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The "option" of unbelief

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The “option” of unbelief

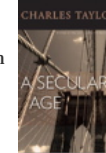
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Charles Taylor suggests in *A Secular Age* that the “default option” in modernity is “unbelief” or “exclusivist humanism,” both of which make up the major positions or viewpoints that the secular “immanent frame”—both in its open and closed or “spun” variety—solicits and fosters. But this seemingly unproblematic observation merits further scrutiny.



For one thing, is the option that we now almost naturally and automatically—if not instantively, then at least conventionally—fall back on still an “option,” in any rigorous determination of this term? Or are “unbelief” and “exclusivist humanism” suggested and, at times, imposed by the immanent frame as historico-metaphysical schematizations of modalities, moods, and motifs that—for all those who are in the thick of it—must of necessity remain largely invisible and impenetrable, that is to say, hardly an “option” at all? Following Taylor’s own “master narrative,” it would seem that we are hardly dealing with a possibility that we could either choose or deliberately refuse.

For another, Taylor multiplies several disclaimers and provisos which do not centrally confront these questions, but are important to note nonetheless. Thus, while he speaks of “the global context of a society which contains different milieux, within each of which the default option may be different from others,” he makes no secret of the fact that his overall analysis takes its points of departure—and finds its limitations—in the world of “Latin Christendom.” Within these cultural and geopolitical confines, Taylor argues, the age of “Reform”—a category which, in his work, precedes and expands well beyond the Protestant Reformation—represents not only a particular historical and intellectual or theological formation of culture, but also a spiritual “option” that becomes the “default” for all, and now forms the contrasting foil against which all its contenders must measure and, eventually, turn themselves. This is not the whole story, but for sound methodological reasons, Taylor claims, we might just as well start here, “because secularity, like other features of ‘modernity’—political structures, democratic forms, uses of media, to cite a few examples—in fact find rather different expression, and develop under the pressure of different demands and aspirations in different civilizations.”

From the particular to the general, even “universal”—this methodic ascension of a *view from somewhere*, as it expands and incessantly reruns its ever grander “narrative” circles, defines the way *A Secular Age* proceeds. Needless to say, Taylor’s cautionary remark does not fully explain why—and how, exactly—we are compelled to start “here,”

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in the Western, North-Atlantic hemispheres, where we happen to find ourselves. But even if this question finds a convincing answer (after all, one cannot start out from nowhere and beginning elsewhere might pose a similar problem, albeit one that is rarely risked in Western scholarship on the secular), when all is said and done many difficulties still remain. Taylor is the first to point them out.

Not just beyond the Western world, but also within the very confines of its territorial and imaginary borders and communities, very different scenarios and, hence, different options—perhaps, even “default options” and optionalities?—can be discerned. Taylor concedes that his “canvas” is itself already “on the verge of being too broad; there are many regional and national paths to secularity within the North Atlantic world, and I haven’t been able to do justice to all of them.”

Yet, in opting for his largely Western and North Atlantic perspective, he recalls that he is merely following here the same line of argument set out in *Sources of the Self*, which likewise “took up a set of issues of universal human concern, but dealt with them within a regional compass.” This, of course, is a perfectly legitimate conceptual and narrative strategy and, yet, it is hard to suppress a series of questions.

First, could not the *secular age*, while clearly of expressed “universal human concern” and painted with the broadest possible strokes and recounted, as Taylor does, with the grandest of narratives—aiming at nothing less than genuine cosmopolitanism and, ultimately, the restoration of “all in all”—still turn out to be a merely “regional” phenomenon and preoccupation that must remain unconvincing and ineffective in the rest of the globe or, say, from a truly global perspective?

Second, if this is the case, should our implicit loyalty or explicit commitment to it, perhaps, be somewhat less than unconditional? But then, from what theoretical—metaphysical or theological—angle, indeed, on what normative grounds or on the basis of which existential ethos could we want, let alone pretend, to formulate such far-reaching reservations? Would we not just get along—and, probably, much farther ahead—in the absence of any need for such questions and answers, since they seem to reach well beyond the limits of what can be reasonably asked? A secularist, naturalist, and pragmatist might make or accept this objection; a *deep pragmatist* must insist and venture into these unknown regions (or, rather, elements, dimensions, interstices) nonetheless. Is it clear which side Taylor sees himself as committed to (or willing to take)?

If we backtrack somewhat further, yet another question arises. For what, exactly, is the historico-metaphysical stance—which is not yet an “option,” in the modern sense of the term, and from which “optionality” is not yet discerned (or for which, by Taylor’s account, the “default” and its alternatives are not even real)—the mental and affective disposition or overall “frame” from which modernity emerges and distinguishes itself by undoing its unshaken securities? If anything, it is a view of the world (I am not saying a worldview) which is, somewhat paradoxically, characterized by its *single aspect theory of reality* and, consequently, its *non-differentiation* of (still falling short of indifference toward) the many: the diffuse affirmation, if we can say so, of the one substance and nature, without even the nonnumerical distinction of attributes, modes, or affects (which Spinoza required), and, as it were, still without subject and negation, mediation and determination (as

Hegel would add).

The putative horizon from (and against) which the secular age with its "multiple modernities" emerged and distinguishes itself is, according to Taylor, based upon a historical—and deeply speculative—hypothesis of an age of "immediacy," which is deemed to have chronologically, logically as well as onto- and phylo-genetically preceded it. And yet, this age of immediacy, if only through the relief of its contrasting horizon, also enabled and sustained the mediations and mediatization (more precisely, the "mediational epistemology" and "mediating elements") of the present era, that is say, its discourse and institutions.

True enough, this hypothesized, prehistorical—and, strictly speaking, pre-mythological—age of immediacy can be no more than a retroactive projection from the vantage point of modernity as it reflects back onto its imagined origins. This must be so, despite the fact that Taylor offers historical narrative and anthropological theory to fill in the blanks of these "archaic" times, which are not simply "traditional," but actually predate the so-called "Axial Revolution" of which first Karl Jaspers, then Shmuel Eisenstadt and Robert Bellah and other historical sociologists, have made so much.

But, then, its perspectival illusion creates a necessary distance which alone allows us to view our point of entry into—and possible disengagement from—our engagements in the by now global, that is, near all-encompassing conceptual frame and cultural imaginary of modernity and modernisms that surrounds us and holds us captive, just as much as they set us free (i.e., put mediations and mediatizations in between us and the age of immediacy and its diffuse "forms" of participation, which had not yet let a self—let alone a "buffered self"—arise). And the vivid painting of its unattractive pre-historical alternative prevents the closed immanent frame and its, at times, reified world structures, dogmatic images, and the like, from opening up *in the wrong direction* (for example, by opting not for post-Axiological "transcendence," but for renewed—reverse and regressive—undifferentiation and the confusion or irrational rapture, indeed, violence that comes with it).

In this sense, the putative, hypothesized pre-historical age of immediacy puts our modern options and predicaments in the widest imaginable perspective, and one, moreover, in which individual, alternative, or competitive aspects and views, attributes and modes, affects and effects, cannot yet be differentiated or perceived. As such, it gives "optionality" its distinctive profile and functions similarly as the near-uninhabitable "Jamesian open space," where, Taylor reminds us, "you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief," or to either the "open" or "closed" take or spin on immanence and its transcendent beyond.

Such contrasting of opposed perspectives—more precisely, between a world of perspectives and one in which there is none (but merely the one and only, unarticulated, substance of the One or less than One)—is an "imaginative exercise" which, Taylor concedes, is hard and rare enough, even (or especially) under the conditions of secular modernity, where we tend to frame and fixate or buffer "beings" and "things" in one way or another. Moreover, while, in our secular age, we seem more than ever "capable to seeing that there is another way of construing things," *the pull toward one frame or another—or within one and the same (e.g., immanent)*

frame operates not in all directions with equal force, making the “open space” (let alone the postulated and imagined pre-historical age of immediacy) much less open and accessible—and always already inflected, curved, or distorted or mythologized—in certain definite (and, all too often, dogmatic) ways.

Taylor nonetheless postulates, indeed, assumes and construes or imagines, a background-condition or original “frame” *within* which frames and construals, imaginings and options, could not yet have developed as such, even though it is only against the foil of this very same postulation that their subsequent “optionality”—and, hence, metaphysical contingency—in the secular age (within and beyond the “immanent frame”) can be thought or experienced. Again, as we have noted (and as Taylor is himself the first to point out), the archaic and pre-axial, pre-historical and pre-modern “world” or “mind” is not a frame or mindset at all. In its very substance it does not yet allow for the differentiation between transcendent or immanent modes of explanation and interpretation, just as it does not yet permit an inner articulation in terms of subject and attribute, cause and effect, mode and affect (to remain, once more, within the Spinozistic idiom).

But without this contrasting state (a virtual world preceding all actual states) and without the hypothetico-speculative stance it allow us to dream up, we would be unable to make sense of the crucial concepts of option and optionality that enable the very fabric of the modern identity: “So there is a condition of lived experience, where what we might call a construal of the moral/spiritual is lived not as such, but as immediate reality, like stones, rivers and mountains.” And with this condition the secular age marks its decisive difference.

On the one hand, this assumption is the fruit of an abstraction, of a phenomenological reduction and imaginative experiment of world (i.e., our lifeworld’s) destruction, of sorts. On the other, Taylor’s own examples of this contrasting foil of assumed archaic, pre-axial, pre-historical and pre-modern “immediacy” are the haunted and demon-infested universe of a Hieronymous Bosch, together with scenes from New Testament Palestine, and ethnographic reports on spirit possession in contemporary Africa.

And, if these examples sound all too specific (not to mention Western-oriented, if not Eurocentric), one might recall Emmanuel Levinas’ invocation of the world of so-called primitive “participation” (a term he borrows from the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl), in which the very idea and reality of the individual and autonomous self or of other selves is (still) encapsulated and occluded by a diffuse-rapturous absorption into some—non-rational—Other. We would be dealing with a mysterious, magico-mystical world before “separation,” “interiority,” “economy,” in short, before the both conceptual and ontological distinction between “the Same” and “the Other”—which, in Levinas’ eyes, represents and mimics a merely aesthetic-sensory realm of shadows, images, and rhythms that lacks all reality and freedom, truth and judgment. This indistinct, amorphous and sonorous world of the pure virtuality of the “there is” (or *il y a*) that, Levinas muses, precedes the act of Creation, would form the illogical and pre-ontological and, strictly speaking, a-chronological, backdrop against which thought and agency, responsibility and justice, critique and Enlightenment, humanism and secularism, can become “options”—and, indeed, the very signal as well as instantiation of “optionality”—as it has become available for us moderns.

One could further think of the pre-cosmic world (or *Vorwelt*) of so-called “elements” of which Franz Rosenzweig

speaks in his *Stern der Erlösung* (*The Star of Redemption*), alluding to a silent universe of masks and statues which precedes the very possibility of language and communication, together with the dialogical "correlation" between the elements these presuppose.

Taylor is thus not the first to have invoked an age-old or, rather, *immemorial* realm of immediacy, which, although somehow irrevocably—and happily—lost, nonetheless *continues to contrast and be virtually co-extensive with* the very differentiation between self and other, naïveté and reflectiveness, whose distinction propels itself forward in a movement of *repulsion* and *flight* away from the (one is tempted to say, logically, chronologically, ontologically as well as phylo- and onto-genetically) "originary" and "earlier" stage of pre-history: the age before history, as we know it, the world before the modern lifeworld. If modernity thrusts itself relentlessly forward and affirms as well as, often, hardens its mindset, this is, precisely, for *fear* of relapsing from conceptual and ontological (but also: cultural and social, existential and political) rationalization and mediation back into the virtual indistinction, that is to say, into the supposedly extinct "age" and "world" of immediacy. The latter may be no real or genuine "option" for us, but its conjured up image—which is a terrifying warning sign no less than a necessary postulate for thought, action, and judgment—is that of *a reversal of the very first reversal* (the "reversal of the field of fear," as Taylor calls it) that liberated us originally and freed us up for the "later" immanent, exclusivist-humanist stance that makes up secular modernity, even though, in its more open mode, it allows us to opt for alternative views (e.g., on metaphysical or religious transcendence) as well.

To insist on the principle possibility of such *reversibility*, at any given moment and on each step along the path that modernity (in its institutions, conceptual schemes, normative criteria, and aesthetic sensibilities) charts for itself, is the sole warrant against the amnesia and complacency that lead its immanent frame to close itself off (from) within one particular stance, thus allowing what is merely one of its many options to assume a position of privilege. Such "dogmatic image of thought" can take the form of a hegemony of one culture over another (which may then provoke the need to appeal for the significance of, say, "two cultures" at the very least); it can also result in an oblivion of "optionality" altogether.

But a potential objection concerning the, at least, analytical distinction between the "age" of immediacy and the secular age of mediacy arises here as well. Could one not just as well—and, perhaps, with even greater plausibility—argue that the mediated and mediatized options (and, hence, "optionality") of belief and unbelief that present themselves, here and now, (from) within the immanent frame do so *in far more immediate and, indeed, diffuse (amorphous, sonorous, in any case, non-discursive and affective-effective) ways* than they did ever before or elsewhere? At its very pinnacle, modernity (that is to say, ultra- or post-modernity) might well resemble something of the pre-modern era, even if only *in this respect*. As Theodor W. Adorno knew, the radically new and the archaically old touch upon—and, eventually, revert into—each other. They would do so, in our times, at least, in this *minimal* mode of eventfulness that—for all the known reasons of global, economic, technological, and, more broadly, mediatic interconnectedness—has immediate and *maximal* impact in the most unexpected and remote of regions. Electoral politics and its spin would be only one of the more salient examples of this old-new societal logic

in which the archaic and archi-mythic turns around (and into) the ultra-modern and *vice versa*, and so are the tendencies that steer capital markets and international relations to their inevitable moments of crises as well as to their no less avoidable—yet always temporary and provisional, partial and arbitrary—moments of resolution (which itself tend to be unjust at worst, and pragmatic at best). The rhapsodic and aleatory—indeed, instantaneous—rhythm of such alternations that punctuate the reversibility of the old and the new is grounded in curious (now troubling and terrifying, then again soothing or even sublime) *synchronicity* between phenomena that are studied under different, seemingly incompatible, perspectives by traditional theologies of the miracle, modern philosophies of the event, and contemporaries media theories of the special effect.

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