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### Naive and reflective faiths

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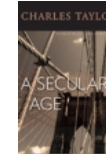
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It was difficult all along to conceive of religion (its ritual practices, mystical unions, or attractions and immersions of any other kind) without at the same time postulating or affirming a *distancing*—reflective or speculative, in case hypothetico-skeptical—stance vis-à-vis the world and life-world in all its worldly aspects. Religion, throughout the text of Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*, meant “engagement” and “disengagement” in theoretical, practical, and, more broadly, existential matters at once. To the very heart of religious belief there belongs not only an affirmation, but also a suspension of belief in the cosmic, social, or subjective matrices and fabrics of which we are made up. Our being-in-the world, *qua believers*, is, after all, if not exactly other-worldly, *not-quite-of-or-out-of-this-world*.



Taylor acknowledges the need for such speculative or otherwise affected—hypothetico-skeptical—distancing as a constitutive element and form of faith under the conditions of secular modernity. Indeed, there is nothing that characterizes modern secularity more than this way of seeing (thinking, doing, judging) things in light of their principal “optionality.” But he does not seem to grant this—as it were, dis-positional—stance any logical or ontological space, let alone normative, weight in the age (or ages) that historically preceded modernity (or that, if a relapse or worse conflagration were to happen, might befall our present secular arrangements and undo what he sees as their advancement of humanity as a whole). There is more separation than there is continuity between the “ages.” And yet the contours and prospects of our future seem more in line and in sync with our present than are those which marked our past.

Taylor’s view of the *coexistence* or even *coextensiveness* of engagement and disengagement—and nothing else defines having options or “optionality” more—is not so much one that stresses their *simultaneity* as it is one that highlights the need and chance for *changing roles and perspectives*, that is to say, of *seeing aspects*. As Taylor puts it suggestively, it all comes down to questions of “navigation”:

We all learn to navigate between two standpoints: an “engaged” one in which we live as best as we can the reality our standpoint opens us to; and a “disengaged” one in which we are able to see ourselves as occupying one standpoint among a range of possible ones, with which we have in various ways to coexist.

But we have also changed from a condition in which belief was the default option, not just for the naive but also for those who knew, considered, talked about atheism; to a condition in which for more and more people unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only plausible ones. . . .

This is not to say that everyone is in this condition. Our modern civilization is made up of a host of societies, sub-societies and milieux, all rather different from each other. But

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the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in more and more of these milieux; and has achieved hegemony in certain crucial ones, in the academic and intellectual life, for instance; whence it can more easily extend itself to others.

The speculative, retroactive postulation of an age of original immediacy (in which no option, let alone “optionality,” can arise or be seen for what it is) and its modern antithesis, namely the discovery and invention of the secular age (in which options are no longer immediately real, but conditioned by a hypothetical, disengaged, posture that was neither imagined nor quite possible before), thus blend here, once again, with a historical and, more precisely, sociological observation from which it must also set itself aside. The fallback or default option for “societies, sub-societies and milieux,” which are engaged in de facto “religion switching”—and, thereby, give further empirical proof of the cultural and, indeed, ontological as well as epistemic-normative pluralism that Taylor’s grand narrative both reconstructs and advocates—remains that of a “excluvist humanism” or “atheism” even though secularity consists, precisely, in the circumstance that our relation to religious and ethnic origins becomes more and more loosened, relaxed, and variable. Religion, in the modern age, turns ever more *global* in the sense of worldwide, expansive, extensive, and diversified, on the one hand, and of abstract, thinned out, vague, and absolute, intensive, or, indeed, deep, on the other. And, yet, Taylor claims, secularity holds sway over all persisting or re-found religious affiliations, as if the empirical outlook of things mattered less than the *still deeper* seated transition, whose origins and consequences no narrative—not even Taylor’s own—can aspire to capture in its essence, that is, in its full scope and effect. As such, the “seachange” in question eludes all temporal and spatial coordinates, just as it resists all narrativization.

It is clear, why this must be so, for what has taken place—and continues to take place with every step we make—is, first of all, a perspectival and near-absolute difference between the “then” and the “now” or between the “here” (among us moderns) and the “there” (among those among whom modernity has not yet announced itself or has not sufficiently sunk in): in one word, a shift that has all the qualities of a *Gestalt-switch* and plays itself out between *minimal* differences with potentially *maximal* consequences (just as massive causes, may have only negligible effects, in turn).

But then, if *Gestalt-switch* there is—between the ages, but also between the worlds, minds, and things or, indeed, options that (eventually) emerge from them—must it not have all the features of “seeing-aspects” as Wittgenstein understood them, and, indeed, of the dual-aspect theory of reality that Spinoza and, in his footsteps, Stuart Hampshire theorized? And, as a consequence, must this not necessarily mean that there is, again, *nothing optional* about the different perspectives (of immediacy and mediacy, participation and separation, engagement and disengagement, transcendence and immanence) after all? For, no matter how much we try, from within one “optional” perspective we cannot see the other at all, or, at least, not *at will* and *while* continuing to see the first. Further, it would seem unlikely that we ever stand in front of a variety of open options, without having adopted at least one of them. Which is another of saying that we do not have options in a mode or mood that we could describe as optional.

We could feel tempted to construe a dilemma: *either* faith is optional and, hence, does not quite live up to its

very concept and intention (which imply its potential for being fully immersed or engaged and, hence, an instant or instance of “fullness”), *or* it is not (and, hence, remains immediate and naïve, a magico-mythical stance or apodictic certainty, both of which require no act or leap of faith at all). In either case, faith is, quite literally, not an option. In other words, we are dealing with *either* naïveté (albeit it in different degrees) *or* with a reflective faith that must remain deeply aporetic, that is to say, never quite it, that is to say, full or fulfilled, arriving at some “middle position,” at best. For faith to have consistency, coherence, or even substance and consequence, it would have to be dogmatic, unquestioning, sealed off, blocking us from—blinding us for—the alternative view, thus undermining the very meaning and importance of “optionality.” Faith that reflects upon itself is a mere or pure form, whose invariable—even when we call it “fullness”—remains the unattainable measure and criterion for any historically or empirically espoused belief, that is to say, for any revealed, natural or material, content faith may come to adopt.

It is a consequence Taylor is reluctant to accept even though there is much in what he says that points in this direction, when he says that differences in belief throughout time emerge when we acknowledge that, “all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit...The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as ‘naïve’ and ‘reflective’: because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background.”

But should we accept this much? Can I choose an option as such, that is to say, for what it is under modern conditions (i.e., nothing more than a hypothetical view or practice, among many possible and potentially equally relevant and valuable others) and at the same time live and express it to the fullest extent, without halt or reservation, as “fullness” and “fulfillment” would seem to require? Does the tacit character of background framing—the “taken-for-granted” of which Taylor speaks—differ significantly in the two (naïve and reflective) ages? Or does any belief, any engagement, imply that I, immediately, blot out the very background, precisely since the moment we hold any view or adopt any course of action, however habitualized, at least some things—indeed, a vast majority of things—must be taken for granted, without ever attaining the level of explicitness that a meaningful use of “reflection” or “optionality” would require?

Indeed, we cannot reflect ourselves fully out of our previous or prevalent immediacies and engagements, bringing our background squarely before our eyes. It is as if opting for an “option”—let alone believing, practicing, or living one—operates from within a different time zone, one that escapes all spatio-temporal, that is to say, historico-empirical coordinates and situations. Again, it is as if “optionality” were itself not an option or, in any case, could not be had but reflectively, that is to say, from a metaphysical point of view—indeed, a “view from nowhere” (Thomas Nagel)—never quite attaining the *minimal naïveté* that religious faith (or, for that matter, any belief, practice, or life) requires for its very concept and existence.

Might not a historical shift from “naïve” to “reflective” belief occur one fine (or terrible) day? More cautiously put: might it, one day, be *possible* or *optional*, rather than, say, *actual* or a reality for all? Perhaps, who knows? But all signs indicate that this time has not come yet. In any event, it is almost impossible to imagine what its coming (as

in Taylor’s formulation of “coming of age of a secular age”) might mean or imply and, when it comes, excludes in turn. For what would the prize—i.e., the downside or side-effect—of pure reflectivity and non-naïveté be? What will be forgotten or suppressed where “fullness” is attained at long last?

As long as these remain open questions, history has not really begun and its secular age has not yet fully dawned. At the very best, it might very well be in “coming.” But then, this might be the only mode and mood in which we can actually relate to the secular, if at all. To think otherwise would mean to imagine—and practice or live—secularity and its reflexivity, not just as a “default option,” but as the indubitable, near-exclusive “option,” which would mean: no longer as an option at all. The secular would thus be reduced to a fatality and necessity and, thereby, begin to lack all contrast to its putative other, namely “immediacy” and “naïvety.” For, if history allows no more—or, not more than one—option, then it doesn’t allow for reflexivity either. More precisely, whatever reflection it permits in such a (admittedly, hypothetical) mono-causal and unilinear scenario will be at best a near-tautological self-explication from within the given frame of thought and action. Lacking any other option, it will remain self-contained, hence, dogmatic, and leave little to have faith in.

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