

Charles Taylor's Obstinacy

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He would have had an easier and quicker time of it had Charles Taylor made *A Secular Age* a book about religion. He mentions religion on nearly every page. We read discussions of religious practice, the concepts of theology, and the evolution of denominations everywhere in the book. Yet he argues for no theological position, at least not in the way a philosopher or a theologian shapes dispositive argument. Taylor puts his affirmations on these matters in parentheses—literal parenthesis in many cases, and in many cases the reader hears the pause in a speaker's breathing that is like the sound parenthesis would have were it a noise. To say this is a book about religion is to mistake the occasion for the topic, or perhaps the start for the end. The keen reader also errs if he says that, religion being the invisible shape around which the book is formed, it is a book about secularity. This too Taylor discusses in detail, but like religion it forms a continuous line only out above the horizon toward which Taylor walks us. He has an azimuth in sight, of which religion and secularity are the two confirming points.

Observe the title: the noun in it is "Age." Taylor's topic is an age; or, better put, it is the state things have come to at one point in an age. He sets this up by means of a long chronicle, part of which is about a different age for which he adopts the name "Axial Age." This concept has a shallow history, sunk into some shady corners of superannuated anthropology, so we have to think why he uses this name. Taken as a simple and straightforward idea, rather than as an interpretation of the data of human pre-history, Taylor uses "Axial" to describe an age in which a set of religions, grouped at a minimum by proximity of date of origin (leaving aside other connections among them), swept through great regions of the inhabited

Earth with such strength that the tribes and nations of the time largely converted to them. The masses chose the powerful ideas of these religions, and individual persons or groups among them chose otherwise merely by exception. These great faiths moved most of the peoples who encountered them in a way that commanded their choice of credal commitment. There was dissent and conflict, of course, but according to this theory the overall energy, even when it was not violently coercive—as it sometimes was but as often was not—defines this period in human spirituality.

By calling our age a secular one, Taylor says a parallel thing, though with a major difference, about the modern period. Its default is secularity. The obvious choice for the growing populations within its reach is the logic, the discourse, the overall vision from within the *saeculum*, rather than from the unmoved spheres beyond it. Our accomplishments and our capacity for more seem so great that it is hard work against the current for people to choose otherwise. Taylor makes it clear, however, that the secularity of the age is a weaker dominant force than the religiosity of the Axial Age was, by a number of devices, the grandest of which is that he spends vastly more pages detailing the inner conflicts of the Secular Age than he did of the Axial. It is not secularity that is under his gaze. His eye is on an age full of conflict. From the many phases in this development, the result is *a* secular age: not the age as a whole, but one particular experience of cosmic position that currently walks astride Occidental civilization and, in great measure, the whole planet. One needs a lot of stick in it—a whole lot of stubborn and steel—to approach the body of conflicts of a violently conflicted world.

As it is the age, with its intricate conflicts, that is Taylor's concern, rather than religiosity or secularity, one rightly sees his book as an examination of the choices this age faces. These are not the choices pushed upon us by the sweep of religion or by the sweep of secularity. They are the choices we face, we who are the age: not great ideas, not force of history, but actions to be taken by the human persons comprising this age in their scope of decision. That is part of the message that Taylor gives us by writing a long book with a short title.

Observe the upper cover: it is like a piece of Latin epigraphy, though the Roman majuscules are in gold upon black rather than incised into marble. This is another great clue about this book. The book is meant to stand up and to stay

standing. Its plan is its author's. It is not encyclopedic, nor does it follow any grid. It is not a book of religion nor is it a book of science, nor of history. Charles Taylor, firmly and unmistakably, speaks to our point in time before which, as before any moment, we present to ourselves, upon the basis of what we have done and said up until now, the choice of what to do next and how to act alone or in concert with others. It's a book about ethics. As a book about a concrete time and place, rather than about the ether of ideas (as real as that certainly is), as a book that specifically is the author's roadmap through the impassable magisteria of science and religion, Taylor places it like a great stone in the one spot that confounds and compels a thinking person. The cover symbolizes the endeavor. It requires tremendous obstinacy because the opponents of the possibility of a rational ground for normative ethics are themselves obstinate. On the scientific side, they never relent in inventing new dresses for the old reductionist story. The latest here, for example, is based on the neurological work of Antonio Damasio, the most sophisticated scientific attempt so far to make consciousness entirely supervenient upon neurochemistry, quickly exploited by philosophers who call it "good news."¹ This kind of empiricist does not propose a gentler scientism any more than the millennialists east and west preparing for Armageddon are kinder and gentler than their predecessors. As Taylor points out, both are resourceful in inventing new ways to cause suffering.

Taylor's sympathetic reader wants to be saved from these forces. He wants something compassionate and hopeful to be restored, and this naturally enough seems like religion to many. The more emotional might say, "Give us back our noumenon, Chuck. You can do it, you're smart. Save us from their spiky fingernails." But Taylor is a tough and obstinate teacher with them, as he is with secularists, because his students have been toughened, as well as confused and weakened, by the freer and more profound and choice of spiritual belief in the Secular than in the Axial age. In the age, or to put it better, the condition of "axiality," choice was possible but different; it has now given way not just in quantity but in kind to a something with a new meaning all our own, which neither side may ignore. He lays out the nature of this domination and of the conflict by

¹I refer to the short essay by Alec Rosenberg, "The Disenchanted Naturalist's Guide to Reality" at *On The Human* (<http://onthehuman.org/2009/11/the-disenchanted-naturalists-guide-to-reality/>). Another leading neuroscientist working in a similar vein on the fundamental nature of consciousness Stanislas Dehaene.

which it is possible, as well as, to a lesser extent, the way in which this system of domination works, but he doesn't do this as an historian of ideas. He does it in order to value the functions of religious belief in an age in which non-belief dominates. To maintain a place for normative ethics against both the divine-command framework of revealed religion and against framework of biological and physical science, while rejecting neither, is not possible without the obstinacy—or rather, without specific features of attention and avoidance that the obstinate thinker wields. Like many good, stubborn thinkers, his plan is part escape artistry and part steel-jawed trap. He goes straight where he wants to go, picking up what he wants from society and religion and philosophy, like a steel kebab skewer.

A Secular Age produces a plan for a normative ethics by using direction and indirection—I do not say misdirection, such as the sleight-of-hand artist uses—to clear the place he wants to land in. This plan is roughly to build a normative groundwork free and apart from deontological ethics, taken as typical of credal religion, on the one hand, and free and apart on the other hand from consequentialist ethics, taken as typical of empiricist secularity. His natural ally against rules ethics and results ethics is virtue ethics, with which communitarianism shares a developed framework to advance normative ethics by rendering certain irremovable problems avoidable, unimportant, or forgettable. Comparison between the Taylorian plan and a general virtue ethics will show in what ways this is a good approach and in what ways it falls short.

The constructive side of the book—the latter half in which he describes the state of play in a secular age—has three chief propositions.²

1. The transformational power of religion has substantially lost its appeal to our time.

Taylor's word for the way in which religion can change people is transformation. Transformational religion is now felt to be a false form of some other causality (433.1) or dogmatically asserted to be out-dated (433.2). It has been replaced by more fragile choices (437.2), many of which are entangled in mutual social display (481.3), or fractious denominationalism (453.3), or other modes that

²In referring to this text, I use page number followed by paragraph number: thus 157.3 stands for the third paragraph begun on page 157. This is handy because the pages are long and frequently have a run of short paragraphs.

combine the successful with the unsuccessful in motile ways. This “mobilization” often exchanges strengths for weaknesses on both the individual and the social sides of moral life. Many of the narrative and institutions in this process, the good, the bad, and the mixed ones, were developed in the century following the Industrial Revolution (471.2) but are played out among us now.

2. *The substitutes for religious transformation use mutual benefit combined with self-sufficiency as their moral principles. Nothing in either of these is exclusive to secularity or excludes transcendent transformation.* The solutions to the conflict within secularity require both individual and public virtues to be organized around these principles (501.top, 543.2-3). But clearly group action is consistent with transformation (545.1-2). On no scale of human life does the natural subtract away that which transcends it (551.3) or prove that we are God-forsaken (553.3). The position that such a thing is “proven” is part of the materialist story which is hardly pure and non-contingent (569.2). Such a position is false.

3. *The communal virtues of trust and reconciliation are clear of skeptical doubt and free of credal restriction.*

Taylor recommends these virtues because of their proportionality between the earthly and the celestial (739.1). They thereby encompass higher orders of goodness (719.3). They master contingency and connect the individual *genium* with its higher destiny. In any case, humankind will not flourish in a secular age without social and spiritual institutions that grasp transformation. Therefore, it is a moral necessity that we replace the collection of these developed by early secular modernity with a new array that promotes trust and reconciliation.

Although at times this book seems anodyne, like the few lines of the speech of Polonius in *Hamlet* blown up to about the size of the Bible, Taylor is always aiming toward these three propositions. He endeavors relentlessly, with little mercy to his readers, to fortify these idea as if behind a star-shaped fort protecting the temple and the town within by tier upon tier of bastions. He is obstinate about this because the issue is with certainty not merely a dispute among schools of moral philosophy. Its consequences are greater even than the long argument between science and religion, because it crosses all terrestrial boundaries. Everyone has a stake in it. A young Frenchman named Nicholas Bouvier who in 1953, with a

friend and just a little cash, drove a jalopy from Paris to Kabul, found a world nearly as open as it had been a thousand years ago, and he caught well its engagement in the one global struggle for our spiritual and material future. From a village in the mountains of Anatolia he observed of the people that

They lack technology: we want to get out of the impasse into which too much technology has led us, our sensibilities saturated to nth degree with Information and the Culture of distractions. We're counting on their formulae to revive us; they're counting on ours to live. Our paths cross without mutual understanding....³

Taylor wants to move us to the region of the position of virtue ethics because we ought not be content with the impasse of doctrines or cultures. If we resign ourselves to that we will pretend that we can do without a way of better governing ourselves amidst the impasse. Human cultures cannot be left to clever disputation, nor carpet-bombed out of memory; they cannot be left alone because no one is alone and no society is to be forgotten. We have plenty of intelligence and moral force, but peace and trust among us all seems as impossible as magic. Would that we had the gift of charming birds!

Sharing the same situation in ethical theory with virtue ethics, Taylor's three points are a communitarian version of three fundamentals of virtue ethics, as to both criticism of other systematic ethics and the suggested improved direction of moral philosophy.⁴

First, virtue ethics directs inquiry to choice rather than to obligation. Kant thought that good choices requires us to have a habit of choosing them and that this disposition is mechanical rather than free by virtue of being rational. To the Secular Age rationality seems to be the iron cage, restrictive and regular, whereas becoming stable enough to make good choices is hard work done willingly done by those who freely choose it. When Taylor says that "code-fetishism" or "nomolatrty"

³Nicolas Bouvier, tr. Robyn Marsack, *The Way of The World* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2009), p. 90.

⁴Julia Annas in her *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) achieves the rare feat of both masterfully describing a large body of philosophical literature and at the same time forcefully arguing in wide terms for its claims. I have used this book as the source for the general statements about virtue ethics in this paper.

are unsuccessful and therefore unappealing (509.1, 704.1, 707.2), he asserts the primacy of choice in moral life, as against rules ethics.

Second, virtue ethics maintains that the object of moral action is the one's whole life, taken in reflection. J. S. Mill had an easy enough time of it declaring that happiness is desirable but he had to torture strict logic in order to try squeezing out of it the specification of what happiness is for enough people, or of what other desirable ends can be re-christened as "happiness," to make sense out of liberty. Thus "results ethics" atomizes moral phenomena into actions. It does apply an idea of mutual benefit to the calculus exercised upon these actions, in order not to omit society, but it then stumbles in finding an idea of happiness suitable to actual individual persons. Mill flops around like a fish caught in a net when he deals with this because results ethics has a hard time looking away from separate actions to larger perspectives. Its academic literature is generally obsessed with correcting its mechanisms for doing so, squabbling about whether the amendment is an "elegant solution" or a clumsily blind about behavior, which is usually the case. Just as the vision of the whole of a person's life is central to virtue ethics, Taylor as well directs us to that greater whole of life comprising transformation temporal and transcendent.

Third, virtue ethics maintains in all versions the fundamental principle that end of life is happiness rather than the good *pro tanto*. The strength of this concept is its endeavor to escape the repetitive, frustrating polemics about values in ethics and morality. Individuals might find virtue more achievable than goodness, and societies certainly can practice trust and reconciliation, as difficult as they are, more easily than they can produce agreement in theology, ontology, and the interpretation of history. Taylor probably sees in communitarianism something like the freshness and light of this approach as opposed to the hopeless locking mechanisms of deontology and consequentialism. These systems are like coy courtesans who make the seeker exhaust himself merely to take off the lock.

A Secular Age includes an *omnium gatherum* of reasons and perspectives for disenchanting nature. One of the few sources of the concept that Taylor does not mention is historiography, which has done as a thorough a job of scrubbing teleology and other forms of meaning as any science but with a special significance because it took as its subject our own making of ourselves, in history, the object

humankind most specially makes. This exclusion might help to account for the problems in the Taylorian chronicle. But as a believing Roman Catholic, Taylor likely does not expect to be disappointed by the end of history and the serving of justice in the fullness of time. Nonetheless, this directs our attention to some kind of durative process necessary to moral life. This requires grappling with contingency in moral phenomena more fully than Taylor does. It's not simply that we feel nature is disenchanted. It's that every scientific reason, and many social reasons, to think it so are demonstrable and therefore truthful in at least one sense. The heavens are as deaf as the earth, but we insist on naturalizing moral phenomena. One still cannot find the corporeal nugget of moral obligation, so this remains a problem for the ethicists even apart from our weariness of nomothetic morality. In the first of Taylor's principle claims he has started to direct our attention away from the knot of naturalism. And he is not wrong in doing so, but even if naturalism is shrunk to a grain of sand it still is going to irritate the oyster.

So in the second of his principle points Taylor performs his critical indirection. True though it is that no naturalism of any sort has the power to exclude transcendental transformation, we struggle with the two faces of virtue, its direction toward ourselves and its direction toward others. This was a problem not only for the utilitarians, being incalculable: it was a constant topic of maneuvers and excuses by the Stoics because it rested on ontological and metaphysical issues to which it seems impossible to make invulnerable approaches, although they enjoyed many successes in the attempt. Stoic ethics wanted virtue to be a choice and it nonetheless often was compelled by its logic to see it as an obligation. It may well be that Taylor's point is that since this nutshell will never be cracked by philosophers, those who wish to think about morality must step beyond it. This is probably true. But it remains true that transformation is a choice that will always be harried by competing and confusing and degraded ideas of mutual benefit. Unless something is put in place of mutual benefit to give warrant for the obligation to help the suffering and to do justice, transformation is still just a bright spinning shining globule. Taylor is right to be obstinate in directing ethics to a new track—better at it than the virtue ethicists in many ways, because he admits no half-hearted gesture to codification⁵—but moral philosophy requires a concept of

⁵As does Rosalind Hursthouse in *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 58-62. I mention Hursthouse because she tends to represent the view that virtue ethics supplements of systems of ethics, whereas Annas, *op. cit.*, tends to hold that it is more valid than they are.

obligation that can be squared with contingency.

So here we arrive at the third of Taylor's principle claims. To base morality, either in the form of a toolkit of virtues or in the form of one or two "master virtues" (such as trust and reconciliation), on the vertical, as Taylor puts it, omits the temporal story of how moral facts, obligation, and judgment are validly known, and perhaps enduringly held, in the long and short processes of human life. It omits, in a word, urgency: the propulsive fluxus of moral claims, their being loudly or softly heard, or forgotten, reflection upon them, the judgment by omission or commission, sooner or later, in one's own day or in another age, by which men and women act upon them. Taylor knows that he cannot rely upon natural facts to describe normativity—hardly anyone has made that clearer—and he is determined not to be stopped by this, correctly and decently obstinate, stubbornly asking us not to lie to ourselves about our need for moral life. Communitarian principles, like virtue ethics, might be a part of the answer, whether ethical philosophers of these schools claim that it is more right than other approaches or that, as they do in about equal numbers, it is a necessary supplement to other ways of thinking about the good. Virtues can be selfish, they must justify themselves, they can be dismissed, they may be too tangled up in the way things go in the outward part of one's life. As helpful as trust and reconciliation are, the theory needs an account of inward moral life. And it needs something even more difficult: a metaphysics of compassion, which includes all our trust and all our forgiveness.

How do we become better people? How do we progress, be it in virtue or in goodness? Taylor describes a lot of the social ways in which we try to do this and some of the personal ways as well. But if our goal is to flourish, then how do we decide to flourish when we are not yet flourishing?—when we don't yet know how good it is to flourish? Moreover, what does it mean just to think about flourishing or about moral progress of any sort? Motivation has to enter into our understanding of "thinking about" such things. Even that is nowhere near enough if we aim for normativity. We must then have obligation. We cannot even determine if normativity exists unless we seek it, for naturalistic reduction does not necessarily foreclose it, though its proponents try to; but obligation is to be sought in something that happens during the lifelong jumble of beliefs, reasons, desires, and motives. We cannot normatively act from any of these without a basis that is both congruent to them as natural facts, located in some sense within them,

responding to them and shaping them in reply, and that is also forceful in some other way deserving to be called normative.

This situation comprehends all beliefs, reasons, desires, and motives, no matter how one shuffles them, and mutual benefit is not exempt from this situation. To be a happy person, one must detach from others so as not to be made unhappy by one's own responses to the acts of others, and yet one must attach to others because natural behavior flourishes by this, increasing short-term and long-term benefits, just as it flourishes by independence. The balance between these two aspects therefore includes something in the natural, whether or not one involves the "vertical"; but what is more is that it has to be worked out by an inward process extant throughout the long jumble. Stoics are certainly right in emphasizing lifelong experience over discrete actions, just as Taylor is right in walking us around "closed immanence." Yet a force within us creates our moral judgments upon moral claims if and only if we have moral obligation as a going concern responding to urgency in time. When it comes to the decisive question of pacifism, where philosophers must absolutely assert or deny the correctness of a universal moral claim, a thoroughgoing concept of moral facts is necessary in order to make the right decision. Because Taylor directs us to what is not excluded, rather than to such a line of thinking, his several sections of violence are indecisive (653-654, 656ff., esp. pp. 673-675, 688ff.), though he is trying as hard as always to give the credit due to all sides and thereby to avoid imposing ungrounded codes.

Of course many philosophers will say that because moral goods are never material facts they are not real. Taylor's obstinacy in *A Secular Age* consists of insisting on the necessity and importance of moral life by directing our attention to a way in which to practice it, notwithstanding any linguistic or logical attempt to restrain it, while simultaneously and with corresponding confidence declining to explain the concepts necessary for a normative ethical system. One fears that the reason for this might be that behind his confidence is a weakening concession, a fear that the experiences and reflections of the moral agent are not enough to make for valid moral claims. Taylor is a realist in metaphysics; and as a person of experience in the disasters and triumphs of the modern overall view, from many quarters of the globe, he seems to have decided that subjectivity will not do for us what objective reality can do. He's not against the place in the middle explored by phenomenology and pragmatism, but in this book he does not develop a normative

theory of moral life from any such place.

As a peek at what such a theory might look like, consider the following statement by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Religion therefore, as I now ask you to arbitrarily think it, should mean for us the feelings, actions, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.

There's a lot to take notice of in this remarkable sentence. For one thing, it is thorough Pragmatist and thoroughly practical. It is concerned solely with what "works." For another, the words depicts a very basic thing, something as graspable as a wheel or a chair. One also notices how extremely resolved and determined the speaker is. He assertively incites the reader. But what most strikes one is the direction of attention to human persons (women as well as men) "in their solitude." It is yet more striking to notice that it is those "feelings, actions, and experiences" each person has encountered in his or her solitude that are the meaning of the topic of the sentence, religion. These elements are broadly speaking not reasons or rationalized thoughts. They are inwardly experienced by the agent where solitary or not. And finally this group of ideas, isolated from the outward world and not directly subject to reason, constitute the apprehension by a human of the divine.

The different kind of theory in very brief prospect here requires a definition of moral obligation very different from the familiar usage by Kant. For him obligation is the rule of reason. He essentializes moral life, until one feature fills the view, like the reflection in a convex mirror, while everything else in the room behind it is miniaturized. Taylor recognizes this when he says that for Kant moral agency is one particular kind of motivation radically distinguished from feeling (607.4-608.top) and that in Kantian ethics moral obligation deriving from our consideration of ourselves as rational agents (554.4). In the different view suggested by James, we apprehend, rather than consider, ourselves not as purely rational but as the subjects of long inward experience, over which we have but little initial control. Applied to moral life, the content of roomy inward apprehension includes our responses to moral claims and judgments about them and about our

responses to them. Obligation is then the product of a long experience, anchored in subjectivity, congruent to human complexity, unforced, and stationed at depth. This concept of obligation could shape our idea of moral obligations toward the care of others in ways that will distinctly improve some older explanations of compassion.

Taylor allows a lot of room for different concepts of social belief, but he does not see the way in which the individual might be connected to the larger stream of humanity by the experiences he or she inwardly collects. That requires a theory of the temporal play of moral feeling such that we can know how defensible and valid moral judgments will result from prolonged reflection. But here again Taylor is obstinate because he wishes to defend that one certain and outward collection of moral experience which, *mutatis mutandis*, is of God. There's nothing better to be stubborn about—nor anything against which inward conscience can more obstinately resist, desperately resist no matter what, upon urgent occasions.