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AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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0:33	Intro. [Recording date: November 8, 2018.]

Russ Roberts: My guest is political scientist Peter Berkowitz.... Our topic for today is Liberalism, writ large. I will draw partly on a 5-part series that you did that we will link to on Patrick Deneen's book, *Why Liberalism Failed*. I want to start by your attempt--it's a bold question--to define liberalism. Not an easy thing to do. So, when you talk about liberalism, what does it mean to you?

Peter Berkowitz: Yes. Not an easy thing to do. Well, first we should distinguish: I don't mean, not because it's not an interesting question, but I don't mean liberalism as the term is typically used in contemporary parlance--that is, the left wing of the Democratic Party, the Progressive point of view, the school of political thought that argues that we should aggressively use government to regulate the economy and redistribute wealth. I don't mean that, although actually those thoughts are within the tradition that I do refer to as liberalism. When I use the term--or, I should put it this way--I want to think more about the modern tradition of freedom. And, since that's a sometimes cumbersome formulation, for short I say 'Liberalism.' And I have in mind a tradition that comes into being, that crystallizes, really, say, toward the end of the 17th century, in England, the seminal work is John Locke's *Two Treatises* on government. This is the tradition that, to a very significant extent, informs the founding of the United States, our Constitution. Its fundamental moral premise is that all human beings are by nature free and equal. It says that the task of government is to secure individual rights shared equally by all, rest government on the consent of the governed. It believes that government should be limited; it depends upon free markets and a vibrant civil society; and so on. That's the tradition that I have in mind when I refer to the Liberal Tradition.

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Russ Roberts: And, talk about how John Locke matters, in general, for that. You happen to, arbitrarily of course, pick Locke as a turning point of some kind. Why is he important for the evolution of the institutions that we call Liberal Institutions in the West? And, who else would you give credit to, or who else is important in that evolution?

Peter Berkowitz: Sure. Well, there's a lot of credit to be given. But, Locke marks a kind of seminal moment. John Locke is not the first thinker in the Western tradition to write about limited government or the separation of powers, or even consent. But he's among the very first, and provides a classical statement of the idea that these political institutions and political ideas to be traced back to, grounded in the idea that all human beings are by nature free and equal. And, this is a relatively new idea. Not that the idea that human beings are by nature free and equal doesn't have roots in the Western tradition, in both classical Greeks and our Biblical tradition. But, the Bible doesn't base equality on natural rights, on natural freedom and equality. It bases it on our all being created in God's image. And Greek political thought doesn't begin from the idea that all human beings are by nature free and equal. Greek political thought tends to revolve around questions of virtue and human excellence, and draws moral distinctions among human beings based on the virtues and thinks about how to organize political society in relationship to virtue. Locke, again, he may not begin, he certainly doesn't begin, but he gives seminal expression to a *new* way of thinking about politics, a way of thinking about politics that says: most important fact about human beings--I use the word 'fact' here from Locke's point of view--is that we are by nature free and equal; and a legitimate political society must respect this freedom and this equality. Locke works that out, and much of political thought--not all, but much of political thought in the English-speaking tradition following Locke involves efforts to think through the variety of political and moral implications of this beginning thought: that human beings are by nature free and equal.

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6:12	**Russ Roberts:** Why would he possibly--how could he possibly start there, given that he was writing in the 17th century, I think, when most people for all intents and purposes were neither free nor equal? What did he have in mind when he would make a claim like that, given that a lot of people were literally enslaved; others were in various kinds of bondage or lack of liberty, and certainly--there was a lot of inequality? What was he thinking and what did he mean by that? Go ahead. **Peter Berkowitz:** Yes. Good questions. Well, I've been emphasizing as this Locke formulation *by nature* free and equal. In reality, human beings were *not* treated as free and equal: slavery, other forms of bondage, inequalities, even savage inequalities in society. At the time, Britain and Europe both were governed by divine-right monarchs. Divine-right monarchy seemed to suggest that there was a fundamental difference between kings and queens, and other human beings. Kings and queens had a right that other human beings lacked. So, Locke was writing at this time, 17th century, amid wars of religion after, officially in 1648 the great wars of religion ended but continued religious strife, including in Britain. And he was writing at a time in which the idea that kings ruled by Divine Right was becoming increasingly incredible, more and more: incredible in the technical sense of more and more difficult to believe. And Locke begins his second treatise raising the question: If we can no longer accept that political power is based upon the claims of Divine Right--and this is what he believed himself to have successfully shown in the *First Treatise* of Government, then we face a challenge, because we would prefer to avoid concluding that the exercise of all power is illegitimate or based upon force and violence, the stronger imposing upon the weaker. So, he asks himself, 'Is there an alternative foundation to Divine Right for political power?' His answer was Yes. His answer was political power *is* rooted in the natural freedom and equality of all--or, let's be more precise--in the decisions by individuals who are by nature free and equal to recognize the political power exercised over them as legitimate. Now, you ask a very good question: Why should anybody think this assumption plausible in the 17th century? And, I think one very important part of the answer is the Biblical tradition, because the Biblical tradition--and John Locke is very much writing within--I've used the phrase, but British scholar [?] John Donne, 'within a Puritan pattern of moral sentiment.' The dominant idea--I should say, a leading idea--taught by Protestantism was the basic equality of human beings. This was a teaching that you would have begun to learn when you were very young. Now, again, one objection one constantly hears is, 'Yes, but political reality differed from what children were taught and even from what might be professed in church.' It certainly did. Political reality almost always diverges from the ideal; and a great deal of politics involves bringing a recalcitrant political reality a bit more in line with what we think to be proper and just.
10:47	**Russ Roberts:** So, at that time--I think of it as a stirring, a feeling that something isn't quite right. And what follows from that is a set of revolutions, upheavals, both in the physical sense and in the intellectual sense, that ends up destroying the defensibility of that monarchy, Divine Right of kings--

seemingly forever. And launches what we would normally--is part of, not only but is part of what we normally call the Enlightenment. Would that be a correct summary?

Peter Berkowitz: Yes. I think that gets you from Locke, toward the end of the 17th century, toward the flowering of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. I mean, one might add that there are additional developments: the rise of modern science, the rise of British maritime cultures. Ships are sent to all over the world. And not only the British, but other Europeans discovering the variety and diversity of humanity; as the economy becomes more involved and more intricate, more opportunities are created for more human beings; more human beings become open to the idea of human equality. So, a variety of elements are at work, all pushing us in the direction of recognizing that human beings are by nature free and equal, and making more demands for a form of political economic and moral life that *reflects* this essential equality and freedom.

Russ Roberts: And, one more definitional point: When Locke said that human beings are free, what do you think he meant by that?

Peter Berkowitz: Ah. Thank you. It's a very important question, and I should have already provided an answer to it. He meant 'freedom' in a precise sense. In other words, you can think of various ways of being free. If I'm hiking and I stumble and find myself pinned down by a rock, I can't move. I'm trapped in that situation. I'm not *free* to get up and move about. Or, if I have an aspiration to fly to the clouds. If I don't have an airplane, you could say, 'Well, I'm limited. I'm not truly free.' In some sense, these are legitimate uses of the word 'freedom.' But John Locke is very clear. He's not referring to freedom in *that* sense. The kind of freedom that we have by nature is not being legitimately subject to the will of another person, or other groups of human beings. Think about it this way: Locke is telling us that we can discern through reason that no human being is born with a title to rule over another, and no human being is born to *serve* another. We are not born with a duty to serve. We are not born with titles to rule. That's freedom. Now, I said, it's a narrow sense. But it's a *profound* sense. And it's rich with political significance. But, it doesn't refer to absolute freedom, complete freedom--as critics of the Liberal tradition come to say it does.

Russ Roberts: So, if I'm thinking of doing something and I'm worried I'm going to be judged for it--

Peter Berkowitz: Yes--

Russ Roberts: so those social norms constrain my choice--they don't constrain--that's not the right word. I don't know what the right word is there, but affect my choices. Just to take a very modest example: I'm going to a funeral, and I decide not to go in my gym clothes.

Peter Berkowitz: Yeh.

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Russ Roberts: I decide to put on a suit. I'm *free* to put on--I'm free to go in my gym clothes.

Peter Berkowitz: Yes.

Russ Roberts: I choose not to because I think it's "inappropriate." That social norm, I assume Locke would not call a restriction of my freedom.

Peter Berkowitz: Yeah. So, we should be careful here. It *is* in a sense a restriction of your freedom--the guilt trips that our parents impose upon us or we as children impose upon our parents. Those are constraints on people's freedom, for sure. But, here's the important distinction: That was not the form of freedom that John Locke believed it was the government's job to protect. In other words, post-modern critics, for example, will talk about enslavement to social norms--

Russ Roberts: Exactly--

Peter Berkowitz: We should not deny that social norms can rein us in, pin us down, shackle us, already in the middle of the 19th century. John Locke and Tocqueville a little bit earlier, are making this point about the power of public opinion, and social norms, to limit us. We need to acknowledge it. It's true. Locke--Locke's teaching is: That kind of unfreedom, and the kind of unfreedom you experience in your ability to fight to the clouds and beyond, is not the kind of freedom the State is designed to protect or achieve to enable you to achieve. The form of protection that the State grants to prevent you from being subject to the will of another. And here I suppose I need to clarify. "Will," not in the sense of expressing an opinion or making a judgment that you dislike or deplore. "Will," in the sense of forcing you: the threat in the face of violence, with the threat of violence to act or to refrain from acting.

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17:19	**Russ Roberts:** It's a very important distinction. And I think--I mean, you can use words any way you like, as long as, well, up to a point as long as you make it clear what you mean by them. And I think that particular distinction you just made is extremely important. And I guess it's the reason I call myself, often, a classical liberal-- **Peter Berkowitz:** yes-- **Russ Roberts:** a liberal in the older sense of the word. And by that, I'm talking about what I think is the correct role of the state. And when I talk about that correct role, I will often say I want a 'minimal state with personal responsibility.' And by 'minimal' I mean--I have no problem; I'm not an anarchist; I have no problem with government providing certain legal restrictions and regulations: courts, police, and so on. And everything is free to happen in emergent ways, but just not through the power of the legislature or the sovereign. And so, yes: It's okay; there are many things we don't like about life. I often: Use drugs as an example. I don't take drugs of the recreational kind. But I think we should be free to make that choice for ourself, and I have no problem with the role that religion or family or culture would play in restricting drug use through shame, education, inspiration--and various other ways. I just don't want the government forcing, not allowing people to have those choices for themselves. **Peter Berkowitz:** Right. And I have a great deal of sympathy, myself, for that way of viewing the matter. In addition, that way of viewing the matter can help us understand enduring distinctions between Right and Left, within this Liberal tradition--or I use another term; I'm glad you mentioned now: Classical Liberalism--for the early moments and the mature moments of the modern tradition of freedom. You spoke of not being against the state, but for a minimal state. And, in fact, in practice many men and women on the Left recognize some limitations on the State. But, you can determine where a person falls within this broader tradition, modern tradition of freedom, by how much power they are willing to give the state for the purpose of securing freedom and equality. So, today's Conservatives tend to wish to see the State significantly limited. They want a broad, private sphere. They want the individual to be able to make lots of choices. Not because we're always confident that the individual will choose best or most wisely. But, because we're *very* skeptical that on balance and over the long haul that other people--government--can choose better for, uh, individuals. But, if you look at those people who want more regulation, including more redistribution, it *is* very interesting that always their arguments are couched in terms of freedom and equality. Very few people say, 'I want more regulation in order to achieve greater aristocracy.' Or, 'I want it to increase the power of my small clique or corner of the elite.' Almost always the arguments are in favor, are justified by an appeal by what's necessary to do to achieve true and genuine freedom, or meaningful equality.
21:09	**Russ Roberts:** If I can--I want to digress for a second. So, I find myself often arguing against those interventionist claims, by saying something like,

'I worry about the concentration of power in the hands of elected officials.' Because, as you said, I don't think they are going to do a particularly good job. And yet at the same time, I respect the intentions of the Interventionists who want to liberate people from what they see as oppressive conditions. Or, oppressive economic straits. And so, I think I--I find myself in what I think is a difficult position to defend, which is that: Ultimately, a lot of my opposition to various government programs or interventions is a fear of tyranny that is not apparent in the current setting. But I worry would be, if things continued in the way that they are going. And I don't know if that's a legitimate concern. I *do know* it doesn't sell very well. Most people don't find it as compelling as I do. And I have to then at least examine my own views as to why *I* find it compelling. Is it because of my so-called knowledge of myself? In a congratulatory view that I know a lot about history, perhaps? Or aware of how unbridled power has turned out, when it operates? And I guess, when I look at the other defense I would offer to my view is that when I look at the long trend in America, away from the Constitutional restraints of the past and toward a more--more of a democracy and less of a republic--I get deeply alarmed. Is there something--I suspect you share some of that concern; but it's interesting how few people find it compelling.

Peter Berkowitz: Yes, I share a great deal of that concern. But I do quarrel[?] with this, when you say how few people find it compelling. Actually, quite a number of people in the United States of America find it compelling. But, there are regions in the country, and classes of people--specific classes of people--who do not find this line of argument compelling. And those people tend to be very heavily concentrated at our universities--

Russ Roberts: They're some of the brightest and most educated, for what it's worth.

Peter Berkowitz: They're some of the brightest and most educated, and that's worth a lot. But they also form a specific political class, with distinct interests. These people think--many of these people think that they are not only very bright and very gifted, many of these people think that they know how to govern and that they know what's best for everybody else. And they, in my experience, grow impatient and resentful with people who don't recognize this. And they have both a strong desire to rule, great confidence, and great confidence in their abilities. And in having those two qualities, it seems to me, they warrant the kinds of suspicions that you entertain, and I do, as well, about what happens with great concentrations of power. *Even if* the original impulse is a noble impulse. But also, these people tend to equate both their interests and their perspective with the universal perspective, and universal interests. And that's just not so, historically or culturally. These people tend to be--

Russ Roberts: Explain. What do you mean by that? What's not so?

Peter Berkowitz: Well, for example, the overwhelming majority of professors at our elite universities are secular men and women. The overwhelming majority are men and women of the Left. It is not true of the United States of America, first of all, that the overwhelming majority are of

the Left; and we have a sizeable religious population in this country. Moreover, this is not just a matter of representation. Now we touch on an area in which Enlightenment thought can be taken to an extreme. There are many people, many among our intellectuals, who believe that the secular point of view is not only a legitimate, a respectable point of view, a powerful point of view; they believe that it's the last word on reality. And that seems to me--

Russ Roberts: As many religious people do, as well. On the other side.

Peter Berkowitz: Yes, fair enough. And I'm actually equally averse to giving either group absolute power. Quite correct. But in *our* political society in the United States of America today, it is the secular class that is largely in control of our educational institutions. Not the religious class. Now, this is a rather new circumstance in the history of humanity. Up until the Enlightenment, there was barely a distinction between the religious and secular. All were in one way or another, almost all lived within a religious framework. So, yes: religious people, you might say *all people*, tend to equate their understanding of the world with the final understanding of the world. But for just that reason, Russ, it seems to me you are well-justified in your skepticism about handing over lots of power to determine not only decisions about labor consumption and production, but decisions about what can be said, what may not be said; what can be heard, what may not be heard; who or what to worship or not to.

28:01 **Russ Roberts:** But so many of the issues that I think are on the table, on the political table, are outside most of these concerns. Let's talk about the hard case. You and I--I know we're on the same people with respect to freedom of speech and what can be said and not said; and we both are upset, I know, at the current state of many university settings where certain things are, literally, not allowed to be said--at a place where we once believed everything should be said, so that the power of education can be wielded as fully as possible. I want to put that to the side. Let's take a harder case. Let's talk about various redistribution measures that the Left and the Right disagree on, or that interventionists and--the Liberal and Conservative interventionists versus noninterventionists disagree on. In particular, think about things like the minimum wage, the earned income tax credit, progressive taxation, the current levels of inequality--which, listeners know I think are greatly exaggerated. But even if they are greatly exaggerated, the actual levels are still large by many historical standards--I shouldn't say all historical standards: by *some* historical measures. And so, when we think about this in the framework of what you're talking about, the Lockean free-and-equal and the political issues of the day, you know, almost *no one* is willing to defend the abstract level of income distribution that would happen in a free market society, without the safety net, without social welfare spending, without interventions in the economy like the minimum wage. And, I don't think--when I think about--and I tend to be one of the few who is defensive of those; I'm willing, I would rather see civil society and philanthropy and charity be the means by which social differences are

effected rather than through the power of the legislature and the state. I'm on a very lonely island there with a very small group of friends. And, when I think about the people on the other side, most of them are extremely well-intentioned. They are not the elites at the universities that you are criticizing and giving a hard time about, for their self-righteous--etc. They are just well-intentioned people who don't like the way the world is; and they operate on a case by case basis; they are not ideologues, like I tend to be. I try to be a more humble ideologue than I was when I was younger. But I'm still an ideologue. And I'm aware of it. Which is a plus. But the people on the other side just say, 'Come on. There's so much extra wealth laying around. You don't need it'--whoever 'you' is--and, 'Let's move some of it around.' And I think most of the people who are in favor of that don't want to be running the world. They don't want to see themselves as the philosopher kings. They just want to make the world a better place. So, what's your response to that?

Peter Berkowitz: My response is that there has always been--you could call it classical liberalism or the modern tradition of freedom--room for some state intervention in the economy, and even some redistribution; but it has to be limited. And, it's limited by considerations of freedom and right. Well, what do I mean? There's a wonderful, brief discussion in Chapter 6 of Locke's *Second Treatise* which deals with education concerning parents' obligations. Parents have an obligation to, argues Locke, to educate their children. But, there's also a puzzle there. If all human beings are by nature free and equal, by what authority impose their will? Educate? Because education is a kind of imposition, a discipline on their children. Locke [?]--

Russ Roberts: It's a very tough question.

Peter Berkowitz: It's a very tough question. Well, it's interesting. As a theoretical matter, it's easy to state what a solution is. As a practical, empirical, policy matter, it's at the heart of all our disputes. Locke answers this: Parents may exercise their authority, and must discharge their duty, in order to prepare their children for a life of freedom as adults. Very interesting. So, a lot of discipline, a lot of training, a lot of headache and heartache. But it's all just directed at and justified by the principle of freedom. The question arises--Locke raises the question: What happens if the child is orphaned? His answer: The state should step in. Government should step in and provide the education that it was the obligation of his father--Locke says, actually, of his parents--to provide. The state, you see, has an interest in ensuring that every citizen is at least minimally capable of fending for himself or herself. That means literate; that means capable of holding a job; that means capable at some basic level of participating in the governance of the country. So, *even from the beginning* in the most austere statement we have of classical liberal framework of government, we have a justification for state intervention. And, one can think in those terms about all the forms of intervention that you mentioned. Let's start with a social safety net. Although now, as then, education is one of the most controversial areas. But, the social safety net: Many people argue--including the great classical liberal Friedrich Hayek--that it's entirely proper for an advanced

industrial, post-industrial, liberal democracy to make a, to maintain a basic social safety net. That is, to prevent, to try to prevent *any* citizens from falling below basic, minimum level of material, material wellbeing. It's bad for the country, it's bad for the economy, it's bad for the spirit of fellow-citizens if people are starving in the streets. So, there's no--this may be painful to certain kinds of Libertarian ears--but within the classical liberal tradition, so far as Locke is a member in good standing of that tradition--and I think he is--there's a very strong argument for a degree. But I want to go back to language you used earlier about a minimal state: that, the Liberal perspective also immediately adds, 'We recognize that there are cases for state intervention, to maintain certain minimums. Even moral minimums. But, we'd like that intervention to be as limited as possible, because we remain alert to the dangers of government, to the temptations of over-reach.' To use the language of the *Federalist Papers* of the encroaching nature of power. We want to avoid situations in which the remedy is worse than the disease. So, we can repeat this, of course, through the course of a discussion of all the great social issues of the day. One would find whether we are talking about a social safety net, tax rates, abortion, affirmative action, same sex marriage, transgender rights--a whole range of questions that one can make arguments in the name of freedom and equality on both sides of the question. With Progressives, or the Left side of the spectrum, more interested, focused on progress, improvement, making adjustments by means of the most powerful agency in society--that's government--to improve the ability of more Americans to enjoy their rights. And to create a society that more accurately reflects the equality we all share--the Progressive argument. With Conservatives constantly warning that giving the government the power to do x, y, or z brings about threats to freedom, and therefore equality that will be worse than the situation without those Progressive reforms. In other words, this is the enduring structure of the debate; and I'll only add this for now: That's as it should be. That is the debate that, since Edmund Burke criticized the French Revolutionaries, has constituted the modern tradition of freedom.

38:07 **Russ Roberts:** So, I want to take an example. I don't know how this fits into that. And that was very well said. But when I think about redistribution, I think the wrong argument--which is the one that's usually made; and I think it's wrong--is: High taxes, high tax rates, used to distribute income, is inefficient. Is *inefficient*. This is the economist's complaint about redistribution: It's going to lower the growth rate.

Peter Berkowitz: Right.

Russ Roberts: I find that remarkably unappealing as an argument. I'm not sure it's true. It's true in some sense. I'm very confident that it's true in *some* sense. The magnitudes, though, are often--that are found at least by people--they of course have an axe to grind, inevitably. But they do find relatively small effects. And, when people say to me, 'So, therefore it's better to let--it's better to have higher tax rates and redistribute the money,' or just to 'Have a larger government, period, because the costs are small.

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Because there's not going to be this big adjustment in labor supply, equality of labor supplied,' my thought always is: I have no problem with government taxing at relatively high rates if I thought they would spend the money well. I'm much more confident that the individuals will spend the money well. Yes, much of it will be on themselves. But, much of it might be given away. Much of it might be given to foundations and charities that would do good things. And I don't see a lot of evidence that the government, through the political process, spends it well. At which point my opponents will often say, 'Well, we just need to fix that.' And, my response is: 'It's really hard to fix, evidently, because we're not good at fixing it.' And I also recognize, by the way, that there may be other societies that do it much better than we do. That allocate money, and spend it more wisely and carefully; that American government spending doesn't seem to be so effective. And I'll just mention an example--where, we are having this conversation two days after the mid-term election, and a lot of people were deeply offended, and correctly so, that in many poor neighborhoods, voting machines were broken. Didn't work correctly. People were forced to stand in line for a long time. And some people saw this as something of a conspiracy. It may be. But I did make the observation that many things the government does in poor neighborhoods aren't done well. They--we don't get good police services in poor neighborhoods. We don't get good public schools. I know it's complicated. It's not just the government provision that we are evaluating there. But, it's not surprising to me that in the public process, it allocates things more happily to politically powerful people rather than to people who have very little political power. And, poor people only get the power of voting. And they don't have the power of donation in other ways that people influence the political process. So, they get the short end of the stick. Which is precisely why I prefer, often, *non-governmental* solutions. Of course, they also--poor people also don't do so well at that. But, that's often just at a point in time. At a point in time, yes, rich people have more stuff than poor people. *Over time*, things that were considered the purview of the rich are suddenly available to the poor. So, part of it will have cellphones. They have color TVs. The things that, when they first came out only were enjoyed by rich people: there's a democratization in capitalism that's quite powerful. I'm not going to say that material wellbeing is the only thing that matters. I don't say that at all, in fact. But, to come full circle, I start making the observation that I oppose high tax rates not because of market inefficiencies or slowing of rates of growth. Because I don't think that government allocates that money well. And I think that argument--again, it's not much of a winner--but that's the right way, I think, to think about those things. And--anyway.

Peter Berkowitz: Well, I think it's a good argument. And, you can make arguments like that, by the way, in other spheres. If government truly knew the correct religious--the truths about religion, why *wouldn't* we want government to direct us to the truths about God, the good life on earth, salvation? But, we have a reasonable skepticism about the ability of government to, let's say, allocate wisdom about religion. And that evidence comes from virtually all of human history. To say nothing of the contemporary arena. This, by the way, is not to praise each and every

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	individual. It is to say that a lot of mischief and destruction seems to accompany government being given the power to decide what the true religious beliefs are-- **Russ Roberts:** That was-- **Peter Berkowitz:** Also-- **Russ Roberts:** Sorry. Go ahead. **Peter Berkowitz:** Sorry. Yeah. I was going to say something similar about speech, other kinds of opinions. And, it seems to me you are making a similar argument about good services and wealth. There's *not* good reason to suppose that government--government: that's too abstract--that the men and women who run for office, and the men and women who are appointed by the men and women who win office, are singularly well-skilled at making these complex decisions. Now, some such decisions have to be made. But we worry about two things. One, we worry about, um, about the quantity and quality of wisdom necessary to figure out the right distributions. And then we worry about the, um, the quality of moral integrity, to avoid the temptations and corruptions of power. It seems to me these are good arguments, although I recognize that in many circles, these days, they are not winning arguments. But I don't confuse arguments that win that arguments that are the best. **Russ Roberts:** Hmm. Yeah. Well, for those of those who believe in the market process, it's a little bit difficult, because the ones that we, might be tempted to argue the best, and among my friends, like, I think we'd have to admit, that the place we think markets fail the most is in the market for ideas. But we don't like to talk about that. **Peter Berkowitz:** Hmmm, hmm. **Russ Roberts:** But that's a long conversation for another time.
44:53	**Russ Roberts:** I want to talk about the Enlightenment more generally. Before we do, though, I want to reference two recent EconTalk episodes, one with Patrick Deneen on his book, *Why Liberalism Failed*; and one with Yoram Hazony on *The Virtue of Nationalism*. And I know you have read both books, and I know you have written about both books. And in our private conversations you've suggested to me that both of them get Locke wrong. How did they misunderstand or mis-construe Locke? And why does it matter? **Peter Berkowitz:** Interestingly, both authors--whose books, I should say, I believe, make important contributions to questions of the first importance today about liberal democracy--but, both books, however, treat John Locke as the kind of great demon or great villain of the modern world. That, they treat them--I think this is Deneen's language--as the First Philosopher of

Liberalism; and they both--both Yoram Hazony and Patrick Deneen--regard this tradition that *we've* been talking about as representing a disastrous, wrong turn for humanity.

Russ Roberts: Yup.

Peter Berkowitz: Both believe that. Both believe that it is necessary for us to understand how John Locke has led us astray, and overcome Locke's grip on our thinking and on our political institutions in order to achieve what happiness we can from political life and life in this world. Okay: so that's a perspective both share. Now, what do they say about Locke? Both say something like this--although I may not be entirely fair to either as I try to create a common Locke. But I think I'm pretty close, what I'm about to say is pretty close to a conception of Locke that both share. Both believe that John Locke's liberalism is devoted to 'emancipating human desire and liberating human beings from all constraint'. That's a near-paraphrase of some of Patrick Deneen's writings.

Russ Roberts: Including other, including tradition? And other inherited things, intellectual inheritances.

Peter Berkowitz: Oh--actually, most specifically tradition, custom, tradition, religious faith: Yes. All that both Deneen and Hazony think is central to making human beings what we are, and to enabling us to live a fulfilling life: Locke is devoted to emancipating us from tradition, custom, faith; overthrowing it; impelling us to turn our backs on it and make *ourselves* the center of the world. So, Locke is the father of contemporary solipsism, narcissism, and individualism. Ram-head[?] individualist.

Russ Roberts: And hedonism, as well. Right?

Peter Berkowitz: Oh--did I leave that out?

Russ Roberts: Yes. You did.

Peter Berkowitz: Thank you for adding. Yes, most definitely hedonism as well. That's the emancipation of desire: Whatever you happen to desire, that deserves to be satisfied.

Russ Roberts: And to make it clear: That's *their view* of what Locke is saying. But you disagree. That's *not* what Locke is saying. Your argument is they've created a straw man.

Peter Berkowitz: That is very much my argument. Locke, as I said--Locke begins from a premise that is meant to be both descriptive and factual: that human beings are by nature free and equal. Which, by the way, I suppose it's worth pointing out is also the premise of the American Declaration of Independence, and of the Constitution: that human beings are by nature free and equal. And this imposes, from Locke's point of view, definite limits on what we may do and the kinds of desires we may rightly satisfy. Second, both Deneen and Hazony think that, through his state-of-nature teaching,

his teaching about the state of nature, John Locke is putting forward a vision of human beings that is radically atomized or individualistic: That human beings come into the world as individuals; they are most happy outside of political society, but *need* compels them to form political societies; but we are not *really* social and political animals. This is--if that were true, it would indeed be a repudiation of the classical teaching, the classical Greek teaching: Aristotle famously says that human beings are social and political animals because we speak, and language is shared, and because we have opinions about the noble and the base and the just and the unjust. And Deneen also argues, as does Hazony, also, that the Bible teaches that human beings are fundamentally social beings who are formed and achieved their happiness in family, community, faith-communities. So, from their point of view, Locke is the antithesis, is the enemy of the correct understanding of what human beings truly are--social and political animals. And, again, I think this represents a drastically wrong-headed reading of John Locke. And, for that matter, I should add, of the Bible. Take, for example, the First Book of Genesis. Actually, contrary to what both Deneen and Hazony suggest, the Bible doesn't begin with human beings in political society. The Bible begins with human beings in--and, forgive the expression--a radically abstract sense. God creates man--it's [?transliteration spoken in Hebrew, not transcribed?]--in his image. And then to make clear that what we are talking about is equality, I think this is, Verse 26 or 27 of the First Book of Genesis: The Bible says, '[?transliteration spoken in Hebrew, not transcribed?]': 'Male and female, he created them.' The first time we encounter human beings in the Bible, they are more radically abstract than anything we encounter in John Locke's Second Treatise and in the state of nature. Now, a reasonable person would not say that the Bible therefore does not understand human beings as also social creatures who are formed and then derived what happiness we are capable on this world from being friends, members of families, members of communities, and so on. I suppose I put it this way: I *will* put it this way: That, the Bible recognizes that we are *both* individuals with a dignity that attaches to us as individuals; and that we are, at the same time, creatures formed by our social relations, and even unthinkable, separate from the families into which we are born, the communities into which we are raised. It seems to me something quite similar can be said about John Locke's teaching. Of course, if I'm right about all of this, I'm going to now rudely anticipate your next question: Why the misreading? Where do they get this idea? Surely where there some smoke there's some fire. And I think that's right, too. I *think* the problem has been--in both of their readings, as you've suggested, what I regard as misreadings--both Hazony and Deneen have identified an extreme variant of modern Liberalism with Classical Liberalism itself. One could call this Far Left Progressivism. One could even call it Post-Modernism. And, we could discuss, I suppose, how certain ambiguities and instabilities in John Locke's thought, and in the form of political life it helped bring into being--Liberal Democracy--*lead* to some of the extreme opinions, including what I regard as an extreme *contempt* for tradition *within* Liberal Democracy, and within Post-Modern or some forms of Progressive thought. That part of the thesis

seems to me, true. That is, there is a *root* within Locke. But the proper response is not to vilify John Locke, but to recover the fullness of his way of thinking.

54:53 **Russ Roberts:** Well, I think as a libertarian--I think it's--my worldview in general has suggested that, while I'm a person of tradition myself, personally, in my own individual choices, that others should be free to choose to be traditional if they choose--

Peter Berkowitz: Sure--

Russ Roberts: or to do whatever they wish. Each individual should be free to flourish according to the division of the good life that that person sees. And, of course, if that person uses that freedom to watch TV [television] all day and get drunk, that's their choice.

Peter Berkowitz: Yes.

Russ Roberts: And I respect that choice. But I think there *is* an atomism, or--I don't know what the right way of thinking about it is--that I've been thinking a lot about lately, in modern times, in the last few years--that's modern times for me. Where I've been forced to confront--part of it comes from my reading of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which I had neglected until recently.

Peter Berkowitz: Hmm.

Russ Roberts: It comes from some recognition of fragmentation, or whatever you want to--alienation in American life--to recognize that my underpinnings of my viewpoint, which I would call, again, economics oriented, free market-oriented, are very incomplete. The phrase I keep coming back to is the human longing to belong. This part of ourselves to attach ourselves to traditions, to teams, to tribes. And that economics--which, again, is the root of my interest, has *nothing* to say about that of any value or significance, other than the occasional--I don't know--icing on a cake where we add a little bit of social interactions, in the case of Gary Becker's work, which were quite clever. And useful at times in understanding things. But, they haven't made their way into mainstream economics in any sense. It's not much of Milton Friedman's work. It's not much of Hayek's work. You mention Hayek's respect of the safety net. That's, like, two paragraphs in *The Road to Serfdom*. He didn't spend a lot of time on it. I think our desire to be part of something larger than ourselves, whether it's our religion or sports team, our political party--these are things that I increasingly think are important in how people achieve meaning in life. And they are totally outside the purview of the models and frameworks that many people use to justify their political views. And so, when I think about this issue of--who is the real liberal, who is the real--who is entitled to claim Locke as an intellectual ancestor--you know, I'm not so interested in that. If I were one of--my intellectual honesty is--I mean, I care about it. I think we should get Locke right, just out of respect for Locke. But I do think that our

current intellectual debates about Left and Right, and where we should be heading--whether they accurately assess Locke or not, I think Deneen, and I think Hazony, and to some extent John Gray, who I'm going to bring up in a minute, also a former EconTalk guest--they are onto something that the sort of cheerful stories we tell ourselves about the Enlightenment's progress are a little overly cheerful. And we've missed out on some things. So that's sort of where, that sort of is my thought on it.

Peter Berkowitz: So, those are important thoughts. However, I think it's important to get Locke right not to settle disputes among scholars, but because I think getting Locke right helps us understand our situation better. It seems to me the objection--the objection to economics is not that economics gives us a partial view of the world. The problem is too many economists for too long claimed that it gave us the complete inadequate picture of the world.

Russ Roberts: Well said.

Peter Berkowitz: Okay. So, I want to make a similar point about Locke and the liberal state. People read Locke and they say, 'Wow. That's all there is to life? This skimpy framework of government, the state of nature, consent. Life is so much more rich. Locke could not have anything to explain to us because we know that human beings begin in families; that our psychology is formed there. Expectations.' Locke has very little to say about social norms. All this is true. Because John Locke had a very precise purpose in *The Second Treatise*. The precise purpose was to teach us something about the origins, the extent, and the ends of the exercise of political power. It is *we* who have ascribed to John Locke the idea that all one needs to know about human beings in the world is either contained in the pages of the *Second Treatise*--which is a bit bizarre given that the *Second Treatise* is actually part of a single book called *Two Treatises of Government*. Bizarre to write two treatises and put everything you know into one of them. But, second, also then to criticize the form of political life we have--liberal democracy--because our contemporary state doesn't minister to--well, it doesn't minister to the human soul. I was going to say to all aspects of life. But, specifically to the soul. And people infer from that, 'You see! Liberalism denies the soul. Rejects the soul.'

Russ Roberts: Correct use of the word[?] there, you mean. The fuller word[work?]

Peter Berkowitz: Yes. So, Locke helps me better appreciate that this classical liberal tradition did not deny, or at least at its best, did not deny, which you rightly affirm, that there's more to life than decisions about labor, consumption, and production, because soul is infinitely deep and infinitely varied, and the study of it, and the care for it are tremendous undertakings and tremendous responsibilities. So, for me, the commitment to a Liberal way of thinking about politics--classical liberal way of thinking of politics--is not only not inconsistent with the larger questions you raise--and that, by the way, that Patrick Deneen and Yoram Hazony raised--with this matter I'm very much *with* them--that inconsistent with raising those larger questions,

indeed within the contemporary modern world it provides the best political framework *to* raise those questions. *To* honor tradition. *To* serve God as you deem best. Now, of course, there are costs and consequences. To be fair to Yoram Hazony and Patrick Deneen, and John Gray: there are developments, Enlightenment developments subsequent to the--excuse me--first-grade flowering of the Enlightenment, that put pressure on tradition. On established authority. On religious faith . To make a very long story short, it seems to me though the solution is not to overthrow the Enlightenment, without which we cannot live well and which is deeply inscribed in the souls of all of us, modern men and women. And so it strikes me as unrealistic and unconservative and illiberal--all of those evils at once--to think that we can abandon it. Simply abandon it. Rather, it seems to me the aim is to correct it, replenish it, elevate it, in *light* of what we can learn from classical Greek political thought and the Biblical tradition.

1:03:48 **Russ Roberts:** So, I want you to extend that. I want to bring in John Gray a little more formally.

Peter Berkowitz: Please.

Russ Roberts: So, John Gray in his set of books and his recent episode on EconTalk--we were talking about atheism, but we really were talking about the last 300 or so, 400 years of intellectual history, which you and I have been talking about as well. Amazing what we can cover in an hour, Peter. It's no small feat. But, thinking about that, there's a really interesting debate; and it actually matters, not just about what Locke really meant or what's the real Enlightenment. But there's a serious argument about whether the Enlightenment enterprise, which I would combine, I would say is respect for the individual, the power of reason, and political freedom--that is democracy in some version--that those three things combined to transform the world in all kinds of mostly glorious ways for the last 3 or 400 years, 2 or 300 years. And John Gray says, 'No. No, no. We haven't made any progress.' And, although I don't agree with him, he did force me to consider that I have dogmatic view of progress--that it's inevitable.

Peter Berkowitz: Oh, really?

Russ Roberts: Yes. And it was very powerful. And certainly, as a religious person, to have to read his indictments of religion--he makes fun of a lot of atheists, but he's not a religious person: he's an atheist. So, there's good atheisms and there's bad ones; and he sees the worst atheisms as Judeo-Christian tradition worked into a different form of secular religion. And it's very clever and thought-provoking. And to some extent possibly even true. But--I'm way off the track--but to get back on track, this Enlightenment experiment, this Enlightenment period that we are perhaps coming to the end of, has been transformative certainly in material ways. We could debate whether that's all it's done and whether that's come at a price of "our souls," whatever one means by that. But I do think you have to take seriously the possibility that there's some truth to that. So, you have Steven Pinker on one side saying, 'Everything's getting better--lifespan, material wellbeing,

the eradication of poverty, the eradication of disease, the improvements in human achievements of all kinds.' I saw a glorious 2-minute video today of someone with Parkinson's taking some kind of treatment that stops--before this treatment they can't pick up a cup and hold it to their mouth, and now all of a sudden they can. It's quite moving. And it's certainly--it's about human flourishing in the richest, fullest sense of the word: the opportunity to overcome those kind of things. So, on the one hand, we have that story. On the other hand, we have some serious challenges, whether they are the move towards populism; the seeming fragmentation of daily life; the rise in mass killings seems to be too often in the headlines--yes, fewer people are dying in wars, but that just could be, as Taleb has pointed out, probably just a misunderstanding of the statistical process. So, I think both sides have something to say. Where do you stand on these issues?

Peter Berkowitz: I'm going to go--I'm going to step way out on the limb. The extreme Pinker view--not always his view, but sometimes his--is the progressive view: Things are just getting better and better and better, especially the last 200 years. And the extreme Gray view, which is also the Deneen view, which is that humanity took this disastrous wrong turn and things have never been worse. I go out on the limb and say, 'Some things have gotten better, and some things have worsened.' And, there is not only no logical contradiction there--some things are better in our situation, some things are worse or, some things are very troubled--it seems to me that this is the very frequent condition of humanity. Are there excesses of the Enlightenment? It would be strange if there were no excesses of the Enlightenment, because the general tendency of intellectual movements and political movements is to excess. So, of course there are. And, by the way: We need to be, I think we should be *grateful* to Gray, to Patrick Deneen, Yoram Hazony for focusing on *some of those* excesses. Gray--the pretensions of Enlightenment, Reason to have illuminated moral and political life in the ways never before illuminated. Deneen--the excessive attacks often made in Liberalisms name against tradition. Hazony--the excessive attacks against Nationalism and the Nation-State made in Liberalism's name. My goodness: Locke is a defender, though, of nation-state. He believes that the best vehicle for defending rights would be a state to which people have consented; since you can't really imagine viable consent to a universal state, he's a kind of friend of Nationalism, too. So, I, not only accept, I *affirm* that the Enlightenment and the Liberal tradition has in many ways gone too far. It's been carried too far by many intellectuals arguing and engaged in activism in its name. All true. So, we need to step back. And, one way of stepping back it seems to me is to ask ourselves, 'Well, what would alternative traditions teach us about the excesses to which Liberalism, the Enlightenment, to which they are prone?' And so I think about Plato and Aristotle in this question. Plato and Aristotle both put forward devastating criticisms of democracy. I should mention, the kind of small-scale democracy that Patrick Deneen very much admires. But those--despite the fact that they didn't know of *liberal* democracy--that is a kind of democracy that presupposes that all are by nature free and equal--both Plato and Aristotle understood that the premise of democracy was freedom, and that it seeks equality for all its citizens: seeks to [?] equality for all its

citizens. They thought that this form of political life was subject to all manner of immorality and viciousness. And that it was *fated* to devolve into tyranny. Sound familiar? But here's something I think quite interesting. Neither of them, for that reason, repudiated democracy. Both--now, we abbreviate and distill because time is short--both more or less recommended that you're not likely to do much better than democracy, or, in Aristotle's case, a democracy that is modified by a certain admixture of oligarchy/rule-of-the-few. Which in practice means rule by the wealthy. So, Aristotle advocated something he called 'polity,' which is a mix of rule by the wealthy and rule by the people. That also could sound familiar. Could resemble certain liberal democracies that we know something about. They were--again, they were acutely aware of the moral limitations of democracy. They were acutely aware that democracy tends to take its principles to an extreme, to neglect other important political considerations, and thereby destroy itself. But they were also shrewd and prudent men, and they understood that efforts to--well, I suppose, [?] engage in revolution by changing liberal--one form of regime liberal democracy for a very different one--were bound to lead to *even worse* catastrophe. Even worse destruction. So, when I study Plato and Aristotle, it's true: I encounter alternatives to Liberal Democracy. I encounter counts[?] of human excellence that enrich my understanding of human possibilities, the capabilities of the soul. Also the temptations to which the soul is prone. But I also find a kind of admonition to neither dwell exclusively on the advantages of Enlightenment and Liberal Democracy; to neither dwell on those, nor to dwell on the disadvantages, but try to see the thing whole. And devise prudent policies for preserving what's best in Liberal Democracy while mitigating, reducing, limiting its excesses and unwise tendencies.

1:13:45 **Russ Roberts:** That's extremely well said. And normally I would have ended right there, because I like to have the guest get the last word. And the guest will still get the last word. But I'm going to try to summarize what you just said, the impact on my thinking; and just think a little bit about the sociology of belief, or the psychology of belief. I think you are exactly right. And I think what you said is incredibly deep. On the surface, it seems rather banal. Right? There's pluses and minuses. You phrased it in a way that--well, you recognize that you are not saying anything particularly dramatic. And yet, I think there is something quite dramatic about it in that, I think having, what I would call it, a humble view of the Enlightenment, or the Liberal Project writ large, or a nuanced view: It doesn't sell very well. It's better--if you want to sell a book, it's better to say--a book that says--I think Steven Pinker calls his book *Enlightenment Now*. But he could have just called it *Enlightenment!* [exclamation point]. Whereas, a book that says *Enlightenment, eh*, it's a mixed bag, plusses and minuses, is not going to be a great seller. And I'm not--I'm joking about Steven Pinker. I'm not picking on him personally. But--well, I kind of am, but I don't mean to. I don't mean to judge him, because I kind of understand the urge to do this; I don't want to make a cheap shot to say that, 'Oh, he obviously left out the bad parts because he wanted to sell books.' Because I assume he believes what he believes with a full heart. At least, not cynical. But I do think as human

beings, we do like Just So stories. And we do like narratives that fit together cleanly. And we do like ideologies that are "always right." And the longer I host this program, the more I realize that, as tempting as those perspectives are, they are really quite incomplete. They are very soothing. They bring comfort and clarity. But, they are not correct in the literal sense. I wanted to say that because these are issues that I've been struggling with for a long time, and I continue to struggle with them. And I think your perspective, which I would summarize as--one of my favorite phrases--'It's complicated,' is probably what a thinking person who is humble about what we know and don't know, should think of it that way.

Peter Berkowitz: Well, thank you. And I agree with your formulations. And I suppose at this point it is worth adding the following: One feature that it seems to me does distinguish Liberal Democracy and Classical Liberalism from other forms of government--and by the way, all forms of government, all political principles tend to be taken by their proponents to an extreme--but what distinguish the Classical Liberalism, Liberal Democracy in America is: one, that it provides a framework within which a variety of views and voices can be heard. Not just dissenting opinions, but better opinions than the ones that rein. And second, not just tolerates the expression of opinion, but can create a framework in which one can be persuaded by the better view, the more complete view, the truer view. That gives Liberal Democracy, I believe, more than any of its competitors, self-correcting powers. In other words, it's difficult to imagine the kind of critiques that John Gray has penned, that Patrick Deneen has penned, that Yoram Hazony has penned of Liberal Democracy in non-liberal democracies. Despite the fact that historical experience tells us that non-liberal democracies also have their disadvantages. But, we in liberal democracies can not only read their books; we can listen to them, to their opinions expressed on widely distributed podcasts; and we can make judgments. And, by the way: If we think that Patrick Deneen or John Gray or Yoram Hazony--suppose we think that one is profoundly correct--we can actually create communities--this is what Patrick Deneen recommends--within our liberal democracies that are to a significant extent sheltered from the mainstream culture, the depredations of daily political life. Which, by the way, come to think of it, was part of the original design of the American constitutional system: to give dissenting voices, those who espoused more Biblical conceptions of good life freedom from an overbearing government to live in accordance to what they believed to be God's will; and our system, to a significant extent, still provides that.