

Charles Taylor & the Immanent Frame of the Secular

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We are offered a particularly insightful analysis of our current cultural ethos by McGill Philosophy Professor Charles Taylor in his most recent prize winning tome *A Secular Age*. (2007). Richard Rorty spoke of Taylor as one the top twelve philosophers of our day. He captures the way in which we have located ourselves in the late modern world and the picture that has taken our minds captive: he calls it the *immanent frame*. This house of the mind and imagination constitutes a unique *social imaginary* (implicit understanding of the space in which we live) in human history. Our focus here will be to exposit the key insights of Chapter 15 in *A Secular Age*. In this critical analysis, he shows how religion has been philosophically and culturally marginalized in Western culture (even while it is in resurgence). Taylor leads us to think freshly about how we have arrived in this cultural space.

The core theme of this landmark book is (510) to study the fate of religious faith in the *strong* sense in the West, meaning: a. belief in a transcendent reality, and b. the connected aspiration of personal transformation, which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing. He is deconstructing or calling into question the *subtraction story* or Western Master Narrative (one deeply embedded in modern consciousness), where science replaces religion after Christendom. In this perspective, the growth of science entails the death of God or the recession of religion. Religion is seen to be replaced by science. Is this hermeneutically valid?, asks Taylor. When did science become equivalent to secularism and why? This is the crux of the investigation.

Ultimately, he wants to explore with us the plausibility of the life-nurturing, transcendent dimensions of human culture. He does not believe that all citizens of late modernity need to deny the possibility of the transcendent within this immanent frame and live within a horizontal dimension only. From his perspective, the story of the rise of modern social spaces doesn't need to be given an anti-religious spin (579). The actual reality of Western culture is closer to the truth that "a whole gamut of positions, from the most militant atheism to the most orthodox traditional theisms, passing through every possible position on the way, are represented and defended somewhere in our society." (556) They are defended in various non-neutral contexts, institutions and communities. This creates for citizens of late modernity the sense of being *cross-pressured* by the different views (the plurality of positions) they encounter. The dialogue and debate of these perceptions is still very robust, with endless potential options to find meaning. Belief and unbelief in God co-exist within society (secularity 3).

What does Taylor mean by the term immanent frame? The *buffered* identity (as opposed to the *porous*) self is a key part of such a mental frame. It operates within a disenchanted world where supernatural beings or forces with teleological goals or intentions are deemed close to impossible (539). With this immanent picture, there is a loss of a cosmic order; everything important is this-worldly, explicable on its own terms; it fits within the time-space-energy-matter dimensions. Social and political orders are constructed by humans for mutual benefit. Society is made up of individuals (the normative element).

Each human is charged with finding her or his own way of being human (Nova Effect), their own spiritual path. Everyone has become an individual measure of the good.

But the immanent frame is by no means ethically neutral or strictly objective. It includes some things (values such as secular time) and excludes others—it renders ‘vertical’ or ‘transcendent’ worlds as inaccessible or unthinkable. It takes a hard moral position, and it operates as a philosophically reductionistic stance. Taylor refers to this moral position as *exclusive humanism* (otherwise known as naturalistic materialism).

So the buffered identity of the disciplined individual moves in a constructed social space, where instrumental rationality is a key value, and time is pervasively secular. All of this makes up what I want to call “the immanent frame”. There remains to add just one background idea: that this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted with a supernatural one, an “immanent” world over against a possible “transcendent” one. (542)

Taylor points out two different ways of seeing the world within this immanent frame, one closed (CWS) and one open. One does have the choice to open one’s self to the beyond or the transcendent. As per Wittgenstein, each is a picture that holds us captive (seems natural and logically unavoidable). It is the box (horizon) within which we observe, think and reason. But of course, it can block out (make us blind to) certain aspects of reality by the very nature of how it shapes our way of analyzing the world. It involves an unquestioned background, something whose shape is not perceived, but which conditions, largely unnoticed, the way we think, infer, experience, process claims and arguments. For example, a major thesis in modernity is that science must bring secularity in its train, which for Taylor is a non-obvious, unproven and biased claim.

From within this picture, it just seems obvious to many who hold it that the order of the argument proceeds from science to atheism (565), that *modernization brings secularization*. In the 19th century, it was assumed that science would develop to the point where people no longer need to believe in God or religion. This is paralleled in the rhetoric of the angry atheists of today. But there is actually a *leap of faith* in this stance, notes Taylor. It carries with it a false aura that it is obvious, or a logical conclusion. It involves, however, a moral attraction to a materialistic spin on reality, a moral outlook (where God and religion is at the bottom of important things to consider). It is not based on scientific facts at all (despite the fact that it takes some of its inspiration from the epistemological success of science). There is a heavy focus on human goods, on human flourishing: rights, welfare, equality, and democracy. Taylor writes:

We can come to see the growth of civilization, or modernity, as synonymous with laying out of a closed immanent frame; within this civilized values develop, and a single-minded focus on the human good aided by a fuller and fuller use of scientific reason, permits the greatest flourishing possible of human beings. Religion not only menaces these goals with its fanaticism, but it also undercuts reason, which comes to be seen as rigorously requiring scientific materialism. (548)

As already stated, we currently live in this cross-pressured space. Our culture pulls us in both directions: secular and religious. (found in famous writers such as Blake, Goethe, Dostoyevski, Milosz). The struggle for belief is ongoing, never definitively won or lost today. This is the major theme of the CBC Ideas Series produced by David Cayley called *After Atheism*. We know of both:

- a. Those who opt for the ordered, impersonal universe, whether in the scientific-materialistic form, or in a more spiritualized variant, feel the imminent loss of a world of beauty, meaning, warmth, as well as of the perspective of self-transformation beyond the everyday (along with regrets about loss of its positive impact on society and nostalgia for a yesterday).
- b. Those whose strongest leanings move them towards at least some search for spiritual meaning, and often towards God. (592-3)

Two Distinct Approaches to Seeing the World

It is helpful to understand the impact of two distinct ways of engaging the world intellectually and philosophically:

1. **Epistemological Approach** (Descartes, Locke, Hume). The set of priority relations within this picture often tends towards a closed world position (CWS). This is stated in the section directly above and its assumptions include the following:

- a. Knowledge of self and its status come before knowledge of the world (things) and others.
- b. Knowledge of reality is a neutral fact before we (the self) attribute value to it.
- c. Knowledge of things of the natural order comes before any theoretical invocations or any transcendence (which is thereby problematized, doubted or repressed). This approach tends to write transcendence out of the equation.

Within this view, the individual is primary and certainty is within the mind. The self is an independent, disengaged subject reflexively controlling its own thought processes self-responsibly. The oft-presumed neutrality of this view is actually bogus; it is in fact a heavily value-laden approach. It offers a whole construction of identity and society with different/distinctive priorities and values.

Materialism, in point of fact, is a *construction* (not arising from science), a story we tell ourselves about the entire cosmos and our place within it, our value, identity, trajectory and purpose. Humans have always had a way of placing themselves in the context of the cosmos and time; it is not possible to do without them. It depends on a certain naturalistic metaphysics. But is it plausible? Taylor's contention is that the power of materialism today comes not from scientific "facts", but has rather to be explained in terms of the

power of a certain package uniting materialism with a moral outlook, the package we call “atheistic humanism” or exclusive humanism. (569) It works off an ontological thesis of materialism: *everything which is, is based on “matter”*, without explaining why this is taken as true.

Even though rooted in the epistemological success of science, Taylor questions whether we are to logically conclude that everything is *nothing but* matter and that we should try to define our entire human and natural situation in terms of matter. Enlightenment of this sort is a kind of *excarnation* or out-of-body thinking. The self is abstracted from its socio-cultural embodiment.

This approach employs a *designative* use of language (Hobbes to Locke to Condillac) which traps the pursuit of wisdom within language and confines it to immanence, where language and its relationship to truth are reduced to pointing. Language primarily designates objects in the world. The object is observed, held at arms length, but not participated in. One assumes a use of language based on quantitative judgments that are non-subject dependant. This tradition also contributes to a mechanistic outlook on the universe. It is committed to the primacy of epistemology (evidence and justified belief). It is not oriented to universals or essences. (D. Stephen Long, *Speaking of God*. p. 230)

Ethics: Once human beings took their norms, their goods, their standards of ultimate value from an authority outside themselves; from God, or the gods, or the nature of Being or the cosmos. But then they came to see that these higher authorities were their own fictions, and they realized they had to establish their norms and values for themselves, on their own authority. This is a radicalization of the coming to adulthood story as it figures in the science-driven argument for materialism.... The dramatic claim to establish our own standards comes down to the thought that we no longer receive those norms from an authority outside us, but rather from our own scientific investigations. (580) We are morally *self-authorized*.

Part of this Master Narrative is that for proponents of the death of God, they want to see *God-absence* as a property of the universe which science lays bare. Taylor notes: “It is only within some understanding of agency, in which disengaged scientific inquiry is woven into a story of courageous adulthood, to be attained through a renunciation of the more ‘childish’ comforts in meaning and beatitude, that the death of God story appears obvious.” (565) Of course, he questions this narrative, and holds it up for scrutiny.

The claim is that religious belief is a childish temptation and a beautiful world (think Peter Pan), lacking courage to face reality and grow up into a more complex, harsh world. Maturing into adulthood implies leaving faith in God behind. But loss of faith in adulthood is not an obvious fact of observable reality, but a construction of human identity and our place in the world. (565) Taylor questions whether it has hermeneutical adequacy. (567) He is not at all convinced that the arguments from natural science to atheism are strong; they seem to include bad reason, inconclusive arguments, and are based on faulty assumptions.

2. Second Way of Seeing: Hermeneutical Approach (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Gadamer). Note also Jens Zimmermann's book *Incarnational Humanism*. (2012). The presuppositions of this approach are:

- a. Self is not the first priority; the world, society and the game of life come first. We only have knowledge as agents coping with the world, and it makes no sense to doubt that world.
- b. There is no priority of a neutral grasp of things over and above their value.
- c. Our primordial identity is as a new player inducted into an old game.
- d. Transcendence or the divine horizon is a possible larger context of this game (radical skepticism is not as strong). There is a smaller likelihood of a closed world system view in the hermeneutical approach to the world. In a sense it is a more humble and nuanced view.

Within this view, therefore, one is not so boxed in regarding the parameters of thinking. Within this *open* immanent frame, certain hard features of the first approach to reality can be deconstructed and the inadequacies of such features exposed. Enlightenment could and does mean an engaging belief in God for millions if not billions around the world. The first view is definitely a more restrictive possibility for making sense of the world. Thomas Nagel questions its reductionism in making sense of consciousness, purpose or teleology and moral value (*Mind & Cosmos*). We may well ask: Is it actually at the end of the day a progressive environment for thought? Or is it intellectually stifling?

~La Fin