

Taylor Chapter 9

An Iron Cage

Just as Taylor sees the rise of the idea of authenticity as a function of the first major malaise - individualism, he sees modern technological civilization as a function of the second major malaise - instrumental reason.

What Taylor seeks here, as with the previous eight chapters on individualism, is a “stance towards modernity” (Taylor 93), a way malaise can be transformed into something virtuous.

Organization of the chapter:

1. Boosters and knockers of modern technological society
2. The “iron cage” and whether we can escape it
3. The “richer moral background from which the modern stress on instrumental reason took its rise,” in other words, the ethical roots of instrumentalism

I. Boosters and knockers, again

Like the idea of authenticity, modern technological society also has its Boosters and Knockers

Knockers see modern technological civilization as an “unmitigated decline” in which we have “lost contact with ourselves and our own natural being, and are driven by the imperative of domination that condemns us to a ceaseless battle against nature both within us and around us” (Taylor 94).

Boosters (uncritically) see technology as the “solution to all our human problems” (Taylor 95).

Taylor argues that both the Boosters and Knockers are wrong in their view of technology and that we must again engage in “a work of retrieval, in order to get a fruitful struggle going in our culture and society” (Taylor 97).

The retrieval he speaks of requires us to seek the roots of instrumental reason just as the previous six chapters sought the roots of individualism. By understanding these roots we will be able to argue in reason about what is good and problematic about technology and instrumental reason - and struggle (ala la lotta continua - P. 107) to steer society in a productive rather than a decadent direction.

In other words, the debate between booster and knockers of technology is just as inarticulate as that over the issue of authenticity.

2. The Iron Cage



Max Weber, 1864-1920

Before engaging in this retrieval, however, Taylor addresses the position that modern technological market driven societies have locked “us into an ‘iron cage,’” which is to say that there is no chance that society can escape the negative impacts of the “atomist-instrumental outlook once one has entered out kind of society” (Taylor 98). This position holds, in brief, that we are trapped by forces beyond our control.

Taylor does not see the inevitability of the iron cage.

Decline is not inevitable as “the mechanisms of inevitability work only when people are divided and fragmented. The predicament alters when their comes to be a common consciousness” (Taylor 100). This common consciousness requires us to give up the notion of humans a simply disengaged rationality (Descartes’ cogito) and see ourselves against the backdrop of horizons of significance that both transcend us but also include us.

Thus Taylor concludes that “our degrees of freedom ... are not zero” (100-101). Thus exploring the moral roots of instrumental reason is not pointless.

3. The moral roots of instrumentalism

Taylor argues that to escape this second inarticulate debate and the iron cage, we must understand the moral ideals that underlie instrumental reason:

- Freedom (and the more self responsible life freedom allows us to live), and,
- The desire to “relieve the condition of mankind” (103-104).

Thus instrumental reason springs both from a desire for greater responsibility and from a “practical and universal benevolence” - or, more simply put, the desire to ease suffering and make life better - to feed the hungry shelter the homeless and cure the sick.

It is only when we lose sight of these roots, that we begin to see technology as a means of domination and not as a means to improve the human condition. Taylor provides a good example of this misconception on p. 106 when he writes of instances where modern medicine has lost touch with its essentially humanistic goals.

Conclusion

“Instrumental reason comes to us with its own rich moral background. It has by no means simply been ... [motivated by the simple drive to domination]... And yet it all too often seems to serve the ends of greater control, of technological mastery. Retrieval of the richer moral background can show that it doesn't need to do this, and indeed that in many cases it is betraying the moral background in doing so - analogously to the way the more self centered modes of self fulfillment betray the idea of authenticity” (Taylor 105).

6. Taylor argues that to escape this second inarticulate debate, we must understand the moral ideals that underlie instrumental reason: freedom and the desire to “relieve the condition of mankind” (104).
7. Thus instrumental reason springs from “practical and universal benevolence” - or, more simply put, the desire to ease suffering and make life better.

8. Taylor sums up the argument in the following way:

“Instrumental reason comes to us with its own rich moral background. It has by no means simply been . . . [motivated by the simple drive to domination] . . . And yet it all too often seems to serve the ends of greater control, of technological mastery. Retrieval of the richer moral background can show that it doesn't need to do this, and indeed that in many cases it is betraying the moral background in doing so - analogously to the way the more self centered modes of self fulfillment betray the idea of authenticity” (105).