

And I don't think I gotta tell anyone... that every framework of meaning doesn't exactly produce the same results in the world. Whether moral objectivity exists or not we still have to survive, we still have to play the game...and the framework...makes the game work. So again, practically speaking...when you make a decision...you don't to be unsure about your decision...you'd much rather have a Christianity or a Marxism or an Ayn Rand to give you some confidence...but if more people weren't trying to evade this ambiguity and discomfort...there wouldn't be as many people outsourcing their understanding of the world to a just couple sources that reinforce the worldview they already suspect is true...there wouldn't be as many people turning themselves into objects doing nothing with their subjectivity...there wouldn't be as many people lost in a sense of radical subjectivity...turning people, entire classes or groups of people into fodder just so they can carry out their plans for cultural dominance. Practically speaking...if someone took a page out of The Ethics of Ambiguity...then at least when things went wrong in their life...at least they could take responsibility for their actions...rather than just blaming the universe.

Thank you for listening. I'll talk to you next time.