

Holding the Center: Restoring Institutions for the Common Good

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In his seminal work, *My Life Among the Deathworks*, the American sociologist Philip Rieff employs the concept of first, second, and third worlds to describe different cultural epochs and their respective ways of understanding the moral structure of the world. First and second worlds, according to Rieff, are those in which the basis of morality is seen to be located in something external and transcendent to people or society. For first world cultures, this transcendent grounding is often mythical or pagan in nature—morality is derived from the gods or rooted in nature. For second worlds, such a grounding is found in a singular God and characterized by faith. This distinction between first and second worlds is not crucial to our argument here, so it is sufficient simply to note that both “first and second worlds justify their morality by appeal to something transcen-

dent, beyond the material world.”¹ In contrast, Rieff argues that third worlds are those that abandon or actively reject notions of transcendent reality and which consequently base their moral structures on things secular, contingent, and immanent. In a third world society, then, moral authority is seen to be derived entirely from human reason, autonomy, historical experience, and individual capacity rather than from any transcendent or sacred source.

Rieff’s concept of the three cultural worlds resonates strongly with philosopher Charles Taylor’s more recent account of transcendence and immanence in the Western world. According to Taylor, transcendence refers to sacred order or reality that is “more than” or irreducible to the material world of physical entities, forces, and the contingent flow of history and, as such, is the source of the foundational moral structure of life.

In his book, *A Secular Age*, Taylor systematically traces how the West has, over the last several centuries, shifted from a civilization in which transcendence (e.g., God) was largely taken for granted to one in which belief in reality beyond the natural, material world is seen merely as one option—often the least plausible one—among many.

The modern, secular age, then, is one best characterized by its pervasive commitment to what Taylor calls “the immanent frame,” a foundational worldview in which people experience and understand the world primarily in secular terms—that is, in terms of natural causes, material entities, physical forces, and contingent historical and social processes, all of which operate absent or independent of any transcendent reality.²

Though differences exist between the ideas of Rieff and Taylor, Rieff’s first and second worlds can easily be understood in terms of the pre-modern, pre-secular epoch whose origins and unfolding history Taylor so carefully recounts. Taylor begins his analysis in *A Secular Age* by describing the worldview of the pre-modern West in terms of enchantment. By enchantment, he means that the pre-Enlightenment peoples of Europe commonly understood their world, and, indeed, themselves, as intrinsically enmeshed in both a lower and a higher, grander realm of being. As such, the operations and events of this world manifested at every turn the deeper purpose, meaningfulness, and moral texture of that higher order. Ex-

planations and accounts of natural and human phenomena were not considered complete or compelling unless they acknowledged the reality and influence of a grander, transcendent realm of being in the experienced world of mundane life and thought—a realm that was held to constitute the cosmological backdrop for all understanding, whether philosophical, political, religious, esthetic, or scientific.

Rieff’s concept of third world culture also neatly aligns with Taylor’s account of the immanent frame, and it is safe to say that, at least in the West, our current age is in fact a secular age, and, as such, it is a particularly poignant example of Rieff’s cultural third world and Taylor’s immanent frame. Indeed, in the modern West, transcendence is no longer taken for granted by and for all. Taylor painstakingly details how the disenchanting, individualistic, mathematized, and mechanical worldview that was the result of Enlightenment rationalism’s epistemological project not only captured contemporary intellectual imagination and culture, launching our present “secular age,” but also entirely supplanted ancient and medieval ways of knowing and being. As Rieff notes, “in the spirit of third world cultural understanding, nothing is tremendous. Nothing is a ‘big deal,’ everything is permitted in principle, if not in practice.”³

One central consequence of this cultural development is that in our modern, secular world, belief in any form of transcendent reality and moral grounding is now widely considered—even by

many believers—to be simply one “lifestyle” option or psychological possibility to be entertained among many on hand, “validly” chosen by some and just as “validly” not chosen by others. The worldview that now dominates as the default in the West is naturalistic and secular, and the moral structure of everyday life is largely seen to be derived from immanent things, such as human reason, autonomy, and individual freedom.

In other words, in this secular age, what is moral or good is now understood as what is rational, what is effective or efficient, what can be scientifically demonstrated or agreed upon, or, increasingly, whatever anyone might happen to personally decide is morally appropriate or good for oneself. The immanent view here can be best understood, Taylor argues, in terms of “closed world structure,” or a pervasive narrative form, a tacit cultural understanding, that normalizes a certain view of the world by seeming to “offer a neutral point of view from which we could problematize certain values—e.g., ‘transcendent’ ones—more than others.”⁴ Closed world structures are those ways in which an underlying cultural logic tells us that “this is just the way things are, and once you look at experience, without preconceptions, this is what appears.”

Taylor further notes that “those who inhabit [the closed world structure of the immanent frame] see no alternative, except the return to an earlier myth or illusion.” Indeed, he argues that this is

what inspires the often passionate reactions to and rejection of arguments for transcendence. It is, Taylor says, “what gives them their strength. People within the redoubt [of the immanent frame] fight as it were to the last, and feeblest, argument, because they cannot envisage surrender except as regression”—a return to the “dark ages” as it were.

Our Institutions

The shift from transcendence to immanence can be seen in the functioning of our most significant institutions, whether educational, ecclesial, communal, or political. As previously discussed, central to the pre-modern, pre-secular world was the fundamental assertion that there was in fact a transcendent reality—a foundational good that instantiated the true and the beautiful and provided meaningful direction for human moral striving in all its various forms. This presumption of transcendence enabled a common vision to emerge that could cultivate institutions capable of providing vital answers to questions both of *how* and *into what* human beings were to be shaped, to what ends human life was intended, and what ultimately it might mean to “do well” in life—or, perhaps more accurately, to “do life” well. However, in our modern, secular age, with its denial of any transcendent reality or non-relativistic vision of the good, many of our institutions are now largely aimed at the achievement of goals and ends that reflect nothing higher or more noble than the naturalistic, instrumental, and

expressive individualist assumptions of the immanent frame.

For example, many educational institutions that were once aimed at “shaping both the moral and intellectual character of students in ways that led them to live and do well over their entire lives”⁵ now prioritize the rapid, cost-effective conveyance of information, the training of scientists and technocrats, the bestowal of certifications and licenses, and the maximization of earning potential. Indeed, universities today often serve merely as training grounds for rising generations intent on devising increasingly efficient means for the rational management of human resources and the husbandry of power. “The new holy trinity” shaping and guiding modern institutional life is, John Ralston Saul notes, “organization, technology, and information,” reflecting a world in which “the new priest is the technocrat—the man [of science] who understands the organization, makes use of the technology, and controls the access to the information, which is a compendium of ‘facts.’”⁶ This paradigm reflects the animating spirit of the secular age in which we live, a spirit that saturates our most important institutions, one in which knowledge no longer possesses any intrinsic moral value or ethical substance, but rather simply reflects objective data, theoretically organized and expressed according to certain basic naturalistic principles, whose worth is determined solely in terms of those particular uses to which it can be put in securing particular extrinsic ends. Such a

shift represents a profound reimagining of knowledge as a tool for the achievement of instrumental ends rather than as a necessary condition for becoming wise or virtuous by some transcendent standard. As one thoughtful scholar has observed, the modern university has proven eminently capable of teaching students *how* to go about making money for themselves but seems entirely inadequate to the task of teaching *what* might be worth spending it on.

Moreover, existing simultaneously in the university is a competing, though equally immanent view, in which education is vehemently *not* about the discovery and implementation of factual, value-neutral scientific knowledge, the sort of knowledge to which the previously described technocratic elite might aspire. Instead, many in education today have come to embrace another immanent view in which the traditions, institutions, and social and political discourse of the West are to be deconstructed, undermined, ridiculed, and replaced, preferably via revolutionary means (with something, though it is never quite clear what). In this view, “oppressive” notions of objectivity and conceptions of universal good, truth, and beauty are to be met with relentless skepticism and ironic detachment.

Educational leaders invest their pedagogical efforts in arming students to engage in social justice activism whose primary purpose appears to be transforming society into a place of radical acceptance and the endless dance of multitudes of coexisting—even if in-

compatible—truths and truth claims. Students are frequently taught that the proper way in which one ought to spend one's time is less about laying hold of any external, transcendent good, or seeking out a truth that might be universally binding or ennobling, and more about looking within oneself, establishing one's personal identity, and learning to authentically pursue one's own vision of what is good, guided only by one's own emotional proclivities and self-referential desires. Thus, the modern, secular university is held together only by a bland commitment to some immanent authority—whether it be science, history, subjective experience, or personal intuition.

The Failure of the Immanent

It should be evident how the moral instability inherent in immanent third worlds creates significant challenges for the vital project of sustaining and restoring societal institutions. The project of restoration implies improvement—or making institutions meaningfully different—and the notion of meaningful difference is inextricably tied to morality. In other words, the restoration of institutions is an inescapably moral endeavor. However, moral structures that are volatile and confused cannot provide a stable or viable foundation from which to restore and strengthen our most important institutions, nor can they offer any substantial, meaningful, or lasting vision regarding the purpose to which these institutions should or could be restored. In other words,

if moral structure is always in dispute and constantly being redefined, our understanding of the ultimate purpose of key societal institutions and how to bring them into alignment with that purpose will be equally confused and volatile. And without a stable foundation or compelling vision embodying a substantive moral demand, the project of maintaining and restoring institutions becomes merely reactive, with efforts to improve institutions devolving into repeated attempts to meet the demands of constantly changing societal values and desires. This leaves institutions indefinitely unsettled in their purpose and perpetually vulnerable to the instability, fracturing, and moral incoherence that characterize the immanent frame of cultural third worlds.

Moreover, if we are to engage in the project of restoring our most important institutions, rescuing them from the flaccid instability and moral impotence that is the necessary endpoint of the immanent frame, then we must understand that “restoring” entails returning to a former, higher condition—one rooted in transcendence. The restoration of institutions, to truly serve the common good, requires more than tactically shoring up a crumbling edifice that rests on a fundamentally flawed foundation. It requires a clear and compelling vision of the good itself, a vision of that which necessarily constitutes and undergirds any coherent and vibrant understanding of the common good as such.

However, in the immanent frame, all prior forms of moral life and understanding are presumed to be contingent, historical artifacts—i.e., simply the particular, culturally generated, and locally relevant morality that existed at a different time, given the unique social, cultural, and political exigencies of that time and in that place. Thus, if operating within the immanent frame, it is unclear *to what* institutions might be restored because there is no meaningful higher condition or vision to ground or guide one's efforts at restoration.

Lacking any enduring source from which to draw inspiration for reinvigorating institutional spirit and purpose, absent any non-contingent or transcendent *telos* toward which institutional vision might be directed, genuine institutional restoration cannot occur. In the immanent frame of third world cultures, all efforts aimed at improving, reforming, or reimagining institutions at any given time are constrained by the closed system of the immanent frame itself, and, thereby, are intrinsically confined to simply a sort of repetitive reiteration of the very institutional values and moral presumptions that they embodied in the first place, and which, in fact, are the source of their moral ineffectuality and spiritual thinness. Institutions envisioned, nurtured, and sustained in the immanent frame are congenitally incapable of being anything more than the transient products of their time, and, thus, are equally as congenitally incapable of surviving (much less flourishing through) the ex-

istential challenges and upheavals of their time. Immanence implies that institutions and their efforts can be justified by nothing more than themselves, and, in this way, are unable to sustain any definitive claim to know what the common good actually is or how it might best be promoted.

Education and Transcendence

What we are calling for here, then, is in some ways a return to a “pre-modern” understanding of the meaning and aims of our key societal institutions. For example, as noted above, educational institutions in our modern world have come to serve primarily utilitarian, technocratic, or humanistic ends; that is, ultimate aims that are characteristic of the immanent frame. However, if educational institutions are to escape the instability and emptiness of the immanent frame, they must instead be restored to a more substantive and stable moral platform, one that can provide a vision of deeper and more invigorating ends as well as the intellectual and spiritual resources necessary to accomplish those ends. As a vital public institution, education (at all levels) must be grounded in transcendence and intensely attentive to facilitating learning in its fullest moral, spiritual, intellectual, and practical totality. That is, education must be understood as fundamentally a matter of soul-formation, undertaken primarily in the service of ennobling and directing the development and as-

pirational desires of not only the individual but society as well.

For educational institutions to fulfill their essential nature and purpose, they must acknowledge and reverence transcendence and be about the serious business of pursuing and defending the true, the good, and the beautiful, of articulating the meaning of the good life as one of moral and intellectual excellence, virtue, and genuine love. An educational endeavor such as this requires firm recognition that not only is it simply true that some ways of living are more worthy of our attention and aspiration than others, but also, that the fundamental purpose of education is to cultivate students who are morally reflective human beings, citizens who are fully able to engage in meaningful deliberations about the common good and its realization. However, such aims can only be achieved, or even realistically aspired to, if the pursuit of truth in both knowledge and wisdom, as well as practical reverence for the good and the beautiful, rather than the mere conveyance of information or the deconstruction of truth, is taken seriously as the very reason for education in the first place.

In addition to providing a unique context in which truth can be sought, revered, and humbly served, educational institutions have another equally vital function to fulfill: the coherent articulation of the meaningful implications of truth and the illumination of the moral and evaluative element at the heart of any and all truth claims. Thus,

education *qua* education—as opposed to either the mere communication of information stripped of its moral context and import or simply an instrument for destabilizing ideological and political agendas—must be relentlessly concerned with articulating the meaning of truth and ethics. Education is an intrinsically and inescapably moral enterprise, one whose central aim must and can only be the illumination, expansion, and transformation of the human soul. Only by being so oriented can education achieve its essential purpose of cultivating a flourishing society nurtured and sustained by virtuous, knowledgeable, and wise men and women. Thus, the work of education is, and must necessarily be, the enlargement of the soul by pointing it toward the true, the good, and the beautiful. This grounding in transcendence is what conditions education to be equally a fundamentally human and a divine enterprise, one whose fullest realization is dependent on our maintaining a deep and abiding commitment to understanding what exactly it means to be a soul (rather than merely a body or a social construct) in the first place.

When the animating concern of education is understood to be the animating concern of truth, it becomes clear that the fundamental aim of academic endeavor is not only to facilitate the increase in knowledge but also to enable the cultivation of wisdom—something that can only occur in a setting where knowledge of ourselves and the truth of the world is never divorced from

the moral and spiritual context of its discovery and application. Genuinely meaningful freedom does not come from the arbitrary pursuit of individual desire, but with conformity to what is best. Real freedom is to be found only in the wisdom of embracing what is truly good, not in the unfettered enactment of evanescent want. In a fundamental sense, it is the true, the good, and the beautiful—in short, virtue itself—that grounds human freedom and makes moral aspiration both possible and genuinely meaningful. In the end, it is not the transience of political or technological power and its exercise that shall make us free, but only transcendent truth.

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2. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press: 2018), 8.
3. Philip Rieff, "A Synoptic of the Three Cultures," *The Fifth Column* 7, no. 1 (1988): 39-40.
4. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 560.
5. Darin H. Davis, *Educating for Wisdom in the 21st Century* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2019), 27.
6. John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (Riverside: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 22.