

Between Culture & Belief

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Progressivism

Charles Taylor rejects common stories about the emergence of secularism within Western culture. He does not deny that the rise of secularism is a real phenomenon of Northern European societies. But he thinks that some of the accounts of what it consists in, and how it came about, are at best simplifications.

There is a temptation to misread Taylor especially if it comes as a surprise to discover that he is Catholic. You may think that he is going to argue that modernity represents an impoverishment of a great tradition and that we must return to the enchanted world of medieval Christendom. But he is not attacking secularism. In fact he thinks it involves a set of rich and challenging attitudes which are difficult to acquire and maintain. His concern in *A Secular Age* is with the processes whereby secularism became an option in Western society. His polemic is aimed at what he takes to be superficial accounts of what went into that process. The trouble with the standard account of the emergence of secular attitudes, he thinks, is that it

'... gives too little place to the cultural changes wrought by Western modernity, the way in which it has developed new understandings of the self, its place in society, in space and in time. It fails to see how innovative we have been; its tendency is to see modernity as the liberating of a continuing core of belief and desire from an overlay of metaphysical/religious illusion which distorted and inhibited it.' (p. 573¹)

What he rejects are various versions of what we might call Progressivism: human society and culture progresses from a benighted state to a state of enlightenment and an important dimension of this progress is the move from religious belief to secularism. An optimistic Progressivist may admit that there may be set-backs and even disasters on the road, but he thinks that the record shows an upward trend. The pessimistic Progressivist may think we are in reality all doomed, but this is because the human race is so self-destructive, or Fate is so indifferent to human welfare, that the chances of us staying on the road to enlightenment are small. He thinks nonetheless that progress, were it to occur and be maintained, consists in emerging out of a state of ignorance and superstition into a state of rational self-determination, of which the rejection of religious beliefs and practices is an essential part.

Perhaps the most popular version of Progressivism in the Anglo-American world is Scientism. The story goes that people were sunk in a state of ignorance, superstition and prejudice until approximately 1600 when science in the modern sense appeared on the scene. It not only undermined the flawed beliefs of the past but taught us how to achieve real knowledge. It is a familiar tale: science teaches us to escape from subjectivity to objectivity; it rejects the anthropomorphic and teleological ways of thinking that generated religious attitudes and distorted preceding attempts to understand Nature and our place in it. Taylor calls this ‘the gross error theory’: religious beliefs are false and we can replace them with true beliefs. To take a simple example, there is a scientific explanation of the rainbow which is true; the biblical explanation in terms of divine intentions is bunk. It is bunk because it is bad science.

History

Part of the myth of Scientism, ‘*a narrow and philistine scientism*’ Taylor calls it (p. 375), is that history is bunk. It admits that the emergence of our beliefs, even the emergence of scientific theories, has a history, but once they have been formulated and verified, the ties with the past can be cut and the question of their meaning and their truth or falsity can be assessed timelessly. The relationship of Science to its history, let alone to the social and political environment in which it is practised, is pared to a minimum.

One radical way of trying to quarantine beliefs from history is to allow into meaning only what we have put there ourselves, to substitute will for inheritance. ‘*Only through mathematical symbolism would it be possible to rise entirely above the contingency of the historical languages and the vagueness of their concepts*’. (Gadamer p. 415). This was the ambition of Leibniz when he proposed a ‘*characteristica universalis*’, the perfect language of calculation which had to be invented by an act of will to avoid the quagmire of inheritance and the opacity of the past. ‘*Whatever can be said, can be said clearly*’ⁱⁱⁱ because we only allow in what we have chosen to put in.

Other versions of Progressivism look to progress not in knowledge but in political and social life. Marxism is an example. Religion is a function of the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. ‘Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains’ⁱⁱⁱ. Enlightenment requires political and economic emancipation. When we shake off the chains that bind us, we will also shrug off the religious attitudes that enslave our minds and sensibilities^{iv}. Taylor calls this sort of story

‘the subtraction theory’: secular attitudes are what are left when you lift the repressive forces that weigh people down and distort their views of the natural world and their place in it.

Freudianism has a similar subtraction account transposed into a psychological key. Religious attitudes are the result of neuroses and alienation. When we are returned to mental health through psychotherapy, the pathological drivers of religious belief will be removed.

Neither Marxism nor Freudianism tries to isolate current beliefs from history. Instead they claim that history is on their side. The classical Marxist believes that in the political domain there is an inevitable direction of history towards an end state of a [classless](#) society. Freudianism sees psychoanalysis as producing in the life of individuals a therapeutic progress from a pathological condition to mental health. History may be sent to the sin bin (if Scientism controls the game) or it may be supposed to be reinforcing one’s theory at a higher level (as Marxism nor Freudianism like to think), in neither case do historical contingencies threaten one’s theory.

Backgrounds to beliefs

To all these theories Taylor objects: *‘This kind of account gives too much place to changes in belief as against those in experience and sensibility.’* (p. 573) He argues that there are factors which lie behind beliefs and without which those beliefs, or changes in those beliefs, or the abandonment of those beliefs, cannot be properly understood. He calls these background elements ‘the social imaginary’ or ‘master narratives’ (p. 573). He compares them to what Wittgenstein refers to as the pictures that hold us captive PI §115. He aligns them with Heidegger’s pre-cognitive, pre-propositional grip on the world *‘the ongoing activity of coping with the world as bodily, social and cultural beings’* (p. 558)

The idea is that there is relief to understanding a world, there is background and foreground. There is front of stage where the overt action takes place and there is upstage, as it were, the scenery, the lighting, the music, everything that makes the setting within which, and only within which, the cognitive action takes place. How are we to hear this claim? Is it meant to be an epistemic position or

an historical interpretation or sociological theory? Are we saying that the truth of our declared beliefs *logically* depend on the truth of other beliefs that we are perhaps unaware of? Or are we saying that historical research or cultural studies discover that, as a matter of fact, certain beliefs and practices became possible or ceased to be possible in certain conditions? Or does he need yet another sort of dependency – neither the strict dependency of logical inference nor the *de facto* dependency of historical contingencies.

If we take the first option – i.e. if we think we are talking about the logical dependence of front-line beliefs on background beliefs – we generate an epistemic inquiry. We can sign up to Descartes' mission statement:

Several years have now elapsed since I first became aware that I had accepted, even from my youth, many false opinions for true, and that consequently what I afterward based on such principles was highly doubtful; and from that time I was convinced of the necessity of undertaking once in my life to rid myself of all the opinions I had adopted, and of commencing anew the work of building from the foundation, if I desired to establish a firm and abiding superstructure in the sciences.

In this familiar opening sentence of the *Meditations* Descartes worries that in the logical background of his present beliefs are innumerable other beliefs that have accumulated in his mind over the years. So a complete clear-out is required if he is to be able to claim that any of his beliefs are true, because the truth of frontline beliefs depends on the truth of the background beliefs. To ensure that he is not dependent on unexamined beliefs Descartes sets out to confront a totally rational knower with a totally intelligible object. The aim is realized in the *Cogito* in which I, purified by Methodic Doubt of all cognitive commitments, confront, in the simplest possible act of rational intuition, my Self, stripped of history and biology, pared down to a bare *ego cogitans*.

Taylor's idea is that the Cartesian project is misconceived from the start: beliefs are formed, altered and rejected in a context, against a background; the project of isolating a single proposition with a view to establishing its certainty is doomed because outside of its epistemic environment it loses its sense. His alternative view is that '*We are in fact all acting, thinking and feeling out of backgrounds and frameworks which we do not fully understand*' (p. 287)

Sometimes Taylor talks of these backgrounds and frameworks in a Cartesian way, as if they were made up of beliefs of which we are only half aware. But generally speaking throughout the book, the social and cultural environment that he examines is a much more generous idea: ‘... *not only is the immanent frame itself not usually, or even mainly a set of beliefs which we entertain about our predicament, however it may have started out; rather it is the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs..*’ (p. 549) Our beliefs are formed in the context of values, imagination and emotion. If this is true then the dependence of our up-front beliefs on the imaginative, social, cultural, emotional and moral background cannot be strictly logical. Logic concerns the relationships between explicit propositions – ‘well-formed formulae’, as the logicians call them. This does not mean that the dependence is not real and substantial; it just means that it is not a matter of inference. Particular beliefs and practices get their weight and value from the role they play in our lives, their place in the cultural web, the connections they have with our feelings and values.

The example of theodicy

All this is particularly true of religious beliefs. An example of the transformation that a belief undergoes when the social and cultural background changes is the problem of suffering. The problem of suffering when it was raised in 18th century Deism turned out to be very different from the religious anxieties of the Judaic-Christian tradition. An indication of the difference is that Leibnitz needed to invent a new word for his problem. In 1710, he published a work entitled *Essays of Theodicy on the goodness of God, the liberty of man and the origin of evil* (*Essais de Théodicée sur la bonte de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal*).^v In it he attacked the idea that the [goodness](#) and [omnipotence of God](#) is incompatible with suffering. He went for broke and established the compatibility of God’s goodness and suffering by proving that ‘*this universe must be in reality better than every other possible universe.*’^{vi} He treats suffering as an abstract, theoretical problem to which he gives an abstract and theoretical answer.

This is not the tone of voice of the Old or New Testament. In the Book of Job, Bildad the Shuhite does indeed pose what sounds like the central question of Theodicy: ‘*Doth God pervert judgment? or doth the Almighty pervert justice?*’^{vii} But the whole debate is presented in terms of an apparent personal betrayal by God. This is the way Job understands his predicament: ‘*God hath delivered me to the ungodly, and turned me over into the hands of the wicked.*’ (Ch. 16).

Job's predicament is seen from a first person point of view. It is not a theoretical problem but a personal problem which arises out of the apparent breakdown in the relationship between a person and his God. In the New Testament this is even more intensely felt: Jesus cries out: *'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'* This contrast between the personal and the theoretical has become so acute that theologians like Levinas want a *'faith without theodicy'*^{viii} The issue, they feel, is not whether we can or cannot reconcile Divine Providence with suffering but whether we can inhabit religious language, rituals and institutions in which those who suffer and those who share the suffering of others can express their anguish and hope.

Many contemporary atheists would give the Leibnizian problem of suffering, as their main reason for rejecting religious belief. So they are likely to read the Levinasian move as a cop out. But from Taylor's perspective, the religious environment has already been abandoned before the Leibnizian problem can even be formulated. Rational arguments about the compatibility of Providence and suffering arrive too late.

A more light-hearted example of the failure to appreciate the importance of a change in cultural environment concerns the Ontological Argument. The Australian philosopher Douglas Gasking produced an ontological argument for the non-existence of God:

- 1. The creation of the world is the most marvellous achievement imaginable.*
- 2. The merit of an achievement is the product of (a) its intrinsic quality, and (b) the ability of its creator.*
- 3. The greater the disability (or handicap) of the creator, the more impressive the achievement.*
- 4. The most formidable handicap for a creator would be non-existence.*
- 5. Therefore if we suppose that the universe is the product of an existent creator we can conceive a greater being - namely, one who created everything while not existing.*

6. *An existing God therefore would not be a being greater than which a greater cannot be conceived because an even more formidable and incredible creator would be a God which did not exist.*

Ergo:

7. *God does not exist.*

In "[The God Delusion](#)" [Richard Dawkins](#) (2006) comments: "*Gasking didn't really prove that God does not exist. By the same token, Anselm didn't prove that he does. The only difference is, Gasking was being funny on purpose*" (p. 84) I am not missing the joke but there is a serious point to be made. The Ontological Argument only makes sense against a Platonic background of thought in which, in some way or other, Mind and Reality are ultimately identical. Dawkins cannot see how anyone could propose the Ontological Argument *seriously* because he cannot see how anyone could take Platonism seriously, despite the fact the Platonism has been the common theme running through Western philosophy and keeps on burying its undertakers to this very day.

The Hermeneutic Challenge

If we learn from these examples and accept, with Taylor, that our beliefs cannot be understood or intelligently criticized independently of the cultural background in which they developed, we are faced with a problem: how are we to get to grips with, to comprehend, to get an overview of this territory out of which explicit beliefs and commitments emerge? Numerous disciplines will stake a claim. History will demand that priority is given to the historical record; sociology and cultural studies will insist that the evolution of ideas is a social phenomenon of communities of encultured language users; phenomenologists will remind us that what we are trying to get our heads round are the experiences and sensibilities of individual people.

All these disciplines have a lot to contribute; but they arrive on the scene too late. What they study and the evidence they point to are all already spoken and spoken for; they have already been processed and presented in some guise or other. These disciplines explain *after the fact* why people think and talk the way they do. Etymology, for example, traces the record of the evolution of a word's meaning; it does not capture emergent meaning on the wing. Of course we are not here talking about the meaning of this or that word. We are talking about this or that way of taking the world. I can learn, for example, about medieval

society and come to see why understanding redemption in terms of feudal ransom and blood money seemed to Christians like Anselm a natural way of expressing themselves. But I don't get it and I never will.

Philosophy, at least as it has often been understood in the analytic tradition, is not much more promising than other disciplines. We philosophical scholars have become not so much Socratic midwives overseeing the birth of new ideas as Austinian paramedics, rushing from one conceptual collision to another, patching up a victim and helping him limp away from the scene of the accident; carrying out a tracheotomy by the roadside in an effort to keep some worn-out theory breathing; pronouncing another sad case dead on arrival.

Well perhaps the best that academic philosophy can do is to criticize impoverished accounts of language or, in an ambitious mood, trace the outlines of the conditions for the possibility of meaning. We cannot expect that any discipline could anticipate what future domains of meaning will open up, yet if philosophy is to be worth a candle it must position itself at the interface of culture and belief. If the phrase 'the interface of culture and belief' seems a little heavy, try translating it into the terminology of Péguy - the interface of 'mystique' and 'politique'. I am struggling with the same problem as he was when he wrote:

What for us, for our fathers, was an instinct, ancestry, living thought, have become for them (politicians) propositions ... what was for us organic has become for them logical^{ix}.

If we are restricted to propositions, to 'politique', philosophy departments become conceptual A & E units, when all along we had hoped for an inquiry that would lead us to feel how ways of thinking and acting get a grip upon us. We hoped to rework or relive or re-experience the dynamics of hermeneutic experience for ourselves, in ourselves. Heidegger wants the philosopher to be a poet^x. Not of course to produce pretty language but to give authentic voice to the world. As if we could look out across Alnmouth bay hoping that as the tide comes in it will flood into words. Hoping that the ebb and flow will find a voice all by itself.

A serious discussion of secularism requires that we locate ourselves where the religious take on the world becomes tenable or untenable, when the faith is found or lost. In Catholic circles, ‘losing the faith’ was a familiar phrase. I used to think this was offensively patronizing. Now it seems just right: ‘I used to have it *here*; it came easily to hand; but now when I reach for it, it isn’t there any more’.

How can we capture the ebb and flow of a religious view of life? Well, however we try to do it, it will have little to do with proving or disproving; it will go beyond method. It calls for a personal engagement with our cultural inheritance, no holds barred: visiting and revisiting the sources of our attitudes without nostalgia: as a sounding board; a living critique; self-critical of our whole sensibility; using every relevant form of inquiry; but not mistaking the defence of theories by argument, with finding forms of life habitable.

ⁱ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of HUP, 2007. All subsequent unattributed page references are to this book.

ⁱⁱ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, Preface

ⁱⁱⁱ [Jean Jacques Rousseau](#), (1712 - 1778) *The Social Contract*.

^{iv} “Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Communist Manifesto*.

^v *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14569a.htm>

^{vi} Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, ‘Theodicy: Abridgement of the argument reduced to syllogistic form’

<http://www.class.uidaho.edu/mickelsen/texts/Leibniz%20-%20Theodicy.htm>

^{vii} Book of Job, Ch. 6

^{viii} Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 100.

^{ix} Quoted Taylor p.748

^x Only that openness to being addressed, which includes the “courage to feel essential anxiety” (as the locus of the experience of nothingness, and thus also of Being), is what is required of humankind” (Thomä ed., 2003: 274ff.) quoted in Anthony Stephens ‘Cutting Poets to Size – Heidegger, Hölderlin, Rilke’ <http://jacketmagazine.com/32/stephens-heidegger.shtml>