

3. Coercion vs. reason

So I've talked a little bit about Newton as viewed as a hero during the Age of Enlightenment. Two other examples, I think, are important to think about and to capture the spirit of the times. So Newton was viewed as the great exemplar, the great example of someone who functions by reason. But I've talked about: it's reason versus authority, in a political sense. It's *freedom* versus authority, *liberty* versus authority. If you think, during this period, of what are examples that they used, and, in effect, imagery that they used, about what the conflict between reason and authority or liberty and authority looks like, I would single out two examples.

So Galileo, a scientist of Newton's caliber, but working in an earlier period than Newton, brought before the Inquisition because of the theories and conclusions that he came to, that he expounded, and that he taught. And I'll talk a little bit about that, but one example is Galileo before the Inquisition. And the other example is Socrates and the way the Athenian democracy treated Socrates, brought him to trial, tried to silence him for, again, for teaching, for his views, for his doctrines, and he was ultimately put to death, had to drink the hemlock and was put to death. And if you think of these two examples, you can think of them in this way: What is Galileo? He's a scientific innovator. He's bringing new conclusions about facts, about what is true and false, and he's rejecting, in the process, he's rejecting conventional, traditional views, which had the power of authority behind them.

He's upholding the Copernican system, giving new evidence and arguments for it; he's rejecting the idea that the earth is at the center of the solar system. He's rejecting that religious view. He has new teachings about the nature of the moon, discoveries about the moons of Jupiter. He's challenging established views that are backed by the power of authority. And the power of authority descends upon him, and the power of the authorities to use force, to use coercion to silence him: they're going to put him in house arrest, in prison, and he has to recant what he actually thinks, what he actually believes. So in the realm of fact, of science, of true and false, Galileo is a representative of someone seeking truth, knowledge of fact, scientific discoveries, by means of reason, and being met by the impediment, by the enormous obstacle of authorities using the power of force and coercion. So that is one example.

Socrates, you can view him, he's not a scientist, in the way that one thinks of Galileo. He's a philosopher. And particularly what he's doing—what was he doing in Athens?—is he's bringing new views and teaching new views, and discussing and advocating new views about right and wrong, about the nature of values. So Galileo's on the side of fact. Socrates is on the side of values, of bringing new moral ideas, new moral truths into the world. And he's met again by the power of authority who wants to silence him. And the power of authority that can use coercion—to use force. They're going to fine him, he doesn't accept these fines. They're going to tell him, "Well, then you have to leave the city. We're going to expel you" he's not ready to leave the city. "Well, then, we're going to kill you." And they execute Socrates for his *moral* discoveries. So both in the realm of fact and in the realm of value, what the Enlightenment said is: You need to function by means of reasoning, by means of arguments, by means of gathering evidence and forming considered, reasoned conclusions, as

against going by authority. And you can think: Galileo met the authority of a pope who viewed himself as, “I’m infallible on scientific issues, on issues of true and false, of facts.” Socrates met the authorities who said, “We know what is right and wrong. We know what is valuable and not. We know your teachings are all wrong, and we can silence you.”

So both in the realm of fact and value, they had a view of what it means to function by reason, and what the alternative looks like, of what it means when authority enters these realms backed by, the power of the gun, by prisons and executions. And this was the conflict, in effect. In the Enlightenment, in the most fundamental way, they thought of the conflict as between freedom and its absence. It’s freedom versus authorities that are dictating in the realm of fact and dictating in the realm of values.

So if you think of these two examples, of Galileo and Socrates, and that they met a very different fate than the fate of Newton, who was working during the period of the Enlightenment, Newton was celebrated as a hero, he was given a hero’s funeral, he was universally admired and looked up to, and these kinds of impediments, obstacles, were not put in his way, as they were put in the way of a Galileo and of a Socrates, who was executed. So you can put it: liberty versus authority, reason versus authority. This led to the Enlightenment’s whole view and argument against coercion and why coercion was evil. And you can put it: it’s because they viewed reason as good, and that a person should function by using his reason, by reasoning, by having considered judgments, coercion or force was viewed as bad. Because what it seeks to do—authorities using the power of force, the power of guns and prisons—what they’re seeking to do is to override a person’s considered judgments, to override his reasoning. But you can’t override that and accomplish anything.

So they could imprison Galileo, and he had to recant what he believed, but that is not to convince him that he’s wrong, that he’s made a mistake in his reasoning, that his scientific conclusions don’t make sense. You haven’t convinced Socrates by using the power of coercion, by putting him under house arrest, by putting him in prison. You’ve produced nothing, if knowledge is the goal—or, as the Enlightenment would say: if *enlightenment* is the goal—an enlightened mind that now is not ignorant, but knows, possesses knowledge. You haven’t done anything for Galileo, to convince him, and therefore he doesn’t have any new ideas, new knowledge. So coercion is worse than useless. All it does is terrifies a Galileo of proceeding with his scientific investigations, because he doesn’t know what powers are going to descend upon his head, what coercive powers will descend upon his head. But you haven’t convinced him of anything.

The same with Socrates: the Athenian democracy doesn’t convince him that he’s wrong. They don’t offer him arguments, they don’t show him, “You know, your new views about right and wrong, about morality, don’t make any sense.” That’s not what happens. It’s just: “We’re going to exile you or execute you.” That is not to convince him of anything. So if what one is seeking in life, and if what is crucial in life is knowledge, is enlightenment, then the power of coercion is worse than useless; it’s enormously detrimental to the pursuit of knowledge. And this is why, during the period of the Enlightenment, they were radically against the use of coercion, both in the pursuit of facts and the pursuit of values. You can’t convince anybody of matters of fact, of true and false, by using the power of the fist, a gun, a prison. And that’s the imagery of Galileo, and the symbol of Galileo. And you can’t convince

anyone about issues of value, of good and evil, by resorting to a fist, a gun, or a prison—and that’s the imagery or the symbol of Socrates.

So it was precisely because they viewed both the realm of fact and the realm of values as open to reason that they said coercion can’t enter these fields. And that was their whole argument against coercion. And the result is during the period of the Enlightenment, you can think of them as: what they’re advocating is freedom. But that meant much more than economic freedom. It meant a person’s intellectual freedom, the freedom of a Galileo to function without someone trying to silence him, terrorize him. It meant moral freedom, or moral-political freedom. Here is the imagery of a Socrates brought before the political authorities, told that he has to recant or repudiate his moral views. And it also included economic freedom, but for the same reason: that what economic controls do is try to dictate to a person his view of true and false or right and wrong.

And let’s take a very simple example, just of an economic control: minimum wage laws. Now, advocates of minimum wage laws will say, in passing the minimum wage, it’s false that this is going to create unemployment, or more unemployment. They just, many, will say, “No, it’s false that that will happen.” But there’s a whole argument in economics that that’s inescapable, that you’re going to create unemployment. If a person can be hired at five dollars an hour, and businesses can make a profit employing the person at five dollars an hour, but can’t if they had to pay him seven dollars an hour, if you pass a minimum wage that says, “The minimum wage is seven dollars,” the person earning five dollars now finds it very difficult, indeed impossible, to find a job in that economy. And that’s the sense in which now he’s unemployed, before he was not unemployed. So there’s a whole economic argument that it’s false that minimum wage laws don’t create additional unemployment.

The person who thinks that, who is challenging this view that minimum wage laws are innocuous, they don’t create unemployment, he has a different view: he thinks they’re wrong, he thinks he’s right. Can he act on that knowledge, of what *he* thinks is true and false? No. If you’ve imposed an economic control of a minimum wage of seven dollars an hour, everybody has to obey. And it’s obedience. Even if you think it’s wrong, you have to obey. So that kind of economic control trespasses on a person’s view of what is true and false. It also trespasses on his view of what is right and wrong.

Another view of the people propounding a minimum wage law: they’ll say, “These are good. They’re good for people. They don’t hurt people, they’re good.” Again, there’s an economic argument saying, “No, obviously people are hurt. The person who would have employed someone, the employer who would have employed someone at five dollars an hour, now can’t. So he’s lost. And the person who was employable at five dollars an hour, because he’s just starting off, doesn’t have skills yet, he’s not very productive, you can hire him at five dollars an hour, you can’t at seven dollars, he too is hurt, because he can’t find a job now. So there are people hurt on both sides. It creates real damage, real hardship.

So there’s an argument to be made that these are bad, that these are wrong, they’re not valuable, they’re harmful. But, again, can you act on that view of what’s right and wrong? Not if they’ve passed a control that’s saying, “Minimum wage law is seven dollars an hour,” and that you have to pay that, regardless if you think it’s hurtful to people and harmful to yourself to act in that way. So economic controls trespass both on a person’s view of what is

true and false and right and wrong. And the result is that the case for freedom during the Enlightenment is: these are just aspects. Intellectual freedom, economic freedom, political freedom, are just aspects of the basic philosophical argument for why freedom is necessary and desirable.