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Phronêsis vs Scepticism: An Early Modernist Perspective

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Abstract

Taking advantage of the way in which Charles Taylor hinges his account of the rise of modern secularity around the year 1500, this article attempts a reassessment of some aspects of early modern thought which have been prominent in recent studies. In particular, it focuses on the thin boundary between illusion and reality, on the lure of scepticism, and on the changing role of the Aristotelian notion of *phronêsis* in human action.

Keywords

epistemology; illusions; *phronêsis*; scepticism; secularity; virtues

A Secular Age has all the breadth, range, erudition and ambitious scope that we have come to associate with its author, so anyone setting off to comment on it is likely to be at a loss as to where to begin. Fortunately this is not a problem from the perspective of early-modern intellectual history, given that Taylor has chosen to hinge his whole argument around the year 1500—a time when it was still 'virtually impossible not to believe in God' (25) but when the seeds that would give rise to modern secularism could already be discerned. That moment is at the centre of the emergence of a view of the world which is still very much with us, and it is therefore hardly surprising that when it comes to questions of epistemology, verifiability, and religious belief, the early modern intellectual legacy should have a particularly pointed relevance.

This inescapable rootedness of our assumptions in the soil of early modern Europe goes some way towards explaining why it is so difficult to offer any explanation of the processes of change which successfully avoids what Taylor has labelled 'subtraction theories'—interpretations that see the emergence of secular modernity as a movement with a clear logic, leading to developments that are now generally accepted and often positively welcomed. Take, for instance, the widespread modern assumption that knowledge of the self is prior

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to knowledge of reality, and that knowledge of reality, in turn, can be neutral, value-free, and independent of any theoretical invocation of forces or realities that transcend it. It is commonly assumed that the emergence of such an assumption went hand in hand with a shift from an 'enchanted' to a 'disenchanted' world, to use the famous Weberian notion, and that this shift entailed a transition from a type of society where ideas of 'order', grounded in a meaningful cosmos and other conceptions of a 'higher' or 'transcendent' time, gradually gave way to what Taylor calls the 'modern moral order' of secular time, direct access, mutual benefit, and disenchanted immanence.

Of course, as Taylor is perfectly aware, many philosophers (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty among others) have posed a worrying challenge to these assumptions by pointing out that their claim to represent a rational, objective, disengaged perspective is itself shot through with subjective values. Nevertheless, even those who have become aware of this challenge find it difficult to avoid the tendency to 'subtract'. Martha Nussbaum's influential polemic against disengaged modes of doing philosophy, for instance, on the one hand attacks the emphasis that these methods put on generalities at the expense of particularities; on the other hand, in setting up the allegedly Christian aversion to the body and the senses as an obvious target, Nussbaum reveals her implicit agreement with subtraction theories of 'disenchantment'.[1] She even expresses a guarded sympathy for the more extreme critics of the humanist tradition, particularly those inspired by Nietzsche, who see any sign of transcendence as an unhealthy symptom of a groundless longing for an ultimately unattainable harmony.[2] Hence Taylor's suggestive observation that, whether they write from a humanist or an anti-humanist perspective, all enemies of transcendence are firm advocates of a rehabilitation of the body and the senses. But, interestingly, whenever they take Christianity to task on this issue, their efforts are mired in a contradiction rooted in the demonstrably false assumption that Christianity involves a necessary distrust of the sensual, particularly the sexual (631–4).

This common assumption is in fact the result of a fundamentally erroneous tendency to see Christianity as another form of Platonism, where the saints lose interest in the world and become transformed in the same way that Platonists become attuned to the Idea of the Good. Taylor calls the bluff of this idea by pointing to the radical difference

[1] See, for example, 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love', in Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 286–313, and Taylor's discussion in *A Secular Age*, pp. 625–34.

[2] *Love's Knowledge*, op.cit., p. 379.

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between the detached serenity of the suicide of Socrates and the unbearable agony of Jesus at Gethsemane. It is easier for Platonists to renounce the fullness of human flourishing simply because they know there is something wrong with it. This is clearly not the case for Christians, whose transformation, Taylor writes, is from the very beginning 'bound up with a compassion which is itself incarnate as bodily desire' (644).

In fact, the modern affirmation of ordinary life would be inconceivable without the legacy of Christianity. Already in Patristic sources Taylor detects a fundamental transformation of Greek philosophy through its contact with Christianity, leading to an unambiguous affirmation of the body alongside history, individual identity, contingency, and the emotions (275–9). From this it follows that the frequent association of Christianity with a sharp distinction between soul and body rests on very shaky foundations. Even St Paul's opposition of the spirit and the flesh bears no relation to it, for the Pauline flesh (*sarx*) is *not* the body (*soma*), and the Pauline opposition, like the later Augustinian opposition of charity and concupiscence—the love of God and the love of self—always preserved the essential harmony and integrity of the human person.[3]

A central question of Taylor's enormously detailed survey of the emergence of secular modernity is how this incongruous identification of Christianity with a rejection of nature and an emphasis on sacrifice as a denial of human goodness came about. His answer is multilayered and complex, but two suggestive lines of enquiry stand out. The first is that the modern attacks against Christianity exaggerate the juridico-penal view of the atonement. Although this view, which developed in some strands of medieval theology, has always been detectable in the Christian tradition, Taylor argues that its modern critics distort it unduly by looking back at it through the modern filter of what he calls 'the disciplines of disengaged reason', which are in fact the legacy of the Cartesian tradition. The second is that, although Christianity is the victim of such distortions, it is itself inescapably implicated in the processes that brought them about; for disenchantment was itself an inevitable consequence of the process of 'reformation', a term used by Taylor in a broad and consistently trans-confessional sense that can be traced back to the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century and, more generally, as far back as the 'Axial turn'—the term used by Karl Jaspers to describe the great cultural transformation of the first millennium

[3] Taylor draws on Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989). For the Pauline opposition see Dale B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), especially pp. 123–28, 168–74, 194–97.

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BC, marked by the emerging opposition between immanence and transcendence.[4]

If there is anything that modern Christians have in common with mainline secularists, Taylor argues, it is that they are both equally happy to see the Axial revolution, which began a piecemeal process to rid religion of the relics of paganism and idolatry, in an unambiguously positive light. Modern secular humanism would in fact be incomprehensible without the legacy of a succession of Christian movements of 'reformation' that made it, unlike its Epicurean and Lucrecian predecessors, activist, interventionist, universalist and motivated to act for the good of others. Wherever it has innovated in relation to the Greeks and the Romans, therefore, modern secular humanism unavoidably draws on the Christian faith that it claims to reject.

Taylor traces this development from the Middle Ages to the modern era in exhaustive (and exhausting) detail. Although he makes it clear that the turn to the natural *per se* was always intrinsic to Christianity, he sees the movement gathering momentum under the influence of the lay spirituality encouraged by the mendicant orders from the early thirteenth century onwards. What gave the movement a particular appeal was primarily a revolution in *devotion*—the emerging image of Jesus Christ as the paradigm human being 'in relation to whom alone the humanity of all others can be truly known'(94). This opened up a radically new perspective which gave a renewed emphasis to the unique *particularity* of the person. The trend was especially germane to the anti-Aristotelian reaction characteristic of the Franciscan school of thought associated with Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, for whom knowledge came to mean the grasping of 'the individual form'. What Scotus called *haecceitas*,[5] meaning 'thisness', is at the basis of the modern understanding of reality, and it is often seen as symptomatic of an anti-Aristotelian trend that would become central to modern secular humanism.

In all this, Taylor's analysis goes much further in the sheer weight and depth of its detail than any previous historical account of the process of secularisation, but is nonetheless in fundamental agreement with the bulk of modern analysts who trace the roots of the process to the late medieval and early modern periods. Much recent research sheds valuable light upon many philosophical preoccupations at the centre of Taylor's thesis, some of which are in need of a more careful

[4] See for example, Robert N. Bellah, 'What is Axial about the Axial Age?' *Arch.europ.sociol.*, vol. XLVI, no. I, 2005, pp. 69–87. Karl Jaspers coined the notion in *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1st ed.). (München: Piper Verlag, 1949), trans. by Michael Bullock, *The Origin and Goal of History* (London: Routledge, 1953).

[5] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 761. The links between the Scotist and the Avicennan understanding of being, both based on the complete subtraction of the notion of existence, are lucidly expounded in Etienne Gilson, *L'être et l'essence* (Paris: Vrin, 1948), pp. 133–5.

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and consistent treatment. In what follows I shall consider three of these: (1) the boundary between illusion and reality; (2) the lure of scepticism; and (3) the changing role of the Aristotelian notion *phronêsis* in human action.

Illusion and Reality

The intellectual historian Stuart Clark has recently proposed that the main philosophical changes in the early modern period need to be understood as 'part of a dislocation in the cognitive system of Aristotle' between c.1430 and c.1680.[6] He detects this change in the enhanced and increasingly disturbing importance given to the function of the imagination in human thought, no longer understood as one amongst the many auxiliary powers of the human mind but as the one single mediator between the body and the soul.[7] This enhanced importance brought with it a nagging distrust, for the imagination could be filled with both good and evil 'phantasms': good ones might represent images of heavenly and divine things, but bad ones would be invariably faithful to their master, the great counterfeiter. To complicate matters further these two sources of inspiration were extremely difficult to 'discern'. Duke Theseus's memorable words in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, are steeped in the dilemma: 'The lunatic, the lover and the poet/Are of *imagination* all compact'.[8] It is small wonder that when Descartes came to consider the grounds for doubting sense information, he reviewed the phenomenon of dreaming as if it was parallel to that of madness—not, Clark is quick to point out, the all-embracing notion of madness to which we have become accustomed, but 'the more precise and paradoxical melancholia, with its unique combination of utter conviction and total error'.[9]

Descartes, of course, was not working in a vacuum. These are precisely the circumstances that had already made Shakespeare so aware of the difficulty of separating dream from reality. Feste's visit to the imprisoned Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* plays on the idea of madness by a shrewd manipulation of the illusion/reality complex.[10] So too, Hamlet's dream leads to an unprecedented effect of profound

[6] Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 5.

[7] In the early sixteenth century, for instance, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola—not to be confused with his more accomplished forebear Giovanni—argued that the soul was incapable of knowing anything if the imagination did not constantly supply it with the images necessary for knowing. See Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, op.cit., p. 44.

[8] V.i.6–8, my emphasis.

[9] *Vanities of the Eye,* op.cit., p. 57.

[10] *Malvolio*: 'I am as well in my wits, fool, as thou art', *Clown*: 'But as well? Then you are mad indeed, if you be no better in your wits than a fool'; Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, IV.ii, 91–3.

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disorientation: the dream does not tell Hamlet that the world is a foul place or that he is a wretched prisoner of the powers of darkness but, as the late A.D. Nuttall perceptively put it, that 'he could believe himself free, *but for* his bad dreams'.[11] These bad dreams, moreover, were steeped in ambiguity; they pointed either to the sceptical intuition that nothing is real or to the generally perceived fact that Denmark was a place of wickedness. By the latter interpretation, Nuttall writes, Hamlet's 'bad dream is the site not of an illusion but of shocking veracity'. His opinion that there is 'nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' is 'pivotal between a Stoicism that retains some grip on ethical objectivism' and 'a modern radical uncertainty' where the question, 'How do I know that I am not dreaming?' has become 'suddenly vertiginous'.[12]

These growing perplexities about the mechanisms of perception, so relevant to the growing process of secularisation and disenchantment at the core of Taylor's argument, were equally well reflected in the early modern debates surrounding historical knowledge. Take Lorenzo Valla's famous attempt to counter Aristotle's view that poetry offered profound general truths while history, poor little history, could tell only what a given person did or suffered. What modern critics often overlook is that Valla's response actually reinforces rather than contradicts Aristotle's opinion. Valla insists that historians do not record events just as they happened but, rather, compose them with the candidly artistic aim of offering the same profound truths that poets evoke in the actions of mythical heroes.

Despite the undoubted growth of history as a critical discipline, therefore, humanists continued to apply historical methods to attain the traditional ends of history as a guide to the good life—*historia magistra vitae*—rather than to recreate an alien past 'as it actually happened'.[13] The very artificiality of history, in other words, was a source of strength rather than weakness. So long as *decorum* was maintained—i.e. the point where rhetoric met moral philosophy and political prudence (the key Aristotelian notion of *phronêsis* to which we shall return)—any excessive concern with factual accuracy was unhealthy. This goes a long way towards explaining why Shakespeare's historical plays do not give us 'a factually accurate account of the origin of the War of the Roses but an accurate

[11] *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 246–7, 195. Nuttall's emphasis.

[12] Ibid., pp. 194–6.

[13] See Anthony Grafton, *What was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 32, 35. Grafton explains that the likes of Bodin, Boudouin, Patrizi, and Chytraeus would have had no qualms about agreeing with Campanella's charming statement that those not interested in history were 'sicut vermis in caseo, nil sciret, nisi quae ipsum casei partes tangent'— 'like worms in cheese, knowing nothing except the parts of the cheese that touch them'.

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account of the way such things can come about', as Nuttall put it.[14] The sixteenth-century historian of Savoy and Genoa, Uberto Foglietta, would have heartily agreed: those who wanted speeches only to be recorded in their actual wording, he stated, were little better than superstitious ingénues, for it was impossible to recall even an everyday conversation verbatim![15]

There are, additionally, quite fascinating parallels between the growing concern among early modern historians with source criticism and the adoption of geometric and linear perspective by early modern artists. The aim in both movements was undoubtedly the achievement of greater objectivity by growing ever closer to the *haecceitas*, the 'thisness', that Taylor sees at the root of modernity: source criticism would allow historians to get closer to empirically verifiable facts just as perspective would bring art closer into line with the principles of optics. But unfortunately the deception involved in both methods was all too obvious and a consequent source of deep anxiety. To identify empirically verifiable facts with objective truth was as illusory—as 'superstitious'—as to be fully persuaded by geometric and linear perspective. Both methods rested on what Stuart Clark calls a 'deception in the service of . . . veracity' and an 'irresolvable combination of the false and the true'.[16]

This tension was reflected in the growing use in early modern painting of a technique called 'anamorphosis', of which Holbein's *The Ambassadors* is perhaps the best-known example. The technique highlighted the intrinsic falsehood of perspective's claims to objectivity and truth, and it was by no means confined to the visual arts. Clark reminds us of Shakespeare's 'ey'd awry' in *Richard II*, of *Macbeth*'s evocation of 'a world caught between the actual and the virtual, where . . . the difference between appearance and reality is constantly and radically undermined', and, following Alison Thorne, of the Bard's presentation of Troilus's crisis over Cressida's identity as an 'anamorphic puzzle' set within the play's 'wider obsession' with the 'epistemological discrepancy' between the real and the viewer's perception of it.[17] Anamorphosis is also the key theme that runs through another great literary work of the period, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, where the deluded hero's madness becomes a delicious puzzle for the multifarious portrayal of contemporary reality from a perspective where the thin boundary between illusion and reality—what in early modern Spain became known as *desengaño*—revealed itself forcefully in practically every area of intellectual endeavour,

[14] *Shakespeare the Thinker*, op.cit. p. 38.

[15] Cited in Grafton, *What was History?* op.cit., pp. 43–4.

[16] *Vanities of the Eye*, op.cit., 83–4.

[17] Ibid., pp. 90–1, 236; cf. Alison Thorne, *Vision and Rhetoric in Shakespeare* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

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most memorably in the paintings of El Greco and Velázquez and in the theatre of Calderón.[18]

From all this it might seem difficult to resist the temptation of assuming that an overwhelming lack of trust in verifiability had made it virtually impossible for anyone with even the most elementary philosophical preoccupations to avoid the lure of scepticism. For if something as fickle and as liable to manipulation by spiritual forces as the human imagination was the single mediator between body and soul, how could the senses possibly be trusted?

Scepticism

It was this climate of opinion that made the publication of the first edition of the original Greek text of Sextus Empiricus's account of Pyrrho's scepticism by Henri Estienne in 1562 such a momentous event in the history of early modern thought. Estienne's text placed the Greek 'tropes' for doubting quite firmly on the intellectual map of Europe. It was not any radical novelty that caused the stir—after all, Pyrrho's arguments had been known for centuries through Cicero's *Academica*. Estienne's edition nevertheless gave Pyrrhonism a renewed freshness which made the movement's epistemological challenges increasingly relevant to a generation of intellectuals who had been struggling with some rather disturbing questions. If what was at stake was the reliability of the senses, and if the senses were the only means to apprehend reality, then it followed that correspondence could not be verified without the help of precisely those things which were being assessed. As Sextus Empiricus had bluntly put it, 'it is absurd to try to settle the matter in question by means of the matter in question'.[19]

This Pyrrhonist challenge to Aristotelian epistemology was at the root of the changes that concern Taylor, and it gave rise to the most persuasive seventeenth-century attempts to find an answer to the sceptical challenge in the formulation of what is often seen as a new theory of perception.[20] By Thomas Hobbes's time, for example, the truth or falsity of visual experiences was no longer a question of a

[18] Perdo Calderón de la Barca's best known play, *La Vida es Sueño* (the English 'Life is a Dream' fails to bring out the delicious ambivalence of the Spanish) is perhaps the most profound theatrical treatment of the topic; see Paul Lewis-Smith, *Calderón de la Barca: La Vida es Sueño* (London: Grant and Cutler, 1998). On El Greco and Velázquez see Jonathan Brown, *Painting in Spain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 62–78, 179–90. A suggestive general survey is Jeremy Robbins, *The Challenges of Uncertainty: An Introduction to Seventeenth-Century Spanish Literature* (London: Duckworth, 1998).

[19] *The Skeptic Way: Sextus Empiricus's 'Outlines of Pyrrhonism'*, trans. and ed. B. Mates (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 97.

[20] The classic study is Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle*, revised and expanded edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

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concordance (or lack of concordance) between the perceiver and the external reality. It had become a question of language, one where the mind's input into whatever it applied itself to know—together with all its prejudices, preconceptions and assumptions—played as much a part in the process of knowing as the actual object of knowledge which could never in fact be known by itself and in isolation from the agent.[21]

Scholars often feel the need to point out that this theory belongs to Hobbes, not to Kant or Wittgenstein. It is, of course, tremendously exciting. It even has a post-modernist ring. It might therefore come as a bit of an anticlimax to be reminded that the understanding of reality as something which is construed as much as it is grasped by the perceiver is in fact unmistakably Aristotelian. The way in which it has come to be perceived as a new and essentially anti-Aristotelian movement which had to be opposed to the allegedly Aristotelian conviction that there was a naïve concordance between appearance and reality, is one of the most pointed ironies in early modern intellectual history. Its nagging persistence goes some way towards explaining the repeated failures of modern analysts to avoid the tendency to subtract. Take the Cartesian denigration of history as mere gossip, without any *fides*, for example. It is widely regarded as an almost inescapable intellectual position by the early eighteenth century, a time when even those who defended history, like Jean Le Clerc and Jacob Perizonius, could no longer see any useful connection between their arguments and the *decorum* of the humanists.[22] Yet, there is a glaring exception to this. It is, of course, the staggering work of that other exciting writer, apparently full of post-modernist suggestions: the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico. In one of his many perceptive sections, Taylor seems aware that there is something wrong with the insistence on an almost inevitable teleology in the acceptance of the Cartesian position when he recalls the modern reception of Vico as 'one of the leaders of the reaction against a shallowly rationalist explanation of human action'. The reason why we cannot understand Vico as a simple by-product of scientific discovery, Taylor writes, is that he introduced 'another kind of deep time' into his analysis 'that leads back into darkness . . . prior to light'(335).

Taylor does not seem to me to go far enough here. The real crux of Vico's brilliant response to the Cartesian depreciation of history is that it harked back unmistakably to the instinctive Aristotelianism of the humanists. It was the poets not the philosophers, Vico insisted, who had written the first human histories; and it was only such poetico-historical knowledge that human beings could come to know

[21] I draw on Clark's discussion in *Vanities of the Eye,* op.cit., p. 337.
[22] Grafton, *What was History?,* op.cit., p. 254.

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with any degree of certainty. If like Descartes, he continued, 'you were to import the geometrical method into practical life, you would do no more than exhaust yourself in becoming a rational lunatic'.[23]

The repeated reluctance to see any hint of Aristotle in Vico's powerful response to Descartes seems to be swayed by the benefits of hindsight and the concomitant tendency to 'subtract'. This is what leads modern analysts, Taylor included, to play down some significant paradoxes and complexities that point to the persistence of intellectual traditions that could well have emerged triumphant in more favourable circumstances. The same could be said of the persistent predilection among modern analysts for the allegedly inescapable lure of sceptical views in the early modern period. Shakespeare, of course, is a favourite and seemingly endless source of ideas to shore up 'subtraction theories'. Against this trend, A. D. Nuttall raised a convincing voice. Modern commentators, he observed, repeatedly get Shakespeare wrong on the question of perception. 'It is one thing to say that the eye cannot see itself but by reflection and another to say that there is no such thing as a truly intrinsic quality, that the question, "But what is it like, *in itself*" is a doomed, unanswerable question'.[24] This is undoubtedly correct. It is precisely what Hippolyta's reply to Theseus in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* so neatly encapsulates: 'But all the story of the night told over, / And all their minds transfigured so together, / More witnesseth than fancy's images / And grows to something of great constancy'.[25] By 'constancy', Nuttall explains, Shakespeare means consistency or coherence.[26] We know that something is true, not just if different witnesses give separate accounts that cohere but also, and especially, if our intrinsically relational experiences tell us that they do. Mercutio's words, 'Now art thou sociable, now art thou Romeo, now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature',[27] point to Shakespeare's conviction that 'the fullest identity is that nourished and perhaps constituted by relationship'.[28]

Shakespeare's 'constancy', in other words, seems perfectly interchangeable with the *decorum* and verisimilitude of the *artes historicae*, and it has much closer links with Aristotelian poetics than with the anti-Aristotelian epistemology that Descartes and Hobbes would eventually espouse. It is not at all sceptical, but neither does

[23] *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*, quoted by Robert C. Miner, '*Verum-factum* and Practical Wisdom in the Early Writings of Giambattista Vico', *Journal of the History of Ideas* vol. 59, no.1 January 1998, p. 53.

[24] *Shakespeare the Thinker*, op.cit., p. 213 (Nuttall's emphasis).

[25] V.i.23–26.

[26] *Shakespeare the Thinker*, op.cit., p. 123.

[27] *Romeo and Juliet*, II.iv.82–83.

[28] Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker,* op.cit., p. 106.

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it accept the naïve epistemology that modern critics so often and so misleadingly equate with Aristotelianism. It is this subtle balance that allowed Shakespeare to join 'verisimilitude to wonder', as Nuttall put it with unquestionable insight,[29] a conjunction that leads us straight into the final philosophical preoccupation with which we are concerned.

Phronêsis

The anamorphic conjunction of verisimilitude and wonder might have clear post-modernist connotations, but it in fact sinks deep roots into the middle ages. It received its clearest formulation in St Thomas Aquinas's theory of the human intelligence. As Taylor explains, in Aquinas's view 'the meaning of being is relative not just to a vision of the world but also to an understanding of the stance of the agent in the world' (97). At the centre of this theory was the resolute application of the Aristotelian notion that body and soul are not two separate things but an interrelated composite unity. From this it followed that the soul could have no intellectual activity that did not involve some bodily input. As Paul T. Durbin writes, 'the object of human intellectual knowledge must have the universality and necessity appropriate to intellectual knowledge in general, but it must be a universality grounded in particulars, in the singular existents of our changing physical world'.[30]

St Thomas's vision was clearly as remote from idealism as it was from empiricism. Its recognition of the autonomous rights of reason and science against the exclusive domination of theology left the way open for an autonomous and disinterested scientific activity that could not in any way be considered a threat to faith. Anyone adhering to such a view would have been utterly baffled by Pierre Charron's defence of Pyrronhism, penned in the seventeenth century as an antidote against the 'superstitions' of the 'carnal, earthly and corruptible imagination' that would prepare humanity for a religion like that of the angels.[31] How much more sensible than this artificial separation of body and mind was to accept one's intrinsic contingency! Clear remnants of this tradition can still be detected in the neglected Aristotelianism of the seventeenth century which, as Clark writes, came to see the technique of anamorphosis as possessing 'the emblematic quality . . . of teaching the way to resolve spiritual confusion through the fixity and determination brought by faith'.[32] Such an outlook had

[29] Ibid., p. 383.

[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 60 vols., xii (1a. 84–89), Paul T. Durbin, ed., *Human Intelligence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. xxi.

[31] Quoted in Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, op.cit., p. 283.

[32] Ibid., p. 94.

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much in common with the *decorum* of the humanists. Yet it has been strangely neglected since the late medieval period.

Among the reasons that might explain this neglect is the legacy of the thirteenth-century Parisian condemnation of Averroism along with the works of St Thomas. It is important to remember that most of the charges against St Thomas referred to specifically metaphysical issues. As a result, those who stood up in his defence and attempted to clear him of Averroism unwittingly transmitted an over-metaphysical image of St Thomas which paid little and inadequate attention to his Scriptural and Patristic interests. In this way, a skewed, anti-Augustinian, semi-Pelagian image of St Thomas developed in the late middle ages which proved deeply offensive to mainstream theology. Even after the Council of Trent confirmed St Thomas's orthodoxy, the eclectic theological debates that marked the period proved fundamentally inimical to the Thomistic theory of the human intelligence. Francisco Suárez, for example, undoubtedly the most authoritative and influential philosopher of the period, favoured an eclectic synthesis of the different medieval schools of thought which insisted on a nominalist transition from apprehensions of essence to judgments of particular existence. This proved irreconcilable with the Thomistic understanding of the relationship between matter and form and with St Thomas's central dictum that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.[33]

The persistence of this nominalist streak in early modern Christian thought goes a long way towards explaining the paradox that Taylor detects in the tendency to associate the denigration of nature with the legacy of Christianity. Nominalism opened the door to voluntarism, and thereby to a conception of the natural order that was fundamentally different from its classical and medieval predecessors. Drawing on Remi Barque, who sees the classical and medieval notion of the natural order as one where it was possible to aim towards a supernatural life without doing violence to our natural inclinations, Taylor remarks that this 'older conception of order . . . was one of forms which were seen as already at work in reality' (125–6). The modern perception, by contrast, is 'reconstructivist'—it sees forms as 'imposed ab extra on nature by human will' and it favours objectified experience over moral insight. It is only in this modern,

[33] Cf. Francisco Suárez, *Disputationes Metaphysicae*, Disputatio 5 *De unitate individuali eiusque principio* http://homepage.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/Michael.Renemann/suarez/index.html). See the excellent brief discussion of the unpropitious climate of opinion for the reception of Thomism in the late medieval period in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990), p. 150. For the more general context see Heiko Oberman, '*Via Antiqua* and *Via Moderna*: Late Medieval Prolegomena to Early Reformation Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 48, no.1, Jan.–March, 1987, pp. 23–40.

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nominalist-inspired understanding, that human order must be constructed by the will (501, 789–90 n. 69).

This world-view inevitably shuts the door to the notion of *phronêsis*, the linchpin of the virtues which, according to St Thomas, involved a grasp of the individual such as is impossible to the human intellect alone. Since all human actions are individual and unique, *phronêsis* had to deal with concrete individual situations. Although emphatically an intellectual virtue, therefore, *phronêsis*, or *prudentia* as it became known in the Middle Ages,[34] necessarily involved a sensitive evaluation of experience. But this involvement of the senses went far beyond a mere mechanical reception of so-called 'sense-data', for it involved a bodily interpretation of the world in terms of what nowadays we know to be the genetically-received structure of the nervous system. The same process was reflected in the human understanding of the world as an interpretation in terms of the historically-developed structure of language. Besides the external senses, in other words, *phronêsis* required the involvement of a set of internal senses which alone could provide the input of external sense-data with the necessary structure to make them meaningful to human bodily life.

As St Thomas would have maintained, whatever has meaning necessarily has a role as part of some structure; and since a purely intellectual skill would be unable to achieve this, human beings need to make direct use *not* of their intelligence but of the kind of interpretation of reality provided by bodily sensation whenever they want to refer to individuals as such. All the same, this involves a disposition of the internal, not the external, senses. This understanding attributes much of what became the job of the 'conscious mind' in post-Renaissance thought, to the sensibility that human beings share with other animals.[35]

[34] The modern word 'prudence' completely fails to convey the classical and medieval sense and is best avoided. The closest modern equivalent is perhaps Jane Austen's 'good sense' in *Sense and Sensibility* which, in his recent, fifth, posthumous book, Herbert McCabe refers to as 'arguably the best treatise on *prudentia* in English'. *On Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 104. Further on, McCabe explains that *prudentia* is 'the acquired . . . disposition of the *mind* to do well the job of deciding *what to do about achieving* some good *end* that we *desire*: it is "right practical reason"', ibid., p. 134 (McCabe's emphasis).

[35] McCabe writes: 'these [internal senses] are the *sensus communis* (or "co-ordinating" sense), the *imagination* (retaining what it was like to experience something), the *sensus aestimativus* (or "evaluating" sense, which grasps the sensual significance of bits of experience), and the sense-memory (which stores up what it was like to have such significant experiences)'. *On Aquinas*, op.cit., pp. 116–17. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 78, 4. The modern understanding of senses as mere things we use for understanding the world around us leads Anthony Kenny to dismiss Aquinas's notion of internal senses as contradictory. McCabe writes that Kenny 'would get nearer the truth if he began by recognising that what makes something a *sense* is that it is a bodily activity by which

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In sharp contrast, the conviction that it is possible to understand the world from the perspective of a disengaged, impartial spectator is at the basis of the early modern obsession with theodicy. In many fundamental respects, theodicy is an unmistakable symptom of disengagement, with its 'certainty that we have all the elements to carry out a trial of God (and triumphally acquit him by our apologetic)', as Taylor puts it (232). Michael Buckley demonstrated that it was the excessive weight given to these apologetic defences of the justice of God in the face of the problem of evil that gradually but relentlessly made the exclusive secular position the prevalent option in modern thought.[36] And Taylor points to the sharp irony that the origins of exclusive secular humanism should be located at the very same moment when the distinction between the immanent and the transcendent was so persistently re-emphasised by Christian apologists with the specific purpose of defending the sovereignty of God against the potential threat of an autonomous natural order. Modern Christians and modern secularists, in other words, are both irretrievably implicated in the emergence of Taylor's 'modern moral order'. They both share equally in what he calls 'the immanent frame' and neither of them can escape it.

This is a remarkable coincidence which necessarily trumps any subtraction theory of the genesis of modernity as the result of either the relegation or the overcoming of religion. As Taylor convincingly shows, there is in fact nothing in the immanent frame that *per se* rules out the transcendent. The widespread assumption that this is the case is merely the result of 'spin' (594–600). By the same token, the reason why such 'spin' often seems so overwhelmingly convincing to the modern mind is itself the result of the general misunderstanding of what has come to be perceived as the incoherencies of late medieval and early modern Aristotelianism.

It is therefore a pity that Taylor does not give this theme the full attention that it deserves.[37] For a revaluation of the Aristotelian

we interpret the world. St Thomas speaks of external and internal senses in a quite literal way'. *On Aquinas*, op.cit., p. 111.

[36] Michael Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987).

[37] Taylor mentions a number of studies 'which show how the subject was changed through a series of steps involving late Scholasticism, Duns Scotus, nominalism, "possibilism", Occam, Cajetan and Suárez, Descartes, where each stage appeared to be addressing the same issues as the predecessors it criticized, while in fact the whole framework slid away and came to be replaced by another.... I haven't been able to do justice to this work here, but the story I have been telling is in a sense complementary to theirs.' See *A Secular Age*, p. 295. Among the works Taylor lists are Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981), *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988), and *Three Rival Versions*; Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) and *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven and

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theory of knowledge and its understanding of *phronêsis*, especially as they are expounded by St Thomas, would have provided him with a welcome rallying point for the various and enormously rich historical themes that absorb his attention, thus helping to highlight the deeply interrelated significance of a hugely varied array of intellectual preoccupations that often seem too disparate and disconnected in *A Secular Age*. Just as anamorphosis in art, *decorum* in history, and the conjunction of verisimilitude and wonder in literature all point to the deep human longing for transcendence within contingency, so a re-evaluation of the role of the Aristotelian-Thomist notion of *phronêsis* in human action might have given Taylor's prodigious range of interests a clearer rallying point.

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Charles Taylor replies:

I am grateful to Fernando Cervantes for exploring some facets of the emergence of modern Western epistemology which are essential to the story I would like to tell, but absent, or at least very undeveloped in my book.

I too have been very puzzled by the rise of a representationalist epistemology in the early modern period, one that is summed up for me in the phrase of Descartes in a letter to Gibieuf: Descartes declares himself 'assuré que je ne puis avoir aucune connaissance de ce qui est hors de moi, que par l'entremise des idées que j'ai eu en moi'.[38] This sentence makes sense against a certain topology of mind and world. The reality I want to know is outside; the mind, my knowledge of it is within. This knowledge consists in states of mind which purport to represent accurately what is out there. When they do correctly and reliably represent this reality, then there is knowledge. I have knowledge of things only through (par l'entremise de) these inner states, which we can call 'ideas'.

I want to call this picture 'mediational', because of the force of the claim which emerges in the crucial phrase 'only through'. In

London: Yale University Press, 1973); and John Milbank *Theology and Social Theory* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

[38] Letter to Gibieuf of 19 January 1642; English in *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970), p. 123.

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