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Reforming Belief: The Secular as Modern Accomplishment

More than Subtraction: Obstacles to Unbelief

The “secular” is not just the neutral, rational, areligious world that is left over once we throw off superstition, ritual, and belief in the gods. This is because the secular is not just *unbelief*, or lack of specifically religious belief. What characterizes *secularity*₃ — and the *secular*₃ age — is not merely private. The emergence of the secular is also bound up with the production of a new option — the possibility of exclusive humanism as a viable **social imaginary** — a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence. So it wasn’t enough for us to stop believing in the gods; we also had to be able to *imagine* significance within an immanent frame, to imagine modes of meaning that did not depend on transcendence. This is why “subtraction stories” of the sort offered by secularization theory will always fall short. The secular is not simply a remainder; it is a sum, created by addition, a product of intellectual multiplication.

So, if we’re going to answer Taylor’s overarching question — How did we get here from there? How did we get from a time (in, say, 1500) in which atheism was virtually unthinkable to a time (in 2000) when theism is almost unbelievable? — we can’t simply note when and where various beliefs were knocked off. We also have to consider the change in conditions that made it possible for the West to be able to imagine exclusive humanism as a viable vision of significance.

This is where Taylor's story begins. We have to try to imagine the scene: we're in the late medieval world, and atheism is pretty much unthinkable. This certainly doesn't mean everyone believes the same thing. Far from it. In fact, crucial to Taylor's account is the recognition of all kinds of competing visions of Christianity already operative in the West before the Reformation. But still, no one has yet dreamed of Nietzsche or Christopher Hitchens. Why was that? What were those features of the "background" or "imaginary" of medieval society that occluded these imaginative possibilities? If we can identify those features of the medieval social imaginary, we will have located the "obstacles to unbelief" that need to change to make both secularity and exclusive humanism imaginable (*Secular Age*, p. 29). Taylor highlights three features of this medieval imaginary that functioned as obstacles to unbelief (p. 25):

1. The natural world was constituted as a cosmos that functioned semiotically, as a sign that pointed beyond itself, to what was *more* than nature.
2. Society itself was understood as something grounded in a higher reality; earthly kingdoms were grounded in a heavenly kingdom.
3. In sum, people lived in an enchanted world, a world "charged" with presences, that was open and vulnerable, not closed and self-sufficient.

It's not that these features guarantee that all medieval inhabitants "believe in God"; but it does mean that, in a world so constituted, "atheism comes close to being inconceivable" (p. 26) because one can't help but "see" (or "imagine") that world as sort of haunted — suffused with presences that are not "natural." To say this was part of the ancient and medieval imaginary is to say that it's what was taken for granted. So some part of the answer to Taylor's overarching question about how this changed is that "these three features have vanished." Not until these obstacles were removed could something like exclusive humanism emerge.

Our Modern Secular Imaginary: Removing Obstacles to Unbelief

To get at this, we really need to try to *feel* the difference between that age and ours. Because we're not really talking about what people *think*; it's more a matter of the difference between what we take for granted — what we don't give a second thought — and what people of that age took for granted. Because of this, Taylor is at pains to emphasize that he's not merely talking about changes in *ideas* or shifts in theory. "What I am trying to describe here," he urges, "is not a theory. Rather my target is our contemporary lived understanding; that is, the way we naively take things to be. We might say: the construal we just live in, without ever being aware of it as a construal, or — for most of us — without ever even formulating it" (p. 30). It is at this "level" that the shift has occurred; it is a shift in our naïve understanding, in what we take for granted (pp. 30-31). And this shift to a new "background" is *not* just true for exclusivist humanists; even believers believe in a way that also generally takes for granted this new background. So the shift to a secular age not only makes exclusive humanism a live option for us, it also changes religious communities. We're all secular now.

Taylor lays out five elements of our modern, secular₃ social imaginary, highlighting the contrast with premodern forms of life and the assumptions that attended them. What we'll notice is that each of these elements effectively rejects some aspect of the medieval imaginary we noted above.

Disenchantment and the "Buffered" Modern Self

It is a mainstay of secularization theory that modernity "disenchants" the world — evacuates it of spirits and various ghosts in the machine. Diseases are not demonic, mental illness is no longer possession, the body is no longer ensouled. Generally disenchantment is taken to simply be a matter of naturalization: the magical "spiritual" world is dissolved and we are left with the machinations of matter. But Taylor's account of disenchantment has a different accent, suggesting that this is primarily a shift in the *location* of meaning, moving it from "the world" *into* "the

mind.”¹ Significance no longer inheres in things; rather, meaning and significance are a property of minds who perceive meaning internally. The external world might be a catalyst for perceiving meaning, but the meanings are generated within the mind — or, in stronger versions (say, Kant), meanings are imposed upon things by minds. Meaning is now located in *agents*. Only once this shift is in place can the proverbial brain-in-a-vat scenario gain any currency; only once meaning is located in minds can we worry that someone or something could completely dupe us about the meaning of the world by manipulating our brains. It is the modern social imaginary that makes it possible for us to imagine *The Matrix*.

To sense the force of this shift, we need to appreciate how this differs from the “enchanted” premodern imaginary where all kinds of nonhuman things *mean* — are loaded and charged with meaning — independent of human perception or attribution. In this premodern, enchanted universe, it was also assumed that *power* resided in things, which is precisely why things like relics or the Host could be invested with spiritual power. As a result, “in the enchanted world, the line between personal agency and impersonal force was not at all clearly drawn” (p. 32). There is a kind of blurring of boundaries so that it is not only personal agents that have causal power (p. 35). Things can do stuff.

At this point Taylor introduces a key concept to describe the premodern self: prior to this disenchantment and the retreat of meaning into an interior “mind,” the human agent was seen as porous (p. 35). Just as premodern nature is always already intermixed with its beyond, and just as things are intermixed with mind and meaning, so the premodern self’s porosity means the self is essentially *vulnerable* (and hence also “healable”). To be human is to be essentially *open* to an outside (whether benevolent or malevolent), open to blessing or curse, possession or grace. “This sense of vulnerability,” Taylor concludes, “is one of the principal features which have gone with disenchantment” (p. 36).

At stake in disenchantment, then, are assumptions not just about meaning but also about minds, about the nature of agents and persons.

1. Taylor notes that this is not only about “linguistic meaning” but also about the fuller sense of meaning as in “the meaning of life” (p. 31). This will be related to his later use of the term “fullness,” which will be discussed further below.

In the shift to the modern imaginary, minds are “bounded,” *inward* spaces. So the modern self, in contrast to this premodern, **porous self**, is a **buffered self**, insulated and isolated in its interiority (p. 37), “giving its own autonomous order to its life” (pp. 38-39).

What does this have to do with our overarching question? Why would this make unbelief so hard in a premodern world? Taylor suggests it yields a “very different existential condition” because in an enchanted, porous world of vulnerable selves, “the prospect of rejecting God does not involve retiring to the safe redoubt of the buffered self, but rather chancing ourselves in the field of forces without him. . . . In general, going against God is not an option in the enchanted world. That is one way the change to the buffered self has impinged” (p. 41). In other words, it wasn’t enough to simply divest the world of spirits and demons; it was also necessary that the self be buffered and protected. Not until that positive shift came about did atheism/exclusive humanism become more “thinkable.” So this relocation of meaning and its attendant “buffering” of the self removed one of the obstacles to unbelief. Exclusive humanism becomes a little more thinkable.

Living Social

Not only were things invested with significance in the premodern imaginary, but the social bond itself was enchanted, sacred. “Living in the enchanted, porous world of our ancestors was inherently living socially” (p. 42). The good of a common weal is a *collective* good, dependent upon the social rituals of the community. “So we’re all in this together.” As a result, a premium is placed on *consensus*, and “turning ‘heretic’” is “*not* just a personal matter.” That is, there is no room for these matters to be ones of “private” preference. “This is something we constantly tend to forget,” Taylor notes, “when we look back condescendingly on the intolerance of earlier ages. As long as the common weal is bound up in collective rites, devotions, allegiances, it couldn’t be seen just as an individual’s own business that he break ranks, even less that he blaspheme or try to desecrate the rite. There was immense common motivation to bring him back into line” (p. 42). Individual disbelief is not a private option we can grant to heretics to pursue on weekends; to the contrary, disbelief has communal repercussions.

So if there is going to be room to not believe (or believe in exclusive humanism), then this very sociality or communitarianism has to be removed as yet another obstacle. The emergence of the buffered self already lays the groundwork for this since “this understanding lends itself to individuality, even atomism. . . . The buffered self is essentially the self which is aware of the possibility of disengagement” (pp. 41-42). The buffering of the self from alien forces also carves out a space for a nascent privacy, and such privacy provides both protection and permission to disbelieve. Once individuals become the locus of meaning, the social atomism that results means that disbelief no longer has social consequences. “We” are not a seamless cloth, a tight-knit social body; instead, “we” are just a collection of individuals — like individual molecules in a social “gas.” This diminishes the ripple effect of individual decisions and beliefs. You’re free to be a heretic — which means, eventually, that you’re free to be an atheist.

The Carnival Is Over: “Lowering the Bar” for Flourishing

Remember that we are tracking those features of the premodern imaginary that needed to be abolished in order to create room not only for unbelief but also for the positive emergence of exclusive humanism as a live option for organizing both an individual life and whole societies. The buffering of the self protects us from the danger of not believing in the gods; the privatized, individualized self protects us from the social stigma of not being part of the team, so to speak. Taylor identifies a critical third element that we might describe as the mundanization of the *ne plus ultra* — a sort of “lowering of the bar” in how we envision the requirements of a life well lived. Once again, we’ll get a feel for this shift if we try to get a sense of how this differs from premodern lived experience.

Especially in Christendom, Taylor recalls, there was a unique tension between “self-transcendence” — a “turning of life towards something *beyond* ordinary human flourishing” — and the this-worldly concerns of human flourishing and creaturely existence. We might redescribe this as a tension between what “eternity” required and what the mundane vagaries of domestic life demanded. It was assumed that human life found its ultimate meaning and telos in a transcendent eternity *and* that the de-