

## More Notes on Part II and Part III

### Overview of Parts II [The Turning Point] and Part III [The Nova Effect]

- A. Basic Question: how do we get from the times around 1500, at which time being a Xn was just about the only option, to 2000, in which being a Xn is one option among many and one of the most amazing options is that of **exclusive humanism**.
- B. We will need to be continually mindful of Taylor's use of what I call 'diagnostic concepts': those essential concepts that are basic to a thinker's way of construing and analyzing the 'world' or some subject matter. The distinction T draws between the **porous self** and the **buffered self** are diagnostically important for him. Briefly: [see pp. 37-42]
  - 1. The **porous self** is that self living in an *enchanted world*, opened up and vulnerable to being acted upon by demons, spirits, cosmic forces, God. Boundaries between self and other agents and powers are porous and selves live in fear of these powers. The church provided the social context in which the mysteries of the world were contained by the mysteries of God's sacral presence in the language and liturgy of the church. To stand apart from the church was therefore perilous and heretical and threatening personally and socially.
  - 2. The **buffered self** is that self for whom the enchanted world has been evacuated, leaving behind social imaginaries involving the traditional orthodox church and its practices. The buffered self is bounded within itself and impervious to mysterious external powers.
- C. **The Turning Point** refers to that transition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which the rise of **Providential Deism** marked the turning away from orthodox belief to a social imaginary in which human reason projected the world as an **Impersonal Order**—i.e. not ordered by a personal God who is an agent active upon and within time and space—morally focused on human flourishing and mutual benevolence.
  - 1. Such deism was first the social imaginary of elites who were in criticism of the social conflicts stemming from religious differences and rivalries and then penetrates further into a more general social imaginary.
- D. Providential Deism thus begins the undermining of traditional orthodox/evangelical beliefs and unleashes the **Nova Effect [Part III]** of previously unimagined options between belief and unbelief.
- E. Hence: Providential Deism gives rise to the buffered self and its place in an impersonal natural and historical order, which then gives rise to the Nova Effect which makes possible the rise and legitimacy of exclusive humanism, in which it is possible to talk about the highest of human aspirations and morality without any reference to a transcendent and personal god.

It might be helpful to remember a conceptual point I have garnered from some language of Taylor's: the **contrast between belief and unbelief** is often characterized as a contrast between **belief** in the God of orthodox/evangelical Xnty who is a personal agent active upon and within the world and the **unbelief** in this God, with so many variations of humans experiencing some sense of nonpersonal or impersonal **transcendence** or simply no experience of any sort of transcendence.

### Part II: The Turning Point

From the previous chapter Taylor has referred to the rise of Modernity that has involved the "taming of the nobility" with their inclination to achieve order by heroic warfare and the rise of a "commercial class" with their need for a well ordered—a "polite"—society in which conflict is minimized, commerce can flourish and with such flourishing, humans can enjoy mutual benefits of a just moral order. New forms of sociability and education emerge to support and extend such a social order with its attendant social imaginary. 214-18.

## Chapter 6: Providential Deism

- A. Taylor's defining theme here is that deism, which first attaches to or trades on an orthodox theme of God as the Creator and Providential Orderer of the world, transitions into an **anthropomorphic shift** in which the following emphases emerge: 222-24
1. Rather than God's providence involving more than human good and destiny, humans owe God no more than 'achieving' their own good—their mutual happiness and good.
  2. Such a shift diminishes any human need for grace: humans are quite capable of rationally discerning the providential moral order and have the power and discipline necessary to follow the moral order. Sin is simply disobedience than can be overcome by more disciplined activity and purpose.
    - a. God still has a role: i) he created us and endowed us with reason so as to discern the moral order and ii) he will judge us as to whether we have earned salvation as reward for good behavior. The decline, though, of hell.
  3. The sense of *mystery* fades: Xnty is not mysterious—it is perfectly rational. The mysteries of the human heart fade. [This is where the buffered self begins to emerge.]
  4. The eclipse of the idea that God was planning a transformation of human beings beyond the limitation of their present condition. Partakers of God's life, *theiosis*.
- B. While this deistic construction understood itself as an apologetic for Xn belief and practice, its net effect was to diminish Xn faith as any more than what any rational person should properly believe and live. [See the reference to Michael Buckley's influential study, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, Yale 1987. 225, fn. 8, p. 801]
1. It will often occur later that deism will be characterized as 'religion narrowed to moralism'. 227
- C. This shift reflects the successful inculcation of a disciplined, industrious and productive form of life—hence, Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' that creates and distributes goods in a disciplined and rational way! 229
- D. Deism thus undermines any sense of a sacral order in which Christ is divine and salvific—Jesus is primarily a moral teacher commensurate to rational ethics— and the church is that sacral hierarchical society necessary for the distribution of grace and salvation. The traditional sacral church is dismissed as no more than “dangerous religion” in the forms of “superstition”, “fanaticism”, and “enthusiasm”. 239 “The anti-model here was Catholic Christianity.” 240
- E. The rational morality of deism does stress human flourishing as involving **mutual benefits and mutual benevolence—an overlay from Xn *agape***—and the importance of self-discipline and social discipline to properly order society. This morality is in principal universal and warrants political intervention to relieve society of irrational superstitions and fears that bring about conflict and wars. Put another way: deists were confident that society could be reordered by discipline politically and persuasively enforced. 247
1. Note: It is this set of deistic beliefs that were so powerful in the revolutionary period of American history.
  2. The emphasis on human flourishing as dependent on freedom from authoritarian coercion, mutual benevolence and mutual benefits—even in the works of Adam Smith and David Hume—did not suppose the 'invisible hand' could itself work without regard for mutual benefits and mutual benevolence as intended goods.
  3. The rationality that deism celebrates is what is later called 'instrumental reason': that sort of reason that solves human problems and is practical and social in its basic orientation and practices.
  4. Such instrumental reason dispels mysteries, pursue practical human goals which aim at human happiness in this life—not in some transcendent future life.
  5. See the rich and focused discussion of these concerns on pp. 260ff.
- F. The buffered identity, capable of disciplined control and benevolence, generated its own sense of dignity and power, its own inner satisfactions, and these could tilt toward hostility to orthodox Xnty.
1. The Enlightenment was repulsed by the whole pattern of the juridical-penal understanding of the human situation with its emphasis i) on original sin and the atonement, ii) the belief that only a few are saved, iii) the belief in divine omnipotence and predestination.

T thinks his diagnostic analysis of the historical currents and trajectories of deism into the Enlightenment undermines the 'subtraction' theory of secularization—namely, that secularity is simply that subtraction or reduction of religion that comes about by the rise of modern science. Herein, T rehearses again what he regards as the real

problem of secularization as involving an embedded framework that develops over time and is still formative in our time. See pp. 264-69 for a recapitulation of his narrative history of the rise of secularization.

## Chapter 7: The Impersonal Order

- A. T states upfront that this chapter is about another dimension of Deism: **the change in the understanding of God and God's relation to the world.**
1. The drift away from the orthodox understanding of God as an agent interacting with humans and intervening in human history, towards God as architect of a universe operating by unchanging laws, to which humans have to conform or suffer the consequences.
  2. A change in theology from God with powers understood analogous to human agency and personality and exercising those powers continuously in relation to humans and the world, towards a God related to the world and humans only through the law-governed structures he created, towards finally an understanding of the human condition at grips with an indifferent universe with or without God.
  3. Deism as the halfway house on the road to contemporary atheism.
- B. Be careful and observant: there are two levels of diagnostic analysis going on in the social narrative of this chapter:
1. First, the straightforward social narrative of how deism migrates toward nontheism.
  2. Second, how social imaginaries themselves get constructed and used to explain and critique how history is understood.
- C. It is this second narrative of the formation of social imaginaries that T wants to interrogate and critique with reference to the historian Gibbon.
1. Gibbon claims to be writing true and objective history as opposed to superstitious religious narratives. He uses 'objective reason' to describe and explain how Xnty arose and developed, but, according to T the social categories Gibbon uses to 'explain' what was happening turn out to be categories simply given to him as an elite person sustaining a particular social imaginary about human life and its causal categories and explanations.
  2. It is important to note that T has spent much philosophical effort in other writings challenging presumably 'rational' ways of describing human behavior—ways that invariably apply one set of embedded understanding to another differently embedded understanding.
  3. Gibbon was ringing the change on an Enlightenment understanding of that impersonal, unchanging order of causes and effects and actions and emotions, etc.
- D. At this point T develops a counter-understanding of Xn faith in which other notions of impersonal and unchanging order repeatedly threatened the rising social imaginary of the NT followers of Jesus.
1. These followers encountered a social imaginary largely indebted to Plato and Aristotle in which the 'real' order of the world was unchanging and that which is unchanging is higher than that which changes. Contingency, movement-in-time are lesser realities.
  2. The temptation for Xns was to conceptually conform to this socially constructed world and regard the real drama of Jesus life, death, and resurrection as an ascent to the unchanging deity. Note: T correctly, in my judgment, sees the role of Arius in this, even though T erroneously calls it the "Aryan" view [278].
  3. The doctrine of the Trinity was the church's attempt to interpret God in terms of the dramatic life of Jesus rather than the impersonal unchanging orders of being. But T suggests that the real drama of Jesus was about 'communion' in which human beings and God exists in personal relationship.
  4. Hence, God's agency is not simply the agency of acting-upon but the agency of acting in communion with other beings. [I suspect we will see more development of these ideas later in the book.] pp. 274-280
- E. The remainder of this chapter veers in several directions but comes back to the basic point: the deistic conviction that the world is a self-contained impersonal order of laws and agents that can be rationally understood—construed? Imagined?—migrates into an increasing objectification of the world in terms scientific rationality in which the subject doing the objectifying and explaining of the world becomes a spectator; finally this rational spectator being cannot find God among the beings of the impersonal world and the temptation is

either to rule out 'God' as an unnecessary superstition or simply see the world itself as divine [Spinoza, Schleiermacher?,Hegel?]

### Part III: The Nova Effect

The 'Nova' here is rooted in the Latin *novo* and *novum*, the new, being made new, etc. In contemporary astronomy a *nova star* is one that suddenly burns brilliantly bright and then gradually fades. For T the next three chapters variously explore the previously unimagined construals of the world and human life that emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century out of deism's impersonal world order. The Nova Effect "spawned an ever-widening variety of moral/spiritual options, across the span of the thinkable and perhaps even beyond. This phase persists up to the present." In the 19<sup>th</sup> century into the 20<sup>th</sup>, "the fractured culture of the nova, which was originally that of elites only, becomes generalized to whole societies." Alongside these nova, in Western societies there emerges a generalized culture of "authenticity" or "expressive individualism." 299

### Chapter 8: The Malaises of Modernity

- A. The malaises T has in mind are those senses of 'cross purposes' in lived experience that arise and multiply along differing axes of response to the emerging search for viable options to orthodox belief.
- B. Again, the concept of the buffered self is at the center of T's account of the malaises. 300-304
  1. The buffered self is a complex of meanings involving both subjective and objective sides.
  2. Subjectively this self has closed the porous boundary between inside thought and outside nature/world; no longer lives in the enchanted world.
  3. Objectively the self encounters the world as an impersonal and mechanistic order.
  4. The buffered self thus experience a shift in identity: has a sense of power, of capacity, of being able to order the world and self, of being invulnerable, of being proud of one's achievement in independence from belief, of having an 'enormous condescension' toward the past—who lived in ignorance, servitude, and superstition.
- C. It is this buffered self that struggles in the *cross pressures* of rejecting/critiquing orthodox belief—traditional Xn beliefs and practices—and of searching for viable alternatives among the newly emerging possibilities—the nova of social imaginaries—of lived experience.
  1. In living in the midst of cross pressures, the malaises arise from the fragility of the pluralism of possibilities.
  2. Issues of how to live, for believers and nonbelievers—remember, for T even believers have come to understand themselves in terms of buffered self—encounter the modern patterns of social conformity in which believers and nonbelievers share so much in common: they seem to look more and more alike socially!
  3. Put another way, even the believers are shaped by the huge social/economic/political patterns emerging which then mitigates the differences between believers and nonbelievers.
- D. Hence, the believers also encounter the intense hostility to orthodox beliefs and feel the cross pressures of the accusations against orthodoxy: 305f
  1. That it offends against reason to talk of mysteries, of the God-Man, etc.
  2. That it is authoritarian and therefore against freedom and reason.
  3. That it cannot answer theodicy questions: if God is omnipotent and in charge, then why is there so much suffering?
  4. That such authoritarian attitudes threatens the political order of mutual benefits, by i) degrading the reality of the body, ii) mortifying others by irrational condemnations, iii) threatening the legitimate political authorities by appeal to a higher authority.
- E. And yet, T points out that these critiques against orthodoxy gain weight according to the solidarity persons might feel with particular groups or clusters of persons. The more childish one's faith the easier it is for a believer to be persuaded by the judgments of his/her social group/identity. 306-7
  1. T's point: the developing social imaginaries creates group identities as well and such social identities are more often the real determiners of good and bad reasons for accepting or rejecting belief.

- F. The malaises of modernity are rooted in the loss of orthodox beliefs and the givenness of the experience of the immanent and temporal world: in such a world, what are the ways in which the buffered self might find meaning, or the ‘meaning of life’. Such malaise can take three forms:
1. The sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an overarching sense of significance;
  2. The felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives [surely T has in mind the earnest ways popular literature attends to the various ‘passages’ in our lives in which we apparently transition from one mode of living and meaning to another, etc. ]
  3. The utter flatness and emptiness of the ordinary [and the inordinate desire to be ‘extra-ordinary’, ‘exceptional’, ‘famous’.]
- G. Note possibilities of response to the malaises:
1. Romantic aestheticism: the grasp of transcendent beauty in the variegated whole of the world.
  2. The Nietzschean sense of the superiority of the strong over the weak: the few warriors who rise above plebian crowd and assert their power.
  3. The liberal Xn who cannot come to grips with the astonishing suffering that happens everyday and everywhere.
  4. The critique of the various ways in which modernity has worshipped the pursuit of happiness, wherein happiness and flourishing lack real content and are reduced to transient feelings of pleasure.
  5. The sense that death is that final enemy and must be staved off and prevented at all costs.

**[The next three chapters, 9,10,11, basically explore the various dimensions of the Nova Effect by articulating the narrative of their respective topics. Pay attention to the narrative detail and I will focus on brief notes about the major points.]**

### **Chapter 9: The Dark Abyss of Time [322-351]**

- A. T distinguishes between a ‘social imaginary’—how the social world is imagined by persons—and ‘cosmic imaginary’—the ways in which the surrounding world is imagined and plays a role in persons lives.
1. Actually, even the social imaginary includes within itself the cosmic world.
- B. The theme here is the radical shift in which the cosmic imaginary moves from the ‘world’ understood as an ordered cosmos largely oriented to human goods and flourishing to a ‘universe’ of vast dimensions and scope. [Note: not many of us make a distinction between ‘cosmos’ and ‘universe’ and even T does not hue the line on this usage.]
- C. This seems to be the primal pattern of his thinking in this chapter: identifying the narrative movement in social/cosmic imaginaries from:
1. The orthodox cosmos created by God and having a finite duration of years from creation to consummation—Ussher’s 4500 years, but for tradition, not millions of years.
  2. The deistic construal of the cosmos as created and given an impersonal order not requiring, perhaps excluding, divine interventions and actions, and yet an order supportive of human history and flourishing.
  3. The 19<sup>th</sup> century, including Darwin, in which the temporality of the cosmos expands greatly but also as an unfathomable Abyss of temporality and of an order in which human flourishing is not central—in fact, the order of evolution appears to be vicious and largely ordered to the systematic destruction of species and lives and the survival of the strong.
- D. For T the emergence of this abyss of time also involves the emergence of various ways of imagining human social life—it has opened up social space in which persons can wander around among a variety of options between belief and unbelief.
- E. T sees the battle currently between the belief of the fundamentalist as tied to a strict periodicity of time and cosmos and the nonfundamentalists, Xn and otherwise, who already *live* in a social imaginary of the abyss of time.

### **Chapter 10: The Expanding Universe of Unbelief [353-376]**

- A. A wide ranging and often rambling discussion of various options of unbelief arising from the decentering of the universe from concern for human morality.
- B. One option of some importance was the Schiller type of aestheticism: a felt sense of the beauty and wholeness of the immanent world beyond moralisms about human good and meaning.
- C. Near the end of the chapter T returns to develop the Neitzschean option: heroic human action beyond limited moralism in which the hero imposes his action upon the world.
- D. Pick out your own issues herein.

### **Chapter 11: Nineteenth Century Trajectories [377-419]**

- A. This chapter is rich in narrative detail, first about Britain from 1840 to 1940 and then about France in roughly that same period, that repays careful and intuitive reading. The narrative of how the Nova effect in the 19<sup>th</sup> century becomes the Super Nova of the 20<sup>th</sup>.
- B. T captures well the shattering effects of the First World War on the presumptions of European civilization, which consider itself a peaceful, liberal, and Xn, civilization and order. Barth, Tillich, Bultmann were the Germanic counterparts for whom liberal Xn civilization was the hoax to be dissected and rejected. The reaction of the so-called 'neo-orthodox' to the demise of liberal Xnty and civilization.
- C. I found the narratives about British life especially moving: how does find traction for believing and meaning in the midst of the free fall of orthodox belief and the expanding options of unbelief. See discussion of T.S Eliot and others.

Read further on your own.