

1. Liberty and the Enlightenment

I want to talk today about the rise and fall of liberty, liberty as a philosophical doctrine and a philosophical cause. And, basically, the rise of liberty since the Age of Enlightenment, the arguments for liberty, and then why after the Age of the Enlightenment liberty became, in effect, a lost cause, and it was, this—as an ideal, and as a political ideal, and as a moral ideal—was dropped and attacked in the 19th century. So this is a short introduction to the rise and fall of liberty, from a philosophical perspective. There’s many other perspectives which you can take; you can take a more historical perspective; you can take a perspective from the science of economics and “political economy,” as it was put in the 18th and 19th century. We’ll talk about liberty. Here the focus is squarely on the philosophical case and then the arguments against liberty.

And I want to start off with a question, which is a question that many people think they know the answer to, and the question is: Do all people desire liberty? And if you remember, for instance, George W. Bush made a big deal of this, and particularly in foreign policy, that everybody yearns and longs for liberty, that this is a universal desire, sort of in-built in a person. And I think that is actually, that view, is completely wrong. And if you just think a little bit historically, you can see there’s an enormous amount of evidence against the idea that everybody automatically and kind of as an inherent, in-built quality or characteristic, has a desire, has a longing, has a yearning for liberty.

If you think historically, if you think just in the 19th and 20th centuries, the rise of Nazism and Hitler in Germany was welcomed by many people in Germany. Hitler was voted into power, and his program was known. He had written *Mein Kampf*, they knew what he was after, they knew that what he was seeking was dictatorial powers—enormous power concentrated in the government and in the head of government, into the Führer—and yet they voted for him anyway. If you think of the rise of socialism and communism, as communism swept the globe, or many parts of the globe, in the 20th century, this was a popular movement that had many people clamoring that what we need, and our country would be better off if it went communist. And the communists were open, Marx was open about talking about a dictatorship, a “*dictatorship* of the proletariat,” which is the opposite of having freedom.

So if you look historically, there are many places and many eras where the desire for liberty is not there. Now, it might be true to say of somebody that if he understood the value of liberty, that he would be better off living in a system that is free, under a government that protects his freedom, if he understood the value of freedom. But that is a different point than saying that everybody automatically desires liberty. I think that is just not true. And if you realize that it’s just not true, it’s an interesting question, then, to think: “Well, are there periods where you can say that a majority or a sizeable minority of the people do in fact desire liberty, they’re working to achieve it, it is something that they are seeking as a real goal and then seeking the means to implement and to establish freedom in their own country or their own nation?” And I think there are such eras. And the most significant one, the one where liberty becomes a dominant political ideal and a dominant cause that the leading people, particularly the leading thinkers and the leading philosophers in an era, are arguing for and advocating, is the Age of Enlightenment.

It is accurate to say of the Age of Enlightenment, at least for the leading thinkers and the leading people in these countries and during this time, that what they seek is liberty. What they seek is freedom. And I want to explore a little bit of why liberty and freedom (I'm using those terms as synonyms) why this became a political ideal and a cause in the Age of Enlightenment. And to answer that question, I think what you need to ask is: "Well, what did they mean by 'freedom'?" Freedom means the absence of obstacles, impediments, chains, something shackling you, holding you down. To be free is to be free of something. So when we're talking about, in the Age of Enlightenment, and that they're advocating for freedom, for political liberty, the question you have to ask is: "Well, what do they want to be free from? What obstacle or impediments are they seeking to get rid of, to free themselves from?"

And I think the answer to that question, from a philosophical perspective, so the fundamental answer to that question of what they're seeking to be free from is they're seeking to be free from *authority* and from *obedience*. And you can put those together. They're seeking to be free from having to obey authorities. And that is meant in a wide sense. So you can talk about political authorities, but it also includes moral and philosophical authorities. They want to be free; they don't have to obey these things. So I think the easiest way to hold this point is: they want to be free from the king, and you can take him of the representative of political authority, and the whole imagery of a king and people, subjects, kneeling before the king, you're to not question him, you're not to argue with him, you're to be obedient. So it's obedience, in a political sense, to the king, and then you can say of the Pope. Again, it was obedience to a pope, he's supposed to be infallible, he's the authority on scientific issues, such as the issue of the nature of the solar system. Is the earth the center of the solar system? His word goes, because he's supposed to be infallible, he has a direct line of communication to God, he's not to be questioned. And he's a moral authority. What he says about right and wrong is to be accepted without question. That is what obedience is, it means unquestioning, or blind obedience. And this is what the Enlightenment is rebelling against. They're rebelling against the whole conception that life is about obedience to authority—to a king or to a pope.