

Anthony Comegna ([00:20](#)):

Folks, if you've been with us here for this long, you must know that I really love learning about new figures who've been underappreciated, understudied, people who are well worthy of a revival. Well, this week we have yet another particularly interesting case of this phenomenon for you. I know that when I first encountered François Fénelon, it was a section of my AP European history textbook that was basically like listing all of Louis XIII and XIV's top advisors or something like that and other important freshmen of the day. People like Cardinal Richelieu and Mazarin, Colbert, Louvois, John Law, people like that.

And then even after another decade or so of studying intellectual history, I don't think I ever heard about it again. And so this week, I invited Boston College's Professor Ryan Patrick Hanley to join us and talk about setting this personal tragedy of mine aright. Enlightening me and much of the rest of the world with me about the political philosophy of François Fénelon. It's the first major work on the subject in English, so let's get to it.

Right. So Professor Hanley, I'm a historian but I'm an Americanist. And even though I do intellectual history so I have some understanding of the broader figures in the Western tradition and other traditions, especially around this time period, Fénelon is not somebody that I am familiar with. I would say at all, probably outside of lines in a textbook about the period of Louis XIV and his advisers and people at court. So give us an idea first of just who this guy was and what some of the important biographical details of his life are.

Ryan Hanley ([02:09](#)):

Sure. I'd be happy to do that. And let me start by saying Anthony that there's no shame here. You're not alone in that particular self-description of recognizing the name Fénelon but not having engaged him at length. And indeed, that was one of the things that motivated me to take on these two projects in the first place. It just a wonderful, intrinsically wonderful figure, but also one that for a variety of different reasons, maybe we can talk about, has largely not been remembered despite his really remarkable genuine interest and later influence through the enlightenment. So, you're in many ways exactly the audience of scholars that I was hoping to reach through these projects. So, I'm very happy to be able to talk about them.

As for your actual question, so just to set the scene very basically, who was Fénelon? Fénelon was, he was really a genuinely towering figure of the later part of the 17th century in the French Golden Age. So, his dates are 1751 or say, I'm sorry, 1651 to 1715. That final date is important at least of which, because it's of course the same year that Louis XIV died. And as you mentioned in your introduction, Fénelon's own life is intimately bound up with that of Louis XIV and his reign over France.

Fénelon was many things. He was an archbishop. He was a master of spirituality and writing on spirituality. For my purposes, he's most interesting as a political figure and thinker. Within the court of Louis XIV, he worked as a court tutor and he wrote his master work for the grandson of Louis XIV, a novel called *Telemachus*. That really is what most of his influence is owing to today. That book that came out in the very last years of the 17th century was at once the book that caused his later fame and inspired many other later thinkers, but was also a classic document of political resistance. He led his whole life as both a thinker and as a political figure, leading the resistance to Louis XIV's what's now known today as absolutest approach to government. So, I think there's good reasons for us as both historians today but also for classical liberals to engage his thought and to take it seriously.

Anthony Comegna ([04:36](#)):

And you broke the book up into chapters based around sort of, I guess, some of the key ideas or topic areas in his philosophy, and you definitely delve a lot into Telemachus. And I want to spend the bulk of our time here talking about those big topic areas and some questions I had for you related to them. So, early on in the book and one of the more interesting claims that I think you make is that Fénelon's educational philosophy was motivated by this desire to like in the fashion you might expect from an archbishop, his educational philosophy is about inculcating a virtuous ethic into the student or the people at large.

And I mean, you point out that it might strike many of us today in our modern educational system as you know the educator really putting their thumb on the student's personality and that might not be appropriate. But then again, it does strike me as very relevant to the way that organizations like we here at IHS and [inaudible 00:05:46], for example, see their educational mission. There is a moral component to it. We do want to talk about moral philosophy and working together and public trust and all sorts of things like that, that have a very ethical slant to them. So, maybe you could tell us a bit about his educational philosophy and tie up some of these threads for us. What's the resonance of these ideas today?

Ryan Hanley (06:13):

Sure. And I really like how you frame that because Fénelon was both a pioneering educational theorist, but also a practitioner of education. He was himself a teacher engaged in roughly similar enterprises in certain ways to what we do in the modern academy today. To get into that, let me preface it by saying just a little bit of historical context. So, Fénelon had two teaching posts and they were rather unique posts. One was, he was the head of a school called the Nouvelles-Catholiques. This was for the new Catholics, and quite literally, these were the girls who were sons of prominent Protestants who after 1685 in Paris had to convert once the famous revocation of the Edict of Nantes that deprived the Protestant minority of religious freedom or religious tolerance once Louis XIV had deprived them of this.

So, Fénelon found himself as one of his first posts being responsible for converting these young Protestant girls, both in Paris, and then he was later after the revocation, formally sent to some of the Protestant strongholds in the South of France. That is a pretty unique gig. And in that respect, he's not much like us today as college professors, but what it forced him to do was to be very gentle in the shaping of minds, Fénelon believed that it was horrific to try to use coercive force to bring people around. Now, the king had no problem doing that, but as a teacher, Fénelon respected the conscience of his individuals enough to try in this very delicate job, be as gentle as he could and to care about the wellbeing of his individual students.

So, that's one side of it when he's teaching the religious minorities within 17th century France. The other teaching post he had, as I alluded to at the outset, was as the court tutor to the grandson and presumptive heir to the throne of Louis XIV. And this is a very unique gig unto itself. One of the things that he was charged to do was not just to educate the future king of France in the arts of rule, but indeed how to develop the character that would be symbolic of France. That would be representative of its greatness, that would be respectful of the French culture and the French people. And so there again, Fénelon is interested in cultivating the inner dispositions of his student.

And again, this is not like our students today. I don't know if I'm going to have any future presidents in my class, but at the very least, I'm not hired to teach one. So while we do have some differences, I think what unites those two educational enterprises of Fénelon's and connects them to our enterprise today is this deep and abiding concern for the well-being of a student and especially a robust concern for human flourishing and all of its various dimensions and combine this with a real reticence to lord over in some coercive fashion over a student the idea of the good.

The idea for Fénelon was never to inculcate virtue by wagging fingers and imposing upon his students one particular image of the good. Instead, he wanted to bring his students around to cultivate their inner light and their inner genius and to have them respect and to develop and to cultivate virtue in their own right. And I think that that balance of an aversion to coercion but a deep respect for and a desire to encourage human flourishing, I think that really is for all the differences in our context between the 17th century and now, I think that's an educational mission that at least I as a teacher take very seriously.

Anthony Comegna ([10:26](#)):

Now, let's switch over to his economics, because you talk quite a bit about how he has this sort of, it's an agrarian point of view. It struck me as very similar to like the early physiocrats who have this sort of fetishization of agriculture and people producing, honestly, on the land and stuff like that. He has these ideas about the just amount of consumption that people should engage in. Although it's frankly pretty ridiculous that some people have taken those kinds of positions and compared Fénelon to Pol Pot. I mean, that just kind of shocks me that a serious academic would make a comparison like that as though Fénelon was about to liquidate every literate person in France or something. I mean, that seems pretty shocking. Tell us about his economic views and why that comparison is so ridiculous.

Ryan Hanley ([11:30](#)):

Sure. The view to what you allude and which I discuss in the book, it's actually been put forth by one of the greatest scholars of Fénelon in the Anglophone world and someone who really genuinely appreciated his importance. And that was Istvan Hont of Cambridge University. And one of the things that Hont showed was Fénelon's profound influence for the later 18th century luxury debates within political economy, where many people thought that those were launched by Mandeville. Really one of the things that Hont showed in a very important essay was the degree to which those are owed in many ways as responses to Fénelon getting the debate off the ground. But unfortunately, I mean, one of the things that Hont also does and the Pol Pot and Chairman Mao line comes from one of his last and indeed posthumous works is that, I mean, Hont does something with that line about Pol Pot that many people have done. And in many ways, I think it's forgivable on one level that is Fénelon celebrates a variety of different types of economic arrangements.

Some of these are in fact agricultural, and I think they are in many ways as you just described Anthony, proto-physiocratic as it were, but he also celebrates and here's where I think the sort of real interest in his economic vision lies. He also was very explicit and very early in the celebration of international free trade and the benefits that it brings to mutual trading partners and especially the benefit it brings to the least and lowest within a domestic economy. And so from the very beginning, Fénelon was in addition to admiring a flourishing agricultural order, he was insistent on the benefits that come from a much freer trade policy than France was able to enjoy under the mercantilist system of the Finance Minister Colbert, who very famously put together one of the first mercantile import export systems in Western economies.

And so Fénelon was deeply invested in breaking down trade barriers 100 years before Adam Smith, actually another thinker that I've spent a lot of time with. And I think there were a lot of comparisons between the two to be made. So what I want to emphasize is that, I mean, the real interest for students of Fénelon is how it's easy to look at the most extreme formulations and want to typecast. But where I think the real interesting part is, is to see how all of these different sides of his normative vision go together and to remember that a robust commitment to freedom of trade was very important for Fénelon and indeed puts him at the very headwaters of the *du commerce* debate that became only

much later more well known and more famous through Montesquieu [inaudible 00:14:27] as others. I think Fénelon really deserves a lot of credit for being a pioneering political economist at a very early stage in these debates. In fact, I think one would be very hard pressed to find another thinker who was as robustly a defender of free trade at Fénelon's time or before.

Anthony Comegna ([14:47](#)):

And what can you tell us about that idea of just consumption? What is the just amount of consumption?

Ryan Hanley ([14:53](#)):

Yeah. Fénelon's interest was he uses a distinction that what become really central to later 18th century political economy into names like Montesquieu and Hume and Rousseau and indeed to Adam Smith. And so he distinguishes between two different types of commodities, and he distinguishes between on the one hand necessities and on the other hand, what he and later thinkers would call conveniences or superfluities. I mean, we today would call that second type of commodity luxuries. And the first type of commodity is what we define as the basic necessities of bodily survival, food, clothing, shelter.

And so Fénelon's interest was in maximizing freedom of trade on the former front, where he does have that is necessities, necessary goods. And he has many economic arguments that show the benefits of that. As a moralist, he does hedge though. And he does insist that there should be sumptuary laws. He's very upfront about that when it comes to the luxuries. And that of course puts him on a very different side of the divide from later thinkers that we know from the Scottish enlightenment and elsewhere. But it really, and I think that that's important to recognize, but we shouldn't have lost in the shuffle that deep commitment to freedom of trade of necessities in particular.

Anthony Comegna ([16:13](#)):

And I mean, whatever we might think of the very concept of just consumption or how we might apply that individually, I think pretty much everybody listening to the show here will agree with Fénelon in that he had what seems at least like a near absolute preference for international peace. It almost to me seemed a little bit like the medieval peace of God movement and Fénelon backs it up with these concepts or these distinctions between true and false glory and true and false courage in combat and warfare. So, what can you tell us about that?

Ryan Hanley ([16:55](#)):

Yeah. I think that this is a really important side of his thought because in addition to being a really pioneering political economist, he was also a really pioneering theorist of international relations. And at the heart of his IRR theory as it were, is a deep normative commitment to the goal of international peace. And he develops that in a variety of different modes. One of which is indeed he develops a just war theory that is, I think, of really great substantive interest in its own right. But there's another side. And I think this side actually deserves real credit because Fénelon in addition to being a just war theorist was also an institutionalist and he had a very sophisticated early understanding of the conditions necessary to create balance of powers within Western Europe for the sake of promoting a lasting peaceful political order.

And in fact, just one of the things I discovered in the course of my work, Kenneth Waltz, for those of the listeners that might be political scientists, Waltz's name is very well known within IRR circles as a pioneering scholar. And I was delighted to see that Waltz years ago in an interview credited Fénelon with being the first to develop the first balance of power theorist in Western civilization, my at least

modern Western European civilization, the way we think of balance of power today, and Fénelon does that. And I was delighted that Waltz knew this because I don't think a lot of people were reading Fénelon when this article, I think the interview was in the '90s or some point in time.

But one of the things I wanted to do in my companion volume to my book, which is this translation that Oxford also generously published of Fénelon's moral and political writings, I wanted to get that out there and for people to see that. And it's these wonderful four or five pages that are the supplement to a document of his called *The Examination of Conscience*. And there he really does create a realist approach to balancing powers within Western Europe to encouraging the future French Monarch to seeing themselves as the arbiter of this power and restraining their own power so that there can be a just and lasting and mutually beneficial balance. And I think that that's one of those sides of Fénelon that deserves a lot of credit. His sheer realism in the pursuit of what might be seen as lofty and even idealistic goals, like the sort of perpetual peace that the enlightenment thinkers often talked about. Fénelon was a hard-headed guy and knew that power has its own way of expanding and that we needed institutional solutions to balance it.

Anthony Comegna ([19:46](#)):

Yeah. And speaking of those institutions, one thing about his politics seems to be that he's writing about institutions that are quite away from us even more so than contemporary English politics, which at least at that point had a civil war and parliament supremacy and John Locke and all that stuff floating around and getting thicker and thicker. It's a lot more familiar to us, but Fénelon's politics are all about the king and well, hey, they're pretty much all gone. So, what in his politics do you think is the most sort of important, challenging, thought provoking, useful right now for classical liberals?

Ryan Hanley ([20:29](#)):

Yeah. That's a great question. I always think about in this sort of context you introduce yourself as an Americanist. And I remember Joyce Appleby's article, I think with the title, *What is Still Living and What is Dead and the Political Thought of Thomas Jefferson*. And I think the same thing could be asked today of Fénelon. And I think on one level, you're absolutely right. I mean, Fénelon's writing at an age of absolute monarchy and this is not a constitutional republic. It's far from a democracy. And there is a deep concern with restraining the power of the executive who governs by divine right. So, on some level that seems really distant from us. On another level though, maybe not. And it's interesting that you did mention the name Locke, and I think that, that it should be noted that Locke and Fénelon writing in the 1690s are both confronting exactly the same question on other sides of the channel, which is indeed, what are the limits to executive power and how can states be rightfully constituted in such a way that stable political orders emerge even with efficient executives at the top?

So while Fénelon takes a different route, I do think that in so far as that remains a living problem for us, that is, and by that, I mean, executives or supreme authorities with pensions for or dispositions towards illiberal and absolutest conceptions of power. I think that Fénelon has a lot to teach us about effective methods of resistance even within our own modern 21st century age. And indeed, while I would like to complacently say that our modern democracy is past all that and that our global moment has indeed emerged past that, surveying world events in recent years, it's hard for me, especially seeing the rise of strongman politics in a variety of pockets of the world.

It's hard for me to think that we are indeed completely beyond that, and the reasons why that's so are very complex and surely beyond my pay grade. But if indeed, a penchant for absolutism is something that we haven't yet extirpated from modern politics, I think Fénelon can or actually has much

to teach us about sensitizing us to recognizing abuses when we see them and also learning how to strategize to become effective resisters in our own right.

Anthony Comegna ([23:00](#)):

I love that answer because I was raised Catholic. I'm a godless heathen atheist now, but I was raised Catholic and went to Catholic school. And I think an element of it that still remains with me is that bedrock conviction that we're all terrible. We're all vile worms and sinful creatures. And yes, this threat of slipping back into absolutism is always there. And it's always good then to revive figures like this and remember their contributions to the right and the good ideas that are out there. And so I do very much appreciate that.

Ryan Hanley ([23:42](#)):

Oh, good.

Anthony Comegna ([23:43](#)):

And now I'm wondering, in his religious thought, one thing that I really, really love was this idea. I just want you to expound upon it a little bit and explain where he gets this from. This idea that Jesus is sort of treated as the opposite of politics, which even sounds strange to say, but try to explain that for us a bit.

Ryan Hanley ([24:05](#)):

Yeah. And I don't know if I use quite that language in the book, but I think that one of the things that's behind Fénelon's vision there is, I mean, the chapter which I described his particular views on Jesus among other things is in the last chapter, the chapter on love. And pure love was a very central idea of Fenelon's religious and arguably his political thought as well. And one of the things Fénelon was most interested in was in contrast you're just talking about the sort of sinful world Anthony using the sort of Augustinian language of our fallenness and Fénelon really does see, I mean, self-love of the amour-propre, the corrupt vanity side of self-love that worried thinkers from Augustine to Rousseau, deeply worried Fénelon as well.

And he saw a lot of politics as being driven by self-love. I mean, anybody that's been to Versailles and today as a tourist and has seen Louis XIV's palace knows that, boy, self-love is something that this man exemplified. And it was the driving force, this love of glory and grandeur and recognition and fame. This is what drove the politics of the age, self-love, and Fénelon was deeply concerned to define an alternative to that world of flashy externalities. And both his spirituality and his political thought try to defend in different ways, I should say, try to defend an alternative to this. And in many ways, the alternative to self-love of the corrupt sort was pure love. And that's when he talks about figures like Jesus, when he talks about beatitude and sainthood and some other technical concepts within theology.

His interest is really trying to define a way of life that is free of pernicious self-love and is dedicated to pure love. And of course, Jesus, who is a, to say the least transhuman figure is the perfection of that. But it is an ideal that Fénelon thinks that's aspirational for human beings. And I mentioned this, especially because, and again, my book is, I mean, it's literally called *The Political Philosophy of Fénelon* and I'm not a theologian. And I don't explore it all, its richness, his spirituality, but I do think that at least one of the things that's really important for us as political theorist, political

philosophers, historians of political thought, one of the things that's important for us to find in Fénelon is a reminder that as Fénelon I think very clearly lays out not all of life is political.

That is to say for all of these sort of corrupted influences of self-love in politics. Fénelon was deeply concerned to define an alternative, a way of living, a way of going through life, a focus on certain goods that couldn't be reduced to that sorted world of the city of man. Again, to use Augustinian language. And so, I put it that way because one of the things I hope that does is one doesn't have to be religious necessarily to appreciate Fénelon's call and his reminder, perhaps a reminder we need to hear today more than ever, that politics is important, but there's more to life beyond politics and something has gone dramatically wrong when we're no longer able to see anything except through the sole lens of the political.

And so, I think that might be even for, these are your words not mine. I think Anthony, you said the godless heathen thing. If somebody self identifies with that, I hope that that wouldn't be a reason to not crack the cover of the book itself, because I really do believe that Fénelon offers something to both people of faith and to secular people who are deeply committed to the idea that perhaps there's more to life than simply politics.

And now of course, Fénelon's robust vision takes us in certain places where I think the agnostics and the atheists and the believers would all have reason for debate. But I think on that core claim, there's something that he has that's really valuable to remind us of today to try to see other sources of value than specifically political value in our world.

Anthony Comegna ([28:40](#)):

Oh yeah. I mean, I read this as a reading about a fellow traveler in the fight against arbitrary power. And it doesn't matter what the spiritual views are a lot of times. I mean, it's not just because I'm a historian, but I think people do this a lot, especially if you're not religious, you can often easily sit back and appreciate not being attached to a particular spiritual dogma yourself. You can sit back and appreciate how somebody else's impacts who they are and shapes them. And often that can lead to some pretty great friendships and scholarly interchanges and everything else. And I'm wondering in that spirit, you call for people to remember that very main current in his political thought that arbitrary power should be opposed. So maybe you can close this out by just expounding on some of the threads we've already opened here about how you think these different aspects of his thinking will serve the most use to people moving forward here.

Ryan Hanley ([29:49](#)):

Yeah. I can do that actually by maybe concluding with a historical example of Fénelon's 20th century influence. As I was working on the project, one of the things I learned is that during the period of the Vichy government in occupied France in the 40s, that a number of exiled Parisian intellectuals, who had fled were interested in cultivating a form of literary resistance. And to that end, they published classic texts within French political thought that they understood as speaking to the moment. And the first volume that they published in this wonderful [inaudible 00:30:34] series published out of Switzerland was a volume of Fénelon's political writings. There was a deep sense that Fénelon or what the French people needed more than anything at that moment was the inspiration for what it took to defeat the worst forms of arbitrary power as if that even begins to capture what's at stake with Nazism.

Now, of course, those volumes were banned by the Vichy authorities from ever entering France, but they, it was a beautifully produced volume that I've been fortunate to see a copy of. But what I think that reminds us now here, 80 years later almost, is the continuing fact that to the degree that threats of

arbitrary and illiberal power still remained with us, there are different ways that they can be resisted and Fénelon offers a striking instance of what it looks like to resist from within. He was a court official actively trying to reeducate the next generation of French monarchs. He was an advisor to people within the court, not least of which was Louis XIV's wife, Madame de Maintenon.

And one of the documents I translated was this extraordinary letter or epistle to Louis XIV that was probably meant as a talking point for Madame de Maintenon. And it lays out a series of accusations of Louis XIV. And the ways in which his selfish glory came directly at the cost of the wellbeing of the French peasantry and the populace as a whole. While he was taxing things highly so that he could keep his armies in the field for his vain battles for his glory, at the same time, France was suffering horrific famines where as many as 10% of the French population died. For Fénelon, this was an egregious injustice and what it meant to speak truth to power was to tell power of precisely this and why it was wrong and what needed to be done to remedy that.

I'll just put it this way to sum up. Would that we were past having to do things like that anymore, but it seems to me, if one were looking for the sorts of models of what it would be like to advise a prince in a modern context effectively and on the side of a humane concern for the wellbeing of the general populace, I think Fénelon's your man and I think that he gives a, I'm partisan. I really did come to love my subject after working on him. But I think in this respect, he really has something to offer that goes well beyond his historical significance, as important as that is but one that speaks to our current moment and one of our most difficult current predicaments.

Anthony Comegna ([33:28](#)):

Professor Ryan Patrick Hanley holds a PhD from the University of Chicago and teaches political science and political philosophy at Boston College. Our topic today was of course his most recent book with Oxford, *The Political Philosophy of Fénelon*, but you can also check out its companion volume also from Oxford, *Fénelon: Moral and Political Writings* if you're looking for more primary sources, or if you want a more tried and true titan of classical liberalism, you can read Professor Hanley's 2019 book, *Our Great Purpose: Adam Smith on Living a Better Life*. And speaking of a better life, toss your favorite IHS based podcast a rating and review there on your favorite podcatcher. And as if by an invisible hand, the progress will keep on coming.