Two Theories of Modernity

by Charles Taylor

There seem to be at large in our culture two ways of understanding the rise of modernity. They are in effect two different "takes" on what makes our contemporary society different from its forebears. In one take, we can look on the difference between present-day society and, say, that of medieval Europe as analogous to the difference between medieval Europe and China or India. In other words, we can think of the difference as one between civilizations, each with their own culture.

Or alternatively, we can see the change from earlier centuries to today as involving something like "development," as the demise of a "traditional" society and the rise of the "modern." And in this perspective, which seems to be the dominant one, things look rather different.

I want to call the first kind of understanding a "cultural" one, and the second "acultural." In using these terms, I'm leaning on a use of the word *culture* which is analogous to the sense it often has in anthropology. I am evoking the picture of a plurality of human cultures, each of which has a language and a set of practices that define specific understandings of personhood, social relations, states of mind/soul, goods and bads, virtues and vices, and the like. These languages are often mutually untranslatable.

> Modernity is not that form of life toward which all cultures converge as they discard beliefs that held our forefathers back. Rather, it is a movement from one constellation of background understandings to another, which repositions the self in relation to others and the good.

With this model in mind, a "cultural" theory of modernity is one that characterizes the transformations that have issued in the modern West mainly in terms of the rise of a new culture. The contemporary Atlantic world is seen as one culture (or group of closely related cultures) among others, with its own specific understandings, for example, of person, nature, the good, to be contrasted to all others, including its own predecessor civilization (with which it obviously also has a lot in common).

By contrast, an "acultural" theory is one that describes these transformations in terms of some culture-neutral operation. By this I mean an operation that is not defined in terms of the specific cultures it carries us from and to, but is rather seen as of a type that any traditional culture could undergo.

An example of an acultural type of theory, indeed a paradigm case, would be one that conceives of modernity as the growth of reason, defined in various ways: as the growth of scientific consciousness, or the development of a secular outlook, or the rise of instrumental rationality, or an ever-clearer distinction between fact-finding and evaluation. Or else modernity might be accounted for in terms of social, as well as intellectual changes: the transformations, including the intellectual ones, are seen as coming about as a result of increased mobility, concentration of populations, industrialization, or the like. In all these cases, modernity is conceived as a set of transformations that any and every culture can go through—and that all will probably be forced to undergo.

These changes are not defined by their end point in a specific constellation of understandings of, say,

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person, society, good; they are rather described as a type of transformation to which any culture could in principle serve as "input." For instance, any culture could suffer the impact of growing scientific consciousness; any religion could undergo secularization; any set of ultimate ends could be challenged by a growth of instrumental thinking; any metaphysic could be dislocated by the split between fact and value.

So modernity in this kind of theory is understood as issuing from a rational or social operation that is culture-neutral. This is not to say that the theory cannot acknowledge good historical reasons why this transformation first arose in one civilization rather than another, or why some may undergo it more easily than others. The point rather is that the operation is defined not in terms of its specific point of arrival, but as a general function that can take any specific culture as its input.

To grasp the difference from another angle, the operation is not seen as supposing or reflecting an option for one specific set of human values or understandings among others. In the case of "social" explanations, causal weight is given to historical developments, like industrialization, that have an impact on values but are often not seen as reflecting specific options in this domain. When it comes to explanations in terms of "rationality," this is seen as the exercise of a general capacity that was only awaiting its proper conditions to unfold. Under certain conditions, human beings will just come to see that scientific thinking is valid, that instrumental rationality pays off, that religious beliefs involve unwarranted leaps, that facts and values are separate. These transformations may be facilitated by our having certain values and understandings, just as they are hampered by the dominance of others; but they aren't *defined* as the espousal of some such constellation. They are defined rather by something we come to see concerning the whole context in which values and understandings are espoused.

It should be evident that the dominant theories of modernity over the last two centuries have been of the acultural sort. Many have explained its development at least partly by our "coming to see" something like the range of supposed truths mentioned above. Or else the changes have been explained partly by culture-neutral social developments, such as Durkheim's move from "mechanical" to differentiated, "organic" forms of social cohesion; or Tocqueville's assumption of creeping "democracy" (by which he meant a push toward equality). On one interpretation, "rationalization" was for Weber a steady process, occurring within all cultures over time.

But above all, explanations of modernity in terms of "reason" seem to be the most popular. And even the "social" explanations tend to invoke reason as well, since the social transformations, like mobility and industrialization, are thought to bring about intellectual and spiritual changes because they shake people loose from old habits and beliefs—in, for example, religion or traditional morality—which then become unsustainable because they have no independent rational grounding in the way the beliefs of modernity—in, for example, individualism or instrumental reason—are assumed to have.

But, one might object, how about the widespread and popular *negative* theories of modernity, those that see it not as gain but as loss or decline? Curiously enough, they too have been acultural in their own way. To see this, we have to enlarge somewhat the description above. Instead of seeing the transformations as the unfolding of capacities, negative theories have often interpreted them as falling prey to dangers. But these have often been just as aculturally conceived. Modernity is characterized by the loss of the horizon; by a loss of roots; by the hubris that denies human limits and denies our dependence on history or God, which places unlimited confidence in the powers of frail human reason; by a trivializing self-indulgence which has no stomach for the heroic dimension of life, and so on.

The overwhelming weight of interpretation in our culture, positive and negative, tends to the acultural. On the other side, the voices are fewer if powerful. Nietzsche, for instance, offers a reading of modern scientific culture that paints it as actuated by a specific constellation of values. And Max Weber, besides offering a theory of rationalization which can at any rate be taken as a steady, culture-independent force, also gave a reading of the Protestant ethic as defined by a particular set of religio-moral concerns, which in turn helped to bring about modern capitalism.

The Distortions of the Acultural

So acultural theories predominate. Is this bad? I think it is. In order to see why, we have to bring out a bit more clearly what these theories foreground and what they tend to screen out.

Acultural theories tend to describe the transition in terms of a loss of traditional beliefs and allegiances. This may be seen as coming about as a result of institutional changes: for example, mobility and urbanization erode the beliefs and reference points of static rural society. Or the loss may be supposed to arise from the increasing operation of modern scientific reason. The change may be positively valued—or it may be judged a disaster by those for

whom the traditional reference points were valuable and scientific reason too narrow. But all these theories concur in describing the process: old views and loyalties are eroded. Old horizons are washed away, in Nietzsche's image. The sea of faith recedes, following Arnold. This stanza from his "Dover Beach" captures this perspective:

> The Sea of Faith
> Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
> Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
> But now I only hear
> Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
> Retreating, to the breath
> Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
> And naked shingles of the world.

The tone here is one of regret and nostalgia. But the underlying image of eroded faith could serve just as well for an upbeat story of the progress of triumphant scientific reason. From one point of view, humanity has shed a lot of false and harmful myths. From another, it has lost touch with crucial spiritual realities. But in either case, the change is seen as a loss of belief.

What emerges comes about through this loss. The upbeat story cherishes the dominance of an empirical-scientific approach to knowledge claims, of individualism, negative freedom, instrumental rationality. But these come to the fore because they are what we humans "normally" value, once we are no longer impeded or blinded by false or superstitious beliefs and the stultifying modes of life that accompany them. Once myth and error are dissipated, these are the only games in town. The empirical approach is the only valid way of acquiring knowledge, and this becomes evident as soon as we free ourselves from the thraldom of a false metaphysics. Increasing recourse to instrumental rationality allows us to get more and more of what we want, and we were only ever deterred from this by unfounded injunctions to limit ourselves. Individualism is the normal fruit of human self-regard absent the illusory claims of God, the Chain of Being, or the sacred order of society.

In other words, we moderns behave as we do because we have "come to see" that certain claims were false—or on the negative reading, because we have lost from view certain perennial truths. What this view reads out of the picture is the possibility that Western modernity might be powered by its own positive visions of the good, that is, by one constellation of such visions among available others, rather than by the only viable set left after the old myths and legends have been exploded. It screens out whatever there might be of a specific moral direction to Western modernity, beyond what is dictated by the general form of human life itself, once old error is shown up (or old truth forgotten). For example, people behave as individuals, because that's what they "naturally" do when no longer held in by the old religions, metaphysics, and customs, though this may be seen as a glorious liberation, or a purblind enmiring in egoism, depending on our perspective. What it cannot be seen as is a novel form of moral self-understanding, not definable simply by the negation of what preceded it.

Otherwise put, what gets screened out is the possibility that Western modernity might be sustained by its own original spiritual vision, that is, not one generated simply and inescapably out of the transition.

The Attraction of the Acultural

Before trying to say how bad or good this is, I want to speculate about the motives for this predominance of the acultural. In one way, it is quite understandable when we reflect that we Westerners have been living the transition to modernity for some centuries out of the civilization we used to call Christendom. It is hard to live through a change of this moment without being partisan, and in this spirit we quite naturally reach for explanations that are immediately evaluative, on one side or the other. Now nothing stamps the change as more unproblematically right than the account that we have "come to see" through certain falsehoods, just as the explanation that we have come to forget important truths brands it as unquestionably wrong. To make such confident judgments on the basis of a cultural account would presuppose our having carried through a complex comparative assessment of modernity's original vision, over against that of the Christendom that preceded it, to a clear unambiguous conclusion—hardly an easy task, if realizable at all.

Indeed, since a cultural theory supposes the point of view in which we see our own culture as one among others, and this at best is a recent acquisition in our civilization, it is not surprising that the first accounts of revolutionary change were acultural. For the most part our ancestors looked on other civilizations as made up of barbarians, or infidels, or savages. It would have been absurd to expect the contemporaries of the French Revolution, on either side of the political divide, to have seen the cultural shift within this political upheaval, when the very idea of cultural pluralism was just dawning in the writings of, say, Herder.

But even when this standpoint becomes more easily available, we are drawn by our partisan attach-

ments to neglect it. This is partly because an immediately evaluative explanation (on the right side) is more satisfying—we tend to want to glorify modernity, or vilify it. And it is partly because we fear that a cultural theory might make value judgments impossible. The latter notion is, I believe, a mistake; but mistake or not, it plays a role here.

But another thing acultural theories have going for them has been the vogue for "materialistic" explanations in social science and history. By this I mean, in this context, explanations that shy away from invoking moral or spiritual factors in favor of (what are thought to be) harder and more down to earth causes. And so the developments I adverted to above, the growth of science, individualism, negative freedom, instrumental reason, and the other striking features of the culture of modernity, have often been accounted for as byproducts of social change: for instance, as spinoffs from industrialization, or greater mobility, or urbanization. There are certainly important causal relations to be traced here, but the accounts that invoke them frequently skirt altogether the issue whether these changes in culture and outlook owe anything to their own inherent power as moral ideals. The implicit answer is often in the negative.[1]

Of course, the social changes that are supposed to spawn the new outlook must themselves be explained, and this will involve some recourse to human motivations, unless we suppose that industrialization or the growth of cities occurred entirely in a fit of absence of mind. We need some notion of what moved people to push steadily in one direction—for example, toward the greater application of technology to production, or toward greater concentrations of population. But what is invoked here are often motivations that are nonmoral. By that I mean motivations that can actuate people quite without connection to any moral ideal, as I defined this earlier. So we very often find these social changes explained in terms of the desire for greater wealth, or power, or the means of survival or control over others. Of course, all these things can be woven into moral ideals, but they need not be. And so explanation in terms of them is considered sufficiently "hard" and "scientific."

And even where individual freedom and the enlargement of instrumental reason are seen as ideas whose intrinsic attractions can help explain their rise, this attraction is frequently understood in nonmoral terms. That is, the power of these ideas is often understood not in terms of their moral force, but just because of the advantages they seem to bestow on people regardless of their moral outlook, or even whether they have a moral outlook. Freedom allows you to do what you want; and the greater application of instrumental reason gets you more of what you want, whatever that is.[2]

It is obvious that wherever this kind of explanation becomes culturally dominant, the motivation to explore the original spiritual vision of modernity is very weak; indeed, the capacity even to recognize some such thing nears zero. And this effectively takes cultural theories off the agenda.

Uniform and Inevitable Modernities

So what, if anything, is bad about this? Two things. First, I think Western modernity *is* in part based on an original moral outlook. This is not to say that our account of it in terms of our "coming to see" certain things is wholly wrong. On the contrary: post-seventeenth-century natural science has a validity, and the accompanying technology an efficacy, that we have established. And all societies are sooner or later forced to acquire this efficacy, or be dominated by others (and hence have it imposed on them anyway).

But it would be quite wrong to think that we can make do with an acultural theory alone. It is not just that other facets of what we identify as modern, such as the tendency to try to split fact from value, or the decline of religious practice, are far from reposing on incontestable truths that have finally been discovered—as one can claim for modern physics, for example. It is also that science itself has grown in the West in close symbiosis with a certain culture in the sense I'm using that term here, namely, a constellation of understandings of person, nature, society, and the good.

To rely on an acultural theory is to miss all this. One gets a distorted understanding of Western modernity in one of two ways: on one side, we misclassify certain changes, which ultimately reflect the culture peculiar to the modern West, as the product of unproblematic discovery or the ineluctable consequence of some social change, like the introduction of technology. The decline in religious practice has frequently been seen in this light. This is the error of seeing everything modern as belonging to one Enlightenment package.

On the other side, we fail altogether to examine certain facets of the modern constellation, closely interwoven with our understandings of science and religion, that don't strike us as being part of the transformation to modernity. We don't identify them as among the spectacular changes that have produced contemporary civilization, and we often fail to see even that there have been changes, reading these facets falsely as perennial. Such is the usual fate of those (largely implicit) understandings of

human agency that I have grouped under the portmanteau term "the modern identity"[3]—such as the various forms of modern inwardness, or the affirmation of ordinary life. We all too easily imagine that people have always seen themselves as we do, in respect, for example, of dichotomies like inward/outward. And we thus utterly miss the role these new understandings have played in the rise of Western modernity. I want to make a claim of this kind below in relation to the rise of the modern public sphere.

And so a purely acultural theory distorts and impoverishes our understanding of ourselves, both through misclassification (the Enlightenment package error), and through too narrow a focus. But its effects on our understanding of other cultures is even more devastating. The belief that modernity comes from one single universally applicable operation imposes a falsely uniform pattern on the multiple encounters of non-Western cultures with the exigencies of science, technology, and industrialization. As long as we are bemused by the Enlightenment package, we will believe that they all *have* to undergo a range of cultural changes drawn from our experience—such as "secularization" or the growth of atomistic forms of self-identification. As long as we leave our own notions of identity unexamined, so long will we fail to see how theirs differ, and how this difference crucially conditions the way in which they integrate the truly universal features of "modernity."

Moreover, the view that modernity arises through the dissipation of certain unsupported religious and metaphysical beliefs seems to imply that the paths of different civilizations are bound to converge. As they lose their traditional illusions, they will come together on the "rationally grounded" outlook that has resisted the challenge. The march of modernity will end up making all cultures look the same. This means, of course, that we expect they will end up looking like us.

In short, exclusive reliance on an acultural theory unfits us for what is perhaps the most important task of social sciences in our day: understanding the full gamut of alternative modernities in the making in different parts of the world. It locks us into an ethnocentric prison, condemned to project our own forms onto everyone else and blissfully unaware of what we are doing.

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Background and Habitus

So the view from Dover Beach foreshortens our understanding of Western modernity. But it also gives us a false and distorted perspective on the transition. It makes us read the rise of modernity in terms of the dissipation of certain beliefs, either as its major cause ("rational" explanations), or as inevitable concomitant ("social" explanations). What is beyond the horizon on Dover Beach is the possibility that what mainly differentiates us from our forebears is not so much our explicit beliefs as what I want to call the background understanding against which our beliefs are formulated.

Here I am picking up on an idea that has been treated in the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, and Michael Polanyi, and been further elaborated recently by John Searle and Hubert Dreyfus.[4] The notion is that our explicit beliefs about our world and ourselves are held against a background of unformulated (and perhaps in part unformulable) understandings, in relation to which these beliefs make the sense they do. These understandings take a variety of forms, and range over a number of matters. In one dimension, the background incorporates matters that *could* be formulated as beliefs, but aren't functioning as such in our world (and couldn't *all* function as such because of their unlimited extent). To take Wittgenstein's example from *On Certainty*, I don't normally have a *belief* that the world didn't start only five minutes ago, but the whole way I inquire into things treats the world as being there since time out of mind.[5] Similarly, I don't usually have the belief that a huge pit hasn't been dug in front of my door, but I treat the world that way as I emerge in the morning to go to work. In my ways of dealing with things is incorporated the background understanding that the world is stable and has been there a long time.

In other dimensions, I have this kind of understanding of myself as an agent with certain powers, of myself as an agent among other agents, on certain, only partly explicit footings with them. And I want to add: an agent moving in certain kinds of social spaces, with a sense of how both I and these spaces inhabit time, a sense of how both I and they relate to the cosmos and to God or whatever I recognize as the source(s) of good.

God in the Background

In my addition here, I have entered controversial territory. While perhaps everyone can be got easily to agree on the kinds of background understandings I cited from Wittgenstein, and it is arguably obvious that I have some sense of myself as agent, the notion that different modes of social belonging, different understandings of time, and even more, of God, the Good, or the Cosmos, should be part of the background may arouse resistance. That is because we easily can believe that we have background understanding in the inescapable dimensions of our lives as agents, functioning in a physical and social world. But when we come to our supposed relations to God, the Good, or the Cosmos, surely these things only enter our world through our being inducted into our society's culture, and they must enter in the form of beliefs that have been handed down to us.

But this is in fact not how it works. Of course, in any theistic culture there will be *some* beliefs about God, but our sense of him and our relation to him will also be formed by modes of ritual, by the kinds of prayer we have been taught, by what we pick up from the attitudes of pious and impious people, and the like. A similar point can be made about the different kinds of social space. There may be some doctrines formulated about the nature of society and the hierarchical rankings that constitute it which are explicitly proffered for our adherence, but we also come to understand whole volumes in the ways we are taught, for example, to show deference to certain people or at certain times and places. A social understanding is built in to what Pierre Bourdieu calls our "habitus," the ways we are taught to behave, which become unreflecting, second nature to us.[6]

We know our way around society somewhat the way we know our way around our physical environment, not primarily and principally because we have some map of either in our heads, but because we know how to treat different people and situations appropriately. In this know-how there is, for example, a stance toward the elders that treats them as having a certain dignity. What it is about them that is felt to command this stance may not yet be spelled out: there may be no word for *dignity* in the vocabulary of the tribe. But whatever it is that we will later want to articulate with this word is already in the world of the youngsters who bow in that particular way, address their elders in low tones and with the proper language, and so on. "Dignity" is in their world in the sense that they deal with it, respond to it, perhaps revere it or resent it. It is just not formulated in a description, and hence does not figure in an explicit belief. Its being in their world is part of their background understanding.

It is in similar ways that God or the Good can figure in our world. Surrounding express doctrines will be a richer penumbra of embodied understanding. We can imaginatively extend the example of the previous paragraph. Suppose that one of the things that makes the elders worthy of respect is just that they are closer to the gods. Then the divine too, which we revere through these old people, will be in our world in part through our knowing how to treat them. It will be in our world through the appropriate habitus.

We might in fact distinguish three levels of understanding that have been invoked in the above discussion. There is the level of explicit doctrine, about society, the divine, the cosmos; and there is the level of what I called, following Bourdieu, the habitus, or embodied understanding. Somewhat between the two is a level we might call (with some trepidation, because this is a semantically overloaded term) the symbolic. I mean by this whatever understanding is expressed in ritual, in symbols (in the everyday sense), in works of art. What exists on this level is more explicit than mere gesture or appropriate action, because ritual or work can have a mimetic or an evocative dimension, and hence point to something that it imitates or calls forth. But it is not explicit in the self-conscious way doctrinal formulations, which can be submitted to the demands of logic, permit of a metadiscourse in which they are examined in turn, and the like.

We can see why it might be a big mistake to think that what distinguishes us from our premodern forebears is mainly a lot of beliefs of theirs that we have shed. Even if we want, following "Dover Beach," to see their age as one of a Faith which we have lost, it might be very misleading to think of this difference in terms simply of *doctrines* to which they subscribe and we do not. Because below the doctrinal level are at least two others: that of embodied background understanding, and that which while nourished in embodied habitus is given expression on the symbolic level. As well as the doctrinal understanding of society, there is the one incorporated in habitus, and a level of images as yet unformulated in doctrine, for which we might borrow a term frequently used by contemporary French writers: *l'imaginaire social*—let's call it the "social imaginary."

Why does it matter to see the changeover as more than doctrinal? Because otherwise we may have a very distorted picture of it. When people undergo a change in belief, they shift their views between already formulated possibilities. Formerly, they thought that God exists. But in formulating this

belief they were quite aware that there was another option; indeed, usually they are aware that others have already taken the atheist option, that there are arguments for and against it, etc. Now when they switch to atheism, they move within positions already in their repertory, between points already within their horizons.

But some of the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary alter the very repertory, and introduce new possibilities that were not before on the horizon. I will sketch in a minute what this might involve in connection with the rise of the public sphere. Modernity involves the coming to be of new kinds of public space, which cannot be accounted for in terms of changes in explicit views, either of factual belief or normative principle. Rather the transition involves to some extent the definition of new possible spaces hitherto outside the repertory of our forebears, and beyond the limits of their social imaginary.

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The consequence of seeing these changes as alterations of (factual or normative) belief is that we unwittingly make our ancestors too much like us. To the extent that we see ourselves as just differing from them in *belief*, we see them as having the same doctrinal repertory as ours, but just opting differently within it. But in order to give them the same repertory we have to align their embodied understanding and social imaginary with ours. We falsely make them in this sense our contemporaries, and grievously underestimate the nature and scope of the change that brought our world about.

So an acultural theory tends to make us both miss the original vision of the good implicit in Western modernity, and to underestimate the nature of the transformation that brought this modernity about. These two drawbacks appear to be linked. Some of the important shifts in culture, in our understandings of personhood, the good and the like, which have brought about the original vision of Western modernity, can only be seen if we bring into focus the major changes in embodied understanding and social imaginary that the last centuries have brought about. They tend to disappear if we flatten these changes out, read our own background and imaginary into our forebears, and just concentrate on their beliefs, which we no longer share.

Cultural Convergence

These connections will, of course, have to be made in detail, and I haven't got space to do that here. Just to give a taste of what is involved, I could invoke the modern understanding and reality (the two are linked) of a "public sphere" of open debate and exchange through media. This is thought to be an essential feature of any mature and legitimate society—so much so that dictatorial and totalitarian régimes tend to try to fake it, offering supposedly objective news broadcasts, editorials in party newspapers that purport to be the communication of someone's opinion, "spontaneous" demonstrations, and the like.

Now the modern public sphere is a strange kind of reality in an important respect. It is supposed to be a space of discussion linking everyone in principle or potentially, even though its many participants never meet all together in one place. This space has to be sustained by a particular kind of social imaginary, one that is in many respects rather different from premodern modes of imaginary, and that has a lot to do with specifically modern understandings of secular time and simultaneity.[7] Or so, anyway, I want to claim that closer study would demonstrate. Such a study would reveal, I believe, just how our understanding of our relations to society, time, the cosmos, the good, and God have been transformed with the coming of our era.

Now if this is true, then we can see how inadequate and misleading acultural accounts can be. In my sense of this term, these are explanations of Western modernity that see it not as one culture among others, but rather as what emerges when any "traditional" culture is put through certain (rational or social) changes. On this view, modernity is not specifically Western, even though it may have started in the West. It is rather that form of life toward which all cultures converge, as they go through, one after another, substantially the same changes. These may be seen primarily in "intellectual" terms, as the growth of rationality and science; or primarily in "social" terms, as the development of certain institutions and practices: a market economy, or rationalized forms of administration. But in either case, the changes are partly understood in terms of the loss of traditional beliefs, either because they are

undermined by the growth of reason, or because they are marginalized by institutional change.

Even the social explanations assume that these beliefs suffer from a lack of rational justification, since the solvent effect of social change is held to lie in the fact that it disturbs old patterns that made it possible to hold on to these earlier beliefs in spite of their lack of rational grounding. For instance, the continuance of a static, agricultural way of life, largely at the mercy of the vagaries of climate, supposedly makes certain religious beliefs look plausible, which lose their hold once humans see what it is to take their fate in their own hands through industrial development. Or a largely immobile society leads individuals to see their fate as bound up closely with that of their neighbors, and inhibits the growth of an individualism that naturally flourishes once these constricting limits are lifted.

The acultural theory tends to see the process of modernity as involving among other things the shucking off of beliefs and ways that don't have much rational justification, leaving us with an outlook many of whose elements can be seen more as hard, residual facts: that we are individuals (that is, beings whose behavior is ultimately to be explained as individuals), living in profane time, who have to extract what we need to live from nature, and whom it behooves therefore to be maximally instrumentally rational, without allowing ourselves to be diverted from this goal by the metaphysical and religious beliefs that held our forefathers back.[8] Instrumental rationality commands a scientific attitude to nature and human life.

The Homogeneity of Kernel Truths

At the heart of the acultural approach is the view that modernity involves our "coming to see" certain kernel truths about the human condition, those I have just adverted to. There is some justification for talking of our "coming to see" the truth when we consider the revolution of natural science that begins in the seventeenth century. But the mistake of the acultural approach is to lump all the supposed kernel truths about human life into the same package, as though they were all endorsed equally by "science," on a par, say, with particle physics.[9]

I have been arguing that this is a crucial mistake. It misrepresents our forebears, and it distorts the process of transition from them to us. In particular, seeing the change as the decline of certain *beliefs* covers up the great differences in background understanding and in the social imaginary of different ages. More, it involves a sort of ethnocentrism of the present. Since human beings always do hold their explicit beliefs against a background and in the context of an imaginary, failure to notice the difference amounts to the unwitting attribution to them of our own. This is the classic ethnocentric projection.

This projection gives support to the implicit Whiggism of the acultural theory, whereby moderns have "come to see" the kernel truths. If you think of premoderns as operating with the same background understanding of human beings as moderns, namely, as instrumental individuals, and you code their understandings of God, cosmos, and multidimensional time as "beliefs" held against this background, then these beliefs do indeed appear as arbitrary and lacking in justification, and it is not surprising that the social changes dislodged them.

But an examination of the rise of the public sphere would show, I believe, that this is not what happened. It is not that we sloughed off a whole lot of unjustified beliefs, leaving an implicit self-understanding that had always been there, to operate at last untrammelled. Rather one constellation of implicit understandings of our relation to God, the cosmos, other humans, and time, was replaced by another in a multifaceted mutation. Seeing things this way not only gives us a better handle on what happened. It also allows us to understand ourselves better. As long as we think that our implicit self-understanding is the universal human one, as long as we fail to note its contrast with others, so long we will have an incomplete and distorted understanding of it. This is always a price of ethnocentrism.

From a standpoint immured within any culture, other cultures look weird. No doubt we would look strange—as well as blasphemous and licentious—to our medieval ancestors. But there is a particularly high cost in self-misunderstanding that attaches to the ethnocentrism of the modern. The kernel truths of the acultural theory incorporate an often unreflective methodological individualism, and a belief in the omnicompetence of natural science. Impelled by the latter, its protagonists are frequently tempted to cast our "coming to see" the kernel truths as a sort of "discovery" in science. But the discoveries of natural science are of "neutral" facts, that is, truths that are "value-free," on which value may be subsequently placed by human beings, but which themselves are devoid of moral significance. Belonging to the range of such "natural" facts is that we are individuals, impelled to operate by instrumental reason, maximizing our advantage when we are not deterred from doing so by unfounded belief.[10]

Selves, Society, and the Good

Now this hides from view two important connections. First, the way in which our implicit under-

standing of ourselves as agents always places us in certain relations to others. Because of the very nature of the human condition—that we can only define ourselves in exchange with others, those who bring us up, and those whose society we come to see as constitutive of our identity—our self-understanding always places us among others. The placements differ greatly, and understanding these differences and their change is the stuff of history.

We can see a good example of what this involves in the speculative sketch I offered a few pages back of the rise of the public sphere. This and other similar modes of social imagining are closely tied up with the rise of modern "individualism." The account I would like to offer would have us see the rise of this new individual identity as inextricably linked to the new understandings of time and society. Individualism is one side of a coin, of which the flip side is new modes of social imaginary.

By contrast, a widespread alternative view sees individualism as involving a completely self-referential identity; one in which agents are first of all aware of and focused on themselves, and only subsequently discover a need for, and determine their relations to, others. The human of the "state of nature" was, indeed, an important constituent of the early modern imaginary, but we mustn't make the mistake of understanding the people who imagined it in its light. Modern "individualism" is coterminous with, indeed, is defined by a new understanding of our placement among others, one that gives an important place to common action in profane time, and hence to the idea of consensually founded unions, which receives influential formulation in the myth of an original state of nature and a social contract. Individualism is not just a withdrawal from society, but a reconception of what human society can be. To think of it as pure withdrawal is to confuse individualism, which is always a moral ideal, with the anomie of breakdown.

Similarly, our understanding of ourselves always incorporates some understanding of the good and our relation to it. Here too, there are radical differences. The good may be conceived theistically or as in the cosmos (as with Plato's Idea of the Good). But it may also be understood as residing in us, in the inherent dignity of the human person as a reasoning being, for instance, as we find with Immanuel Kant. However understood, the notion of a human identity without such a sense brings us close to the unimaginable limit of total breakdown.[11]

All this is occluded, indeed doubly. Seeing the evolution of instrumental individualism as the discovery of a "natural" fact not only involves projecting our background onto our ancestors. In addition, the naturalist, scientistic outlook that generates this error has been heavily intricated with the representational, foundationalist epistemology that descends from Descartes and Locke. This epistemology has suppressed all recognition of the background. It conceives our knowledge of the world as consisting of particulate, explicit representations. This means that we not only project our own background backward, but also render this error invisible by repressing all awareness of backgrounds as such.[12] The ethnocentric colonization of the past cannot be brought to light, because the very terms in which it might appear have been abolished.

The very idea of an individual who might become aware of himself, and then only subsequently, or at least independently, determine what importance others have for him and what he will accept as good, belongs to post-Cartesian, foundationalist fantasy.

The very idea of an individual who might become aware of himself, and then only subsequently, or at least independently, determine what importance others have for him and what he will accept as good, belongs to post-Cartesian, foundationalist fantasy. Once we recognize that our explicit thoughts only can be entertained against a background sense of who and where we are in the world and among others and in moral space, we can see that we can never be without some relation to the crucial reference points I enumerated above: world, others, time, the good. This relation can, indeed, be transformed as we move from one culture or age to another, but it cannot just fall away. We cannot be without *some* sense of our moral situation, *some* sense of our connectedness to others.

The naturalistic account of the discovery of the kernel truths, implicit in the acultural theory, misses all these connections. When the old metaphysical and religious beliefs crumble, we find as a matter of neutral fact that we are instrumental individuals, and we need to draw from elsewhere our values and acceptable grounds for association with others. In contrast, I want to describe the change as moving us from one dense constellation of background understanding and imaginary to another, both of

which place us in relation to others and the good. There is never atomistic and neutral self-understanding; there is only a constellation (ours) which tends to throw up the myth of this self-understanding as part of its imaginary. This is of the essence of a cultural theory of modernity.

Notes

1. Of course, for a certain vulgar Marxism, the negative answer is quite explicit. Ideas are the product of economic changes. But much non-Marxist social science operates implicitly on similar premises. And this in spite of the orientation of some of the great founders of social science, like Weber, who recognized the crucial role of moral and religious ideas in history.

2. Individualism has in fact been used in two quite different senses. In one it is a moral ideal, one facet of which I have been discussing. In another, it is an amoral phenomenon, something like what we mean by egoism. The rise of individualism in this sense is usually a phenomenon of breakdown, where the loss of a traditional horizon leaves mere anomie in its wake, and everybody fends for himself—as in some demoralized, crime-ridden slums formed by newly urbanized peasants in the Third World (or in nineteenth-century Manchester). It is, of course, catastrophic to confuse these two kinds of individualism, which have utterly different causes and consequences. Which is why Tocqueville carefully distinguishes *individualism* from *egoism.*

3. See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

4. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1927); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1958); John Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Hubert Dreyfus, *What Computers Can't Do* (New York: Harper, 1979).

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), paragraphs 260 ff.

6. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); and his *Le Sens pratique,* (Paris: Minuit, 1980). "On pourrait, déformant le mot de Proust, dire que les jambes, les bras sont pleins d'impératifs engourdis. Et l'on n'en finirait pas d'énumérer les valeurs faites corps, par la transsubstantiation qu'opère la persuasion clandestine d'une pédagogie implicite, capable d'inculquer toute une cosmologie, une éthique, une métaphysique, une politique, à travers des injonctions aussi insignifiantes que 'tiens-toi droit' ou 'ne tiens pas ton couteau de la main gauche' et d'inscire dans les détails en apparence les plus insignifiants de la *tenue,* du *maintien* ou des *manières* corporelles et verbales les principes fondamentaux de l'arbitraire culturel, ainsi placés hors des prises de la conscience et de l'explicitation" (*Le Sens pratique,* p. 117).

7. There is an interesting discussion of this in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities,* 2d ed. (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 28-31.

8. This development of instrumental rationality is what is frequently described as "secularization." See, for instance, Gabriel Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (Boston: Little Brown, 1966), pp. 24-25: "A village chief in a tribal society operates largely with a given set of goals and a given set of means of attaining these goals which have grown up and been hallowed by custom. The secularization of culture is the process whereby traditional orientations and attitudes give way to more dynamic decision-making processes involving the gathering of information, the evaluation of information, the laying out of alternative courses of action, the selection of a given action from among those possible courses, and the means whereby one tests whether or not a given course of action is producing the consequences which were intended." And later: "The emergence of a pragmatic, empirical orientation is one component of the secularization process" (p. 58).

9. Even Ernest Gellner, who is light years of sophistication away from the crudities of Almond and Powell, puts himself in the acultural camp, for all his interesting insights into modernity as a new constellation. He does this by linking what I am calling the supposed "kernel truths" with what he calls "cognitive advance," in a single package. The modern constellation unchained science, and that in his view seems to confer the same epistemic status on the whole package. "Specialization, atomization, instrumental rationality, independence of fact and value, growth and provisionality of knowledge are all linked with each other." See *Plough, Sword and Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 122.

10. Thus Gellner includes "independence of fact and value" in his package, along with "growth and provisionality of knowledge."

11. I have tried to argue this point at greater length in *Sources of the Self,* chaps. 1-4.

12. I have discussed the nature of this modern epistemology and its suppression of the background at greater length in "Overcoming Epistemology," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987); and in "Lichtung oder Lebensform," in *"Der Löwe spricht . . . und wir können ihn nicht verstehen"* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).