

5. The decline of liberty as an ideal

So if you understand those as the moral pillars of the Enlightenment's cause of political liberty and its demand for freedom, its demand for The Rights of Man, and that what government is about is securing and protecting protects these rights—and that's all that it's about, that's its function and only function—it's an important function, crucial function, but a very delimited function. And this is when you get the idea of a delimited government, or of limited government. Well, what is the limit? The limits are imposed by the Rights of Man that you cannot trespass, and the government cannot trespass, on the individual rights of a person.

Why did the ideals of Liberty and the Rights of Man decline in the 19th century?

So why does this happen? Why, shortly after the creation of the United States of America, do we see both the ideal of political liberty, and of the Rights of Man on decline? That is, starting to disappear from the intellectual scene. And why do we see then, the rise of Socialism, of the Progressive Movement in America, of the Fabian Socialists in England, of the Communists and Fascists throughout Europe? Why do we see this on the rise? And you can put it as: why do we see the rise of Collectivism as a political ideal? Gone are the rights of the individual, now it's all about the nation, the collective, the group, the proletariat. So, why do we see this really dramatic change? And I think the answer to this question, there's a really two part answer, two related things, that, when you view them together provide the explanation of this really drastic change. And the first part of the answer is that, I've been talking about the pillars of the Enlightenment, the foundation of the Enlightenment's view. I've been talking about how their view of reason and of morality leads to them, leads them to think of liberty as a political ideal. But, I've been presenting sort of the best case, the best case you could make for what they were arguing, and the types of arguments that they were offering. But when you look at the actual Enlightenment thinkers, and you read their works, the best case is not all that they're arguing. Indeed, when you look at kind of the full philosophical views, there's many flaws in the argument. There's many chinks in the armor, you could put it. And those flaws created a real vulnerability.

If you take, first on the issue of reason, take Locke as he's really the central Enlightenment thinker. His views about the nature of reason are infused with a sort of skepticism, and particularly, a skepticism about the human mind's ability to know the world external to it. So, to know a world that exists independently from human beings. There are questions in Locke about, "Well, can the mind really reach this kind of knowledge?" So there's skepticism about this, that it can really reach this kind of knowledge. And Locke's views then throughout the Enlightenment get pushed further and further down the road to Skepticism. And, if you fast forward, many decades later to another English thinker, David Hume, it's now you have a very, very skeptical philosophy: a philosophy that is questioning man's ability to know the world. So Hume questions man's ability to know the world external to him. He questions man's ability to grasp cause and effect. And he questions man's ability to engage in scientific, inductive reasoning. These are all things that the Enlightenment figures are counting on, Enlightenment scientists are counting on, and he's calling them into question through a real skeptical philosophy. That's on the issue of reason. Now, if you take on the

issue of morality: Locke as I've been saying, and the Enlightenment in general, is on the side of that what the individual should be concerned with, his self-preservation, and the pursuit of his own happiness. That is what they're trying to defend. But, if you look at Locke's full arguments, what you get is not just an appeal to reason. The very foundation of his moral views, he says it rests on an appeal to God. Which means, on an appeal to authority. Which is in direct contradiction to the whole meaning and spirit of the Enlightenment.

So I've been arguing that what Enlightenment was about is about being on the side of reason, and challenging authority. And Locke is certainly trying to do that, but when you get to the foundation of his moral views, there remains an appeal to authority. So there's a vulnerability there. And when you look again, and kind of fast forward through the Enlightenment, this kind of appeal to authority grows, I think. Or at least what grows is a suspicion that reason can figure out moral issues. And when you get to the stage of a David Hume, what Hume is arguing in morality is that reason has very little place. Morality is about sentiments, feelings, emotions. That's what should guide you, not reason. "Reason is a slave of the passions" is one of his famous formulations. So you get now suspicion that reason can operate in the field of morality, of right and wrong, good and evil. So on both the kind of the two crucial issues that I've been talking about, a view of reason and a view of morality, there are real problems, real flaws in the Enlightenment view in the arguments that are being offered for these two ideals. You could put it: the ideal of reason and the ideal of a morality that talks about self-preservation and the pursuit of happiness. So the case, or the defense, for these ideas is suspect, it's vulnerable. And that's the first thing that you have to know in order to understand why the ideal of political liberty disappears in the 19th, and then 20th centuries.

So the first issue, or the first aspect of trying to answer the question of why liberty as a political ideal, disappears in the 19th and then 20th centuries, the first issue I've said, is that you have to understand that the arguments advanced by the Enlightenment in defense of their views were problematic, there were real flaws in the arguments. So there's a real vulnerability created by that. And then the second issue is that people take advantage of that vulnerability. So you're vulnerable to attack, and the attacks soon came. And they come throughout the 19th century, from all the major thinkers, particularly the philosophical thinkers. So, the philosophers of the 19th century attack man's ability to reason about the world. So they continue to reinforce the Skepticism that was emerging during the Enlightenment: "Man can't know the world that exists external to him." And they're questioning the Enlightenment morality: "Morality is not about self-preservation, morality is not about the pursuit of happiness." So, one, you have a vulnerability, and two, people used that to attack. It's an opening to attack the Enlightenment.

So if we go back now to what the enlightened view of life was, I talked about self-preservation, of being rational, industrious, of leading to one's own personal happiness. In the 19th century, all of that is discarded, attacked, it's argued that it's wrong and we need a different view. So take the issue of self-preservation. Well, the ideals that you get, and what, supposedly, life is about, according to 19th century thinkers, is either: it's obedience to duty, and we see the idea of obedience entering again, and that's the Kantian view. Kant becomes the dominant philosopher of the 19th century. Now, Kant was writing at the end of the 18th century, but he becomes the dominant philosopher of the 19th century, certainly in Germany he is. Hegel is a student, in effect; Marx is a student of Hegel. They make changes to the

Kantian position, but not to the basic idea that what life is about, is about obedience to duty; it's not about self-preservation. Obedience to duty.

In England, you get, with the rise of the Utilitarians, a Bentham, a James Mill, a John Stuart Mill, the ideal becomes “social utility,” that you're supposed to be focused on society as a whole and what is useful, beneficial to society as a whole. It's, again, not about self-preservation. Your focus is not on the self, but on society. And the “utilitarian” in “Utilitarians” means “social utility,” as their basic cause in life.

In France, so if you go from England to France, you get the idea of altruism. The term “altruism” is coined in the 19th century in France by Comte, a French thinker. And it literally means, translated from the French: “Live for others.” So it's the opposite of self-preservation. Self-preservation, in effect, you could put it, is: “Live for yourself.” Now the ideal becomes “live for others,” and “altruism” is the Latin for “other-ism.” “Live for others.”

So self-preservation as the basic cause is tossed out and argued against in the 19th century, and the result is what characteristics you should exhibit and what it's moral to exhibit: it's not to be rational, it's not reason; reason is under attack, philosophically. Kant says and, I think, rightly, of what he's doing, he says, in one of his prefaces to his major work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*: “I found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.” Or you can put it: I found it necessary to deny *reason* in order to make room for faith. It is an attack on the idea that a person should function in a fundamental way by following reason, there's other things.

So what you get in the 19th century is faith and, more broadly, emotions— that what you should follow is the emotions, your emotional elements: “drives,” “instincts” and so on; this is what you have to listen to in life, and reason is very limited, it's not adequate as a guide, it has to be supplanted by something deeper, which is the emotional element, supposed, in a man, that is sort of a primary and that will lead him in his life. So it is faith and emotions supplant reason.

Industriousness: that, too, comes under attack for philosophical reasons. The whole idea of an admiration for industry, for commerce, is denigrated and deprecated in the 19th century. Industry and trade and commerce, and business, is viewed as a low activity, unworthy of a person who is really moral, who is really spiritual, who is striving for ideals in life. And what you get in the 19th century is a real longing for the past—for the preindustrial past, for the Middle Ages, for instance, for “Noble Savages,” the Rousseauian idea that becomes very prominent in the 19th century, for a “back to nature” movement, in effect—back to a preindustrial realm. That is what is admired, and the business people and the whole industrial revolution is dismissed as something dirty, low, bad.

So both “rational” and “industrious” become heavily under attack in the 19th century, and the consequence of all of this, of self-preservation and being rational, being industrious, was supposed to be happiness, according to the Enlightenment. That, too, comes under attack. That is not the ideal; the ideal is to have done your duty, which is the Kantian, German kind of version; it's to have achieved “the greatest happiness of the greatest number,” which is the English, Utilitarian version; it is to have lived and sacrificed for others; it's to have achieved a “religion of humanity,” which was a term Comte uses, that's the ideal. So the ideal of

personal happiness and that that's what a moral, enlightened life will result in—that, too, is discarded and attacked in the 19th century.

And if all those things are attacked, then what is going to happen politically? Well, the rights of man are going to be seen as: this is useless nonsense, because it's all wrong philosophically. The rights of man, right to life, was predicated on self-preservation, but that's not the basic goal in morality. We know that now. So that will be tossed out. A right to liberty, of freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of association and assembly, well, that depends on viewing a person as: well, he should be living by his reason. But if he's to go by faith and emotions, authority and obedience enters the scene again, and it becomes the crusading ideal in the 20th century, with socialism and with communism, and the "dictatorship of the proletariat." That is an incredible authority, and that's what one saw in every communist country.

So reason is gone, philosophically, and so a right to liberty, I mean, what do we need this for? A right to property is under attack constantly in the 19th century; this is the rise of all the socialist thinkers, Marx just being the dominant example, certainly dominant in the 20th century, but there's a whole host of thinkers attacking that. And again: if life isn't about industry and making things, why is the right to property, why would this be crucial? Why would we be striving for this? And a right to happiness, to "the pursuit of happiness," as the Declaration of Independence puts it, well, if morally speaking, life is not about happiness, it's about doing your duty, it's about the greatest happiness of everybody, not your own personal happiness, it's about a "religion of humanity" and sacrificing for humanity, why would there be a right to the pursuit of happiness?

So all the philosophical underpinnings or foundations of the rights of man were attacked in the 19th century in philosophy, and the result is they discarded, and they discarded as nonsense, and some thinkers used that term, 'nonsense', the view that there are the rights of man. And as a result the idea of political liberty is no longer the crusading political ideal in the 19th and certainly in the 20th centuries.