

Cato Institute Daily Podcast
"Lying in Service to Truth"

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August 30, 2011
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Caleb Brown: This is the Cato daily podcast for Tuesday, August 30, 2011. I'm Caleb Brown. It may be surprising to hear comedian and magician Penn Jillette say that he once hated magic because he hated lying. Jillette is a Mencken research fellow at the Cato Institute. He is most recently the author of *God, No!: Signs You May Already Be an Atheist and Other Magical Tales* and visited the Cato Institute August 17th.

You're an atheist.

Penn Jillette: Yes I am.

Caleb Brown: And more broadly you're a skeptic.

Penn Jillette: Yeah.

Caleb Brown: James Randi is a good friend of yours.

Penn Jillette: A very good friend and probably, in a way, Randi created me, I think. I think without Randi there wouldn't be me.

Caleb Brown: What do you mean?

Penn Jillette: I mean that I hated magic, hated the whole idea of magic. Hated it with a passion and I didn't like the idea of lying. I didn't think that should be entertainment or that should be part of anything. And I met Randi when I was 18 and he taught me, showed me, demonstrated to me that you could lie in the service of truth. That there was a way to tell lies within a proscenium that allowed you to explore truth. And he showed me how you could be someone who was an outspoken skeptic and still work in magic and still work in entertainment and he was my - was, is - the biggest hero in my life, I mean outside of my family. And I don't think that where I am now as an atheist and a skeptic and a magician and a person, I don't see how I could have gotten there without meeting Randi.

Caleb Brown: How does that dovetail with you being a libertarian?

Penn Jillette: Well I don't know. I don't really know. Tim Jenison, who is the founder of NewTek, a tech company out of Texas that invented the video toaster, about, I don't know - twenty years ago, maybe a little longer, 22 years ago - I was kind of your classic half-assed

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Hollywood hippie liberal. And I hadn't thought, really, about anything, you know? And I was a big fan of science and I was an atheist and a skeptic and I was talking to Tim one night at a - strangely - not strangely, I guess, but at an artificial life conference. It was an early, early - in Santa Fe - we were both at an artificial life conference and then one night we got to talking and one of the things that I'm obsessed about is all of your marginal goofball groups, like your skeptics and your atheists, and those people that are in the minority and have no chance of winning on any battle, they give these little seminars on how to win people over. How to get more people to your cause, how to sell your case. And they give you these incredibly dated Dale Carnegie jive-ass things, you know - make them think it's their idea. Have you got any idea, other than extraterrestrial, is what is a UFO could be - do you have any idea? And you know, and the smiling and open and accepting-type stuff, including, you know, this weird vibe of how to pickup girls and how not to pickup girls. This is the way the skeptic community should deal with women. What? What? How about talking about people? There is no special category. So, you know, those kinds of things. Tim Jenison, as I explained my half-assed position on politics, just said fuck you, you're wrong. You're crazy. No. No. That's wrong, no, no. Read this. No. No. There was no politeness, there was no manipulation. And the lack of manipulation, I believe that I am more sensitive to manipulation and condescending - condescension - than anything. And I believe everyone is just like me. If you feel like the person talking to you is trying to work you or condescending in any way, I think it just puts up a huge wall. And giving classes to people who are socially awkward in how to convince others is just saying be manipulative, be condescending. So Tim dealt with me as an adult, which is you're wrong. You're an idiot. You know, he talked to me as though he respected me. And you have to respect someone an awful lot to say you're wrong, you're an idiot. And he talked to me about the idea of capitalism - he's an Ayn Rand nut. He told me to read some stuff. He said a sentence to me that I don't know where he got it. I always think of it as him but I imagine he'd be the first to tell you he got it somewhere else, but a very simple sentence, where he said do you think it's morally right to punish someone who has done nothing wrong? And I said no. He said then why do you think it's morally right to reward someone who has done nothing right? And that sentence - you remember, you pull that sentence out of context it's mean, it's harsh, it kind of means nothing. But in the middle of a three-hour discussion about capitalism and morality, it was defining for me. So what that sentence means to me is what that whole conversation was. It doesn't mean that one sentence. And staring then with Tim Jenison, starting with one person, one person not trying to manipulate me, not condescending to me, but actually telling me what he believed started me reading more stuff. And I guess I got started reading the Cato stuff in earnest, probably 15, 18 years ago, something like that. And I started reading *Reason* magazine and started, I guess, self-identifying as libertarian, or at least capitalist, or whatever. You know, I never know what the actual club is doing, you know, what the actual - whether *Reason* or Cato or libertarians or the objectivists - what each club is actually doing that week, what their membership is and so on. But my heart has stayed with pretty much that point of view since that conversation with Tim Jenison in Santa Fe.

Caleb Brown: You are a Mencken, and H.L. Mencken research fellow...

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Penn Jillette: Yeah.

Caleb Brown: ...at the Cato Institute...

Penn Jillette: Yeah.

Caleb Brown: ...and you used to write the back page column for *Regulation* magazine and, well, tell us about how that came about.

Penn Jillette: That came about when, I think when Ed Crane just asked me. And I was very flattered and very happy to be asked, you know. Speaking of heroes, one of my comedy heroes, before he was politically important to me, was PJ O'Rourke. And I've never met P.J. O'Rourke. I've never met him. I read him in the *National Lampoon* in '73, when I was still in high school. He always struck me, I mean I've always thought that one of the finest comedy writers in modern times was Michael O'Donoghue, and then right below Michael O'Donoghue, but in the same class, I'd put P.J. O'Rourke. And I think that seeing the stuff that P.J. O'Rourke wrote for Cato and having him involved was a big thing and I was very flattered and liked to talk to them very much. It's a wonderful moment in reading, I think, a book that really did make things so clear to me, *Parliament of Whores*. And I remember reading *Parliament of Whores* in my bathtub in New York City, in Manhattan, when we were playing on Broadway. And I do most of my reading in the bathtub. And I had been reading for hours - it was about four in the morning -and I'm reading *Parliament of Whores* and P.J. O'Rourke just says how did we end up with this Penn & Teller economy? And there was my name in his book and it was just such a, such a boss thing. So I think that if they'd said, you know, P.J. O'Rourke is a member of the Klan, would you like to join? I would be sorely tempted.

Caleb Brown: You have boasted that your act now contains bits that make specific reference to amendments to the Bill of Rights. Can you talk about those bits a little bit?

Penn Jillette: Yeah, we have - we cover the first, second, and fourth pretty clearly in our show. And we've had people, producers come to us and say, you know, you need to do a whole, a whole special of the Bill of Rights. Penn & Teller present the Bill of Rights and magic tricks. We just haven't been able to come up with a good bit about housing soldiers in private homes during peace time. It's just - I just haven't got an angle on the Third Amendment. I just can't get a hold of that. And the Tenth Amendment is, well, you have to talk about everything. But we do, we do our flag, our flag-burning bit, which is our First Amendment bit, where we burn a flag while wrapped in the Constitution and then restore it and then burn it again, show it's done, and then have it reappear while doing the only verse of The Star-Spangled Banner that doesn't reference God, which is the third or fourth - on the shore dimly seen - the one that starts with the shore dimly seen is the only verse of The Star-Spangled Banner that doesn't include a reference to God, which for those people who try to claim that it's a Christian nation, that's a good argument there. But we do that on the West Wing, well, the B story on that particular West Wing was written by Lawrence O'Donnell, Junior, who is one of my closest

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friends, and the B story we wrote together, which is Penn & Teller perform at the White House and we do our flag burning and hilarity ensues. And the - what troubled me about that is Martin Sheen playing the President in this liberal porn that was West Wing, uses a big hunk - not against my will, I wrote it - but uses a big hunk of what I say from the flag in our show in West Wing. And people come up to me after the show and say boy, it was nice of West Wing to allow you to do that bit in your show, and I kind of go, oh, like Yosemite Sam and the smoke comes out the ears. That's ours before it was West Wing! We wrote it for West Wing. And then the Second Amendment, we end our show - it's not as didactic as the First Amendment bit. We do the bullet catch, which is purely American magic trick. Now many of the magic tricks in our show were created. When you speak of magic, there's a couple very simple terms of art. There is effect, which is what the trick looks like, and there's method, which is how the trick is done. In many cases our effect and our method are original. They may have antecedents, but the overall thing are original. Some of our things, the effect is original but the method is something that has been used in other tricks other times, and some of our tricks the method is original and the effect is standard. In the bullet catch, our method is entirely ours with some help from people that work with us, and the effect is one that goes back to the Aboriginal Americans, Native Americans, who did a magic act where they would catch signed bullets from the settlers in the 17th century. Now, maybe as a culture, it's not the best idea to advertise that you can catch bullets when people are coming in to take over your country. Just thinking. We learned that in history, you know? But they did the bullet catch. And we - up until - and we now do a double bullet catch, which has never been done before. And it is - the effect is the most dangerous effect in show business. About fifteen people have been killed on stage doing it. Signed bullet fired at each other. We believe our method is safe. We are frightened that maybe some of those fourteen, fifteen people also thought their method was safe. But just the idea that we're willing to use handguns on stage without apology I believe makes a very strong statement about the Second Amendment and during the introduction I say we only want people on stage to assist us, that is to say to sign the bullets, who believe very strongly in the Second Amendment. So that's a strong Second Amendment statement. And the proof of that is that we can't do the bit anywhere. We can only do it in Vegas. We obviously can't do it in Canada or England. We can no longer do it in the United States of America, which, of course, Vegas is not quite part of. The last time we did it in D.C., we had to have police officers on our payroll take the guns from us at the end of the show, put them in a lockbox that had our lock on it too because we didn't trust them, and they would take it to the police station where it would stay overnight then come back in for our show, we would unlock, they would unlock, we would have it for the show and they would go away. But in New York we can't even do that. In New York there was no way to do it. We tried - this is a very sad thing about the state of New York City - we tried all above-board methods and then we tried bribery. And how can bribery not work in New York City? But we couldn't do the bullet catch there last we tried, and so we've kind of given up doing it any place out of Vegas. And then we do a major bit on the Fourth Amendment which we do about TSA where we show how to bring things through a TSA screening machine and we sell the Dean Cameron - Dean Cameron, a good friend of mine, his securityedition.com metal Bill of Rights, which is the Bill of Rights on a playing card size piece of metal that sets off the alarm and doesn't accomplish anything except allows you to do -

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to be a freedom-fighting performance artist and you are able to say yes, I would like to fly. Here, take my rights. And so those bits have a very strong pro-freedom, whatever you want to call the Cato Institute exact position point of view and we self-identify during the show as libertarians. The show is not an atheist show, it's not a libertarian show. I try to follow the Garth Brooks rule, which is Garth Brooks is a country singer. That's what he does for a living. And I am a magician and comedian. That's what I do for a living. And the amount of times that Garth Brooks as a secular performer can mention Jesus Christ, being a Christian, and being an American is the amount of time that I can mention being an atheist and being a libertarian and an American. And that means that I say during the show Teller and I are both libertarians, I say during the show I am a nonbeliever. Garth says during his show I want to thank Jesus Christ, our Lord, and I'm a Christian. He has two mentions in a two-hour show, we have two mentions in a two-hour show and I believe that makes - means that we're both secular entertainers and I'm not performing as an atheist or as a libertarian, but I am performing as an entertainer who is an atheist and a libertarian.

Caleb Brown: There are a lot of flavors of libertarianism.

Penn Jillette: Yeah, that's for sure.

Caleb Brown: And where would you categorize yourself? Are there, you know, positive libertarians are those who would say simply smash the state - where would you put yourself, or have you thought that much about it?

Penn Jillette: Well this comes back to a thing that I'm obsessed with which is - there's a line by Bob Dylan: Fearing not, I become my enemy in the instant that I preached. It's from *My Back Pages*. A very, very important line. In Bob Dylan lines, probably second only to: It frightens me, the awful truth, of how sweet life can be. That's my favorite Dylan line. Second favorite is: Fearing not, I become my enemy in the instant that I preach. I know that the Cato Institute has to have an agenda. I know that they have to look at numbers and spreadsheets and they have to say this is the number of op-ed pieces we've got in major papers and this is the number of people we have had mention us. I know you have to do that, and I'm okay with that. But for an individual, I think your job has to be, when you're not on the Cato payroll, which I should add I'm not at all, although some people in attacking me have said he gets money from the Koch brothers. Maybe I do. I mean maybe somewhere, something I do, I've gotten a discount at Home Depot or something, but in my professional work I haven't gotten a penny from them, nor have I asked for it, and I think you can attest that being in my position at Cato does not give me any coin at all, it's an unpaid position. So I'm not on the payroll of libertarians, *Reason*, *Cato*, *Objectivist*. They haven't given me a penny, I'm not on the payroll. So I'm not on their time clock. And I believe that your goal without condescension and without manipulation is to tell the truth as you see it. And I align myself when the truth as I see it overlaps with an atheist movement, or a skeptic movement, or a libertarian movement, or Cato. I'm very happy to get on board there. But I don't spend any time thinking about what we are trying to accomplish. And I believe that's really important because if I think how do I convince this person - I'm sitting

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across from someone that I've met and in my mind if I'm thinking how do I get that person to become a libertarian, I believe at that moment I am a pig. I am a bad person, I am doing the wrong thing. I should be thinking what do I believe, what's in my heart, I try to say that, then that person says that back. Because it's possible they're right. And if I'm trying to convince them, I have not given any possibility of them being right. When you say to the person condescendingly, well, how do you think UFOs could have gotten here - that's not a real question. You are trying to manipulate them. And it's possible that the person sitting across from me has information on Roswell that will change my whole point of view. It's very unlikely. I don't really entertain it, but in theory I want to be open to that. So my brand of libertarianism, if you will, is I love having people preach to me. I don't want to ever become the person that's trying to change their mind. And the difference is so subtle, as I think outside of me to be nonexistent, the difference between telling the truth as you see it from your heart with passion and trying to win people over is, I guess the technical term would be rich. Just the slightest possible difference. But to me it's very important and I try to stick with that. So I don't really have - I'm a member of the Cato Institute, I subscribe to *Reason*, I mean, I think - I have to check, but I think I'm a card-carrying member of the Libertarian Party. I never know what I filled out and what exactly I've done, but I've voted libertarian for many years now, you know, 25 years or whatever, and I miss Harry Browne every second. He was wonderful. But - so the flavors of libertarianism I'd go with is just, I think I'd go with maximum freedom. I often say that I'm probably leaning closer to anarcho-capitalist. I would love to see - I mean, every situation, and I've said this a zillion times to Larry King - in every problem you come up with, I would like to have one of the first questions to be: is it possible we can solve this with more freedom instead of less? Is that possible? And sometimes the answer is going to be no, you know. If someone is committing a rape, you know, if someone is killing someone and you are a police person and you have a gun and they are holding a gun to someone's head like this and they're going to pull the trigger, you might not be able to solve that problem with more freedom to that person, you know. If a country is attacking ours and actually changing our way of life, you may not be able to solve that with more freedom to the other side. But teen use of tobacco, television shows we don't like, libraries, at least consider the possibility of going with more freedom. That having been said, I'm not for burning down the situation that we have. I'm not for hose it down, as a friend of mine says on everything. Just hose it down, start again. It's not the style person I am. I believe that you just keep saying the truth as you see it as often as you can, you change your mind every time you see yourself as being wrong, and you hope that that truth will win out in the end. I think it does. I think that the major quality you need to be an atheist and the major quality you need to be a libertarian is optimism and trust and love of people.

Caleb Brown: Penn Jillette is more than 50 percent, by weight, of the comedy-magic duo Penn & Teller. He is a Mencken research fellow of the Cato Institute and former columnist in *Regulation* magazine. You can read some of Penn's writings for Cato at our website, CATO.org.

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