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Abstract: This essay takes the work of Max Weber as a departure point in order to explore the relationship between modern disenchantment and earlier structures of religious experience. It develops its argument using the work of Charles Taylor and John Milbank.

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A Modern Itinerary: Keynotes in the Search for Meaning

(by Chris Fleming and John O'Carroll)

An itinerary

This is an essay about meaning – especially what its felt absence itself means in the contemporary world. Key sociologists of the modern era have long asserted that many people, even entire groups of people, struggle to make sense of the world and the place they occupy in it. In this essay we trace how the rise of the modern world brought with it ways of narrating that – paradoxically – have made it *harder* for individuals to actually answer the questions they ask *and learn not to ask* as modern subjects. That is, within a widely thriving secular society, many people relegate inquiry into “what it all means” to fields like evolutionary psychology and “memetics,” believing that the weight of evidence has revealed that there is no inherent meaning to human existence. But, as this essay seeks to show, such a view has blindspots, and is far from being a simple, self-evident explanation.

In any effective analysis of the narrative of modernity, we believe there are essential historical and philosophical signposts whose deep interrelationship we'll have reason to explore. Understanding them entails a journey through a series of crucial stopping points or way-stations. But where are they – and how to make this journey? In our view, we are in need of an itinerary. The itinerary we sketch is one that we believe can be deployed over and over again in different ways by different readers and writers. We use the term itself with a nod to the overtly atheistic (but often insightful) critic, Régis Debray. At the outset of his *God: An Itinerary*, an account of the “prophetic religions” which he sees as emerging after the rise of civilisation, Debray remarks that he is embarking on an itinerary of the Gods not “in order to debate the existence of God for the umpteenth time, but in order to understand how the only carnivore to practise voluntary fasting succeeded in generating his very humanity” (2). Our religions and our very nature are somehow enmeshed.

The itinerary we seek to build is obviously a very different one from Debray's. Where his concerns a tour of “ways of doing God,” ours concerns the narrative of modernity itself. But why is it necessary to concern ourselves with this? From the time of the Greeks, the injunction to “know thyself” has stood as an exacting demand of human self-reflection. A crucial part of this, in our view, entails an historical understanding of the path to the present. Yet, we contend, a defining feature of modernity is its *lack* of self-understanding.

The most typical and widely accepted characterisation of modernity is a theorisation of that kind of individual disorientation and disconnection known as “anomie.” This is the essential first port of call in our journey. Emile Durkheim utilised the term to depict the way in which, in modern societies, traditional norms and cultural values are undermined but not replaced by new normative frameworks; norms may remain in some form, but are not significant determinants of individual behaviour.

Sociologists from the time of Durkheim and Simmel onwards have pointed to the consequences of anomie and loss of centre in the modern world.¹

Once we grasp, in broadest terms, the psycho-social dimensions of anomie, then a second closely related concept is a useful second destination in our journey. This is the famous idea of a “disenchantment” of the modern world – a notion heavily indebted to the work of Max Weber. It is closely related to anomie because like that idea it depicts a stripping away or loss of meaning – and this in two senses: first, a loss of religiously-grounded cosmology or worldview, and second, the resulting, intensely-felt, loss of sense for the individual. “Disenchantment” refers both to a metaphysical stripping-away of the transcendent domain and also to the subjective sense of de-moralisation in the most literal sense imaginable (demoralise: loss of morale and anomic depression; demoralise: loss of moral basis or meta-ethical grounding).

These characterisations of modernity undoubtedly capture something of the reality of the epistemic and ontological consensus of modern life, on the one hand, and the experience we have of it on the other. We cannot skirt them in our treatment of modernity. Left unsupplemented, they are profoundly misleading; left to stand as they are, they do *not* bring self-awareness. They *look* like empirical reportage, but in their original contexts, they are nothing of the sort. To the contrary, they reflect long-held views and partly forgotten debates. If we leave to others the task of showing the contexts of anomie in nascent psychology and sociology, we do so only because we assume an experiential familiarity on the part of the readers of this particular journal – and because we have sketched its place in our itinerary. But we make no such assumption in relation to the notion of disenchantment – that way-station must be explored in a special and even detailed way, even in a sketch like ours because it is here that some of the characteristic paradoxes, blindspots, and absurdities of modernity’s self-account come to light.

Disenchantment: the Work of Max Weber

Weber’s argument that modernity is the end-product of a gradual process of bureaucratic and rational development has been widely accepted – indeed sometimes rendered formulaic and over-simplified. Regardless, there is considerable value in retrieving Weber’s thesis, albeit in outline. Weber famously called the process of modernisation the “disenchantment of the world” [*Entzauberung der Welt*]. As many people know, lying behind the “disenchantment of the world” [*Entzauberung der Welt*] is the process he calls “rationalisation.”

But what does this entail? For Weber, rationalisation has two main facets, even if these are, he says, ultimately inseparable (*Essays* 293). First, rationalisation names the process whereby instrumental rationality – reason in the service of practical or pragmatic ends – is increasingly refined and assumes greater importance: in economics, science, law, art, and religion. It is “the methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means” (*Essays* 293). Rationalisation displays itself in the way social institutions are increasingly constituted by rules that determine the most efficient means of attaining a given goal. This takes place in a way fairly independent of those values which had previously impacted upon the domain (Weber, *Theory* 115; *Essays* 293-4). Rationalisation leads to the application of precise regulations to social life in a way analogous to the application of scientific method to industrial production.

Another dimension of rationalisation is a form of intellection by which systematic thought is directed to the task of uncovering some objective reality. The process involves “an increasing theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts” (*Essays* 293). This he sometimes calls “intellectualisation,” and more negatively, as “disenchantment.” The transformation of thought has consequences well beyond the university – it affects people’s conceptions of themselves as social agents, as well as their notion of what the world is like.

Needless to say, the consequences of this thesis – and the phenomena to which it refers – for religion, are profound. In the religious domain, we see both notions of rationalisation intermingle. To start with, in their attempts to rationalise their world – to calculate and attempt to predict what had previously been thought to have been governed by chance – the capricious whims of the gods have had to make room for the determinable. Here, rationalisation “means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather than one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted” (*Essays* 139). Weber’s point is that science is no longer either the gift of prophets or the result of contemplation of philosophers and sages about “the meaning of the universe.” “This,” Weber asserts without qualification, “is the inescapable condition of our historical situation” (*Essays* 152).

One might think therefore that science and religion were, for Weber, antithetically opposed in history. But contrary to what many believe he argued, this is *not* his view. For him, both modern capitalism and science were the result of a long development of “rationalisation:

Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as valid. Empirical knowledge, reflection on problems of the cosmos and of life, philosophical and theological wisdom of the most profound sort, are not confined to it, though in the case of the last the full development of a systematic theology must be credited to Christianity under the influence of Hellenism.

(Weber *Protestant Ethic* 13)

Other cultures had developed forms of empirical theorisation, but only in the West could this theorisation be called “science.”

This brings us to the next – and, for Weber, cruellest – point. Born of religion, science comes to make life meaningless:

Science has created this cosmos of natural causality and has seemed unable to answer with certainty the question of its own ultimate presuppositions.

Nevertheless science, in the name of “intellectual integrity,” has come forward with the claim of representing the only possible form of a reasoned view of the world. The intellect, like all culture values, has created an aristocracy based on the possession of rational culture and independent of all personal ethical qualities of man... Viewed in this way, all “culture” appears as man’s emancipation from the organically prescribed cycle of natural life. For this very reason culture’s every step forward seems condemned to lead to an ever more devastating senselessness. The advancement of cultural values, however, seems to become a senseless hustle in the service of worthless, moreover self-contradictory, and mutually antagonistic ends. (*Essays* 355-7)

Weber's choice of the term "disenchantment" is, therefore, apposite, because – unlike other possible terms, like "secularisation" – it conveys both the sense of a socio-structural reality *and* a sense of felt, subjective loss.

This leads to a sharp and unprecedented paradox, the paradox of rationalism. On the one hand, through rationalisation, religion and "ultimate" values have become "subjective," both in the sense that they no longer appear to possess an objective status, and in the sense that they are relegated to realm of private experience, having "retreated from public life" (Weber, *Essays* 155). On the other, the scientist is unable to offer a justification for the idea that what he or she does is valuable; unable to verify the idea that "what is yielded by scientific work is important in the sense that it is worth being known" (Weber, *Essays* 143). Or, as he starkly tells us, only "big children" would presume to think that science could tell us "anything" about what the world *means*.

The Myth of Subtraction

As important as Weber's contribution to the understanding of modernity might be, his own despair at the "disenchantment" of the world has itself become *part of the problem* we are seeking to address. In this sense, there have been further inroads made on the inquiries he initiated. In their different ways, the philosopher Charles Taylor and the theologian John Milbank, have closely explored the nature of modernity in terms of a myth of subtraction. Let us look at Milbank's work first. Milbank contends that *modernity is not self-evidently secular*. In *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Milbank argues that the picture we (and he includes theologians and atheists alike) have of modernity is this one:

It belongs to the received wisdom of sociology to interpret Christianity as itself an agent of secularization, yet this thesis is totally bound up with the one-sided negativity of the notion of desacralizing; a metaphor of the removal of the superfluous and additional to leave a residue of the human, the natural and the self-sufficient. For this negative conception it is convenient that there should always have been some perception of the pure remainder, and the hybrid "Judaeo-Christianity" is cast in this role... (9)

But the constitution of this "secular order" is deeply imbricated within the history of Western religious traditions. For Milbank, it was designed to "exclude the religious" from its purview only in a very restrictive or attenuated sense. This is because the modern origin of the term "secular" lies in the deliberate classical Christian theological distinction between the *saeculum* and the *eschaton* – so-called "historical time" and the "end time." For Milbank that Christianity *itself* instituted the secular (9). There is no doubt that he is right, in a certain factual, historical sense about this. But we have to ask an additional question: what does this actually *mean* to modernity today?

Milbank himself provides some clues. Questioning the quasi-structural version of modernity, he attacks the view that modernity is definable simply in terms of social or cultural plurality. For him, the very structure of plurality which both the sociologists and communication thinkers presuppose to be a matter only of techno-social transformation is itself a profoundly Christian thing. For Milbank, this is *especially* the case on those terrains where Christian dimensions are most denied. For instance, as he puts it, this is the case wherever we find

the notion of the recognition of the “other” itself, which is so important an imperative to dialogue. Hence...a postmodern position that respects otherness and locality and yet at the same time still seeks the goals of justice, peace, and reconciliation, can only, in fact, be a Christian (or possibly a Jewish) position” (Milbank, “End of Dialogue” 175-76).

This is very clever analysis – but it is not Sophistry. Rather, it is the kind of work that is needed for our journey into the paradoxical self-account of modernity itself.

Milbank’s account is compatible with – and a useful prelude to – the last of our way-stations, what is best called the myth of subtraction. The work needed to understand this has been conducted by the Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor. Taylor’s inquiry is broader. He has, since his *Sources of the Self* (1996) posed questions about the nature of modernity on its own terms. In questioning “what sort of thing modernity is,” he develops the argument that *modernity is primarily a cultural, rather than a technological or bureaucratic constellation*. For Taylor, Western modernity is a horizontal social system that can only with difficulty admit older notions of vertical relations, be they with god or king. The epistemological dimensions of this are obvious: modernity comprises a number of what Taylor calls “closed world structures,” which is to say, world views that are closed for some reason or reasons to transcendence: “A CWS ‘naturalises’ a certain view on things” (52). Taylor suggests in this system first superstition (by seventeenth century Christianity) and then belief itself (in the Enlightenment) comes to be seen as child-like, while unbelief seems adult, even heroic (53).

Obviously, Taylor does not overturn the hierarchy of structure/culture simply to reverse a polarity. Both structure and culture are crucial aspects to modernity. What is at stake in a cultural explanation of modernity is the attempt to furnish the account with a sense of the moral universe that gave rise to it, and which perhaps enabled it. This decisive insight is itself an essential one on any itinerary seeking to grasp not just what the self-account of modernity is, but also, why it seems – for all its negativity – to be plausible. When modernity is understood more correctly as a moral constellation, however, then we pass effortlessly to the next step, which both Milbank and Taylor in their different ways have sought to describe.

Both offer consonant accounts of the ways in which modernity hides from itself. Milbank contends that the dominant narratives of modernity are those whose “received sociology” impelled them to take over the “human half” of what was left of the “privatized, spiritualized and transcendentalized...sacred, and concurrently reimagined nature, human action and society as a sphere of autonomy, sheerly formal power” (9). In a related way, Taylor suggests what he calls a “subtraction” view of history. That is,

On this “subtraction” view of humanity, as what arises from the washing away of old horizons, modern humanism can only have arisen through the fading of earlier forms. It can only be conceived as coming to be through a “death of God”. It just follows that you can’t be fully into contemporary humanist concerns if you haven’t sloughed off the old beliefs. (60).

But the question of faith-patterns now begins to require more nuanced examination, as those who espouse reason’s cause turn out to be engaged in complex “acts of faith” of their own. In this version, the value attached to science by unbelievers is *itself* moral – or morally determined. This, we believe, is why so many otherwise thoughtful

commentators miss the key turn-offs – and why less thoughtful ones like Richard Dawkins miss the boat entirely.

The Significance of the Journey

We have traced an itinerary of the modern world which has shown how, with Weber, we arrived at the paradoxical situation of a rational science which could not supply the grounds of objective value for its own inquiry. This, however, only led us to inquire further into Weber's own founding contention that modernity entails a stripping away of superstition. With the works of Milbank and Taylor, we see that it is not possible to take these things away without leaving the entire fabric of modernity threadbare. In addition, we realise a *story* about the history of modernity is at stake.

Modernity, then, is not quite as it appears. It is, above all, a moral constellation, and ultimately, a descendant of a Christian desacralisation. The moral imperatives that motivate us are still, in many respects, sacred. Our allergies are as strong as those of antiquity. But we are profoundly unaware of them. We are indeed, it seems, in modernity's theatre – in which the strings that make us twitch and jump have become invisible to us (Bandera 32); we are actors in the hypothetical scenario in Macintyre's *After Virtue* that our sense of what happened in history is profoundly awry, disturbed.

How to re-open the problem of modernity? How to see it as both a historical process and yet also, remaining aware of its own tendency to self-delusion, a kind of anti-method or method gone awry? We have explored the way the past can be misconstrued and narrativised in problematic ways. We have suggested that what is taken for granted about modernity should be put back into question. In generating the sketch of the possible path to such inquiry, we have suggested it is a journey that needs to be conducted over and over again – by writers with insights different from ours, and approaches that yield different fruits. We believe we have done the preliminary work towards clearing a way – one that involves grasping how and why the self-account of modernity has slammed the gates on the very meaning of life itself.

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¹ For Ferdinand Tönnies, indeed, the modern world ushered in a world of systems (*Gesellschaft*) which damaged the earlier community basis of life (*Gemeinschaft*).