

The Disenchantment of Modernity and The Re-enchantment of the Cosmos



Introduction: Charles Taylor believes that within our current culture there is a sense of deterioration among people, which can be felt deeply, though rarely brings itself to be articulated except by a few. One of the few was Max Weber, who gave much consideration to the 'disenchantment of the world'. Whereas the enchanted world can be defined as one filled with meaning and integration, it is the disenchanted post modern era that is defined as a world void of meaning and purpose. The hollowness of Capitalism and Scientism are being felt within, and the truly resistant are seeking forms of re-enchantment to reintroduce the very significance that appears absent from modern life. Roy Willis and Patrick Curry document one particular act of resistance as the practice of divinatory astrology. This paper will first articulate a definition of disenchantment. The promise of re-enchantment, with particular emphasis to astrology as a means of

resistance and pathway towards re-enchantment, will then be the focus. Some criticisms and conclusions will follow.

Disenchantment

Charles Taylor believes there is a sentiment of decay, which can be characterized as a 'malaise', that has been progressively getting worse since the age of Enlightenment, though it has noticeably worsened since the Second World War. Taylor identifies three central themes to this sense of estrangement felt by the masses. The first is individualism. Individualism is one of the great triumphs of modernity, but comes at a cost. Before individualism became the most desirable paradigm, our culture was organized largely by hierarchy, as seen within families and traditional institutions, which led to great constraints to express one's desires or shape one's own life. The prevailing sense of freedom that is so celebrated today was a result of consciously liberating society from traditional conceptions of ethics and morality.

For Taylor, it was traditional models of viewing the world that placed one within a larger cosmic sequence. Human beings had a designated position within the spheres of life forms. As realms of angels and other spiritual beings were created with their purpose and specific roles designated by a Higher Power, so too did human beings have their place and their existence filled with meaning, relevant to their position within a great hierarchy. People were assigned a position within the societal structure, and one would not diverge from one's post. To question one's place on earth within the hierarchy was to question God's place and plan for a human being. Though there were certainly constraints to living within the structures in place, there was also a sense of consequence and implication to one's existence.

It was not only human existence that mattered in this paradigm, but all life forms had their place within a larger heavenly mystery. From this

perspective, as Taylor further asserts, each animal was representative of a larger place within an even larger cosmology. The objects and things that comprised our earthly spheres pointed towards and spoke of celestial spheres to the people of the pre-modern era, and held significance for their place in a larger plan. Religious ceremony and sacrament of the time were not superficial, but rather, took this connection and organization of all visible and celestial life as evident.

Taylor argues that it was through the questioning and discrediting of this very paradigm, where the world is infused with meaning and life, that led to many of the contemporary freedoms which we now celebrate. It has been this process of questioning which led to destroy confidence in an enchanted world, where all objects are alive. The result is that the world and its things have lost its particular magic. The success of the modern era can be defined as the process of removing magic from the world, and to therefore make any sense of order or meaning to our place within it non-existent. The human removal from an ordered and meaningful world is what Taylor characterizes as the "disenchantment of the world".

This is a new place humanity finds itself in, with specific consequences. Taylor believes that through the triumph of individualism, it is the individual that finds one's self gone astray, without the traditional societal structures, which reinforce a sense of purpose and place. As the world has lost any sense of cosmic meaning, so too have people lost an important characteristic of drive and perseverance. Without a higher reason to our existence, there is no longer an opportunity to live with daring or boldness. This has led to a noticeable loss of passion; further reiterating the 'malaise' that Taylor believes characterizes our modern era. The shadow side of the exaltation of the individual is that the self is now centre. As one has lost one's place within a larger world, so one becomes a world onto one's self. The result of the 'disenchantment of

the world' is the celebration of unnatural narcissism. This is a malaise of a loss of meaning.

The second factor, which Taylor states signifies the current malaise felt by people in the modern era, is the over valuation of rationality. Now that social order no longer contains an element of the sacred to provide arrangement and stability, and no higher sense of morality to contain one's action, one's ethics can be reformulated to suit one's personal desire for contentment. Pleasure becomes the ultimate goal that individuals begin to aspire toward. In the same respect, all the animals and objects that are in the world, having lost any sense of sacredness or place within a larger context of meaning and purpose, are available as substances to be used to aid in one's personal procurement of contentment.

Taylor acknowledges that this change of perception has aspects to it that are liberating. For example, we are now able to utilize more resources towards our own economic gain and self-sufficiency. But the other side to seeing all things as resources, instead of part of a greater chain, is that the ideal of self-sufficiency can lead to exploitation of those very resources, and make one insensible to one's surroundings. The result can be extreme self-centeredness, where it is only the self that matters.

Our emphasis on rationality is also evident for Taylor in the way in which technological advancement is given such high esteem within modernity. Focuses on creating objects that encourage efficiency and output have had a constricting effect. Our human environs have lost quality and character. Since technology is to be invested in and holds the mystique that personal interaction and sacred communions once did, it is technology that will be invested in and revered. Human interactions have lost their depth. Modernity's idolization of technology means that personal morality is in large part determined by ethics of

efficiency and effectiveness, regardless of how destructive the consequences may be. This is a malaise of 'instrumental reason'.

The third concern with modernity, as articulated by Taylor, brings the first two together in the form of the political implications in a world of individualism and instrumental reason. Our cultural and societal institutions encourage and support individualism and reason, to the point that these institutions are regenerated and reinforced by the disenchantment of the world, which characterizes modernity. Taylor points to the infrastructure of some major cities, which are designed so that each person will be required to travel by car, while allowing the erosion of public transit. This is just one example of how individuals are encouraged to stay sheltered within one's self. Government is conceptualized as big and overpowering, and the individual is conceived of as very small and insignificant in contrast. One can feel the loss of political control over one's fate. This is the malaise of a loss of freedom. These are the three fold symptoms of the malady of disenchantment, as outlined by Taylor.

The term "disenchantment of the world" was considered and elucidated perhaps most famously by Max Weber. Alkis Kontos uses the ideas of Weber to discuss disenchantment. The enchanted world can be defined as one filled with meaning and integration. People are in a constant dialogue when living in a symbiotic relationship to their natural environment. This constant conversation provides a stabilizing force with which one found orderliness and calm. The enchanted world was one that dominated the mind of those who lived within the polytheistic context, most notably before the enlightenment. The divine permeated nature, and so it was not just that a relationship was established with the environment, but that the divine spoke through and was represented within it. The cosmos and natural world was alive. The well-being of both the external environment and the internal mental

state were interdependent. From this stance, it was impossible for one to ever feel alone, isolated, or alienated.

With the presentation of the enlightenment era we find the foundations of disenchantment. Kontos asserts that it is rationality that is the underlying drive of disenchantment. Rationalization seeks to empty the world of any sense of magic, mystery, and thereby any meaning. It is rationalization that deduces our human experience so that emotion and soul, which is a central characteristic of humanity, is either irrelevant or absent. In the extreme case, the human soul is non-existent, only an aspect of our psychology or physiology that is to be explained by theory and conjecture. With rationality, humans are left devoid and anaesthetized.

Kontos further articulates two major factors contributing to our disenchanted world; religion and science. Religion, with its movement towards a single God, a single ideal, and a single answer to all human questions, has created a dogma in which the individual is disadvantaged. The disenchanted world has replaced spirituality with institutionalized and politicized religion. Within disenchanted religion, there is only monotheism, and monotheism is the answer to everything. By removing questions, so too removed is the process of self-inquiry. Humans are robbed of the gifts of personal growth and self-respect that are the fruits of the process of contemplation. When there is only one answer, and that one answer is seen only within a singular monotheistic vision of existence. There is no room for irrationality, as everything is attributed to a singular source. Human suffering is a real, lived experience. Kontos argues that it is suffering that defines what it is to be human. Suffering is emotion; it is felt, and therefore not rational. Suffering is either denied, wrong, or made wicked.

The second factor that Kontos articulates as contributing to the disenchantment of the world is science. Science has proceeded

systematically, especially since the era of enlightenment, to reducing all things within the world as objects to be dissected, analysed, conquered, and/ or enslaved. But science is necessarily impermanent, dependant on the sophistication of its measuring devices to reveal what is being investigated. Patrick Curry and Roy Willis have noted that this exaltation of science lends itself to the “crypto-religion” of Scientism. While they acknowledge some of the benefits that science has provided our modern era, under Scientism, science becomes a dutiful secular service; it is scientific logic that becomes the fundamental ceremonial practice. What is not acknowledged within the tenants of Scientism is that what is being sought in sacrament is salvation. Through the aspiration for greater technologies that will reveal more of the environment comes the systemic reinforcement of the disenchantment of the world. This exercise contains a central ambiguity, as Scientism refuses to acknowledge that it is in essence what is inherently enchanted, the natural world, that it seeks to abolish its mystery of. The Scientism being referred to by Curry and Willis is further explicated by Kontos when he states that it is not that rationality in and of it self that is the negative force. In fact, Kontos admits that many benefits are a part of one’s ability to consider things from various perspectives, including the rational. It is the “totalization of rationalization” which has led to the disenchanted world.

The sense of deterioration among people, the sentiment of decay characterized as a ‘malaise of modernity’ that was spoken of earlier by Charles Taylor, is also summarized by Kontos when he refers to Weber’s “melancholy metaphors” for the human being in a disenchanted world:

Petrification, darkness, mechanization, emptiness, inner death, no spirit, no vision. Routine, non-creative energy; a world of shadows without true substance. An iron cage. Prisoners of a denatured culture, subjects of massive, bureaucratic institutions, victims of ferocity and impersonality

of capitalist market society; prisoners oblivious to the meaning of freedom. Exiles unable to recall visions of the Promised Land. Modern urban life: totally detached from Nature, insular, dispirited, lonely.

Re-enchantment

Kontos asserts that it is inherent within us to fight this “iron cage”, that vivacity are still alive within humanity. The ancient gods, with their influence and supremacy, are still felt within as yearnings and desires to find freedom from a prison that can not be named. The universe, heavens, and lived experiences are in constant communication with one’s intellect and spirit through imagery and ideas, desire and fright. Humanity has released the past stage of living as enchanted with their surrounding, and there may be no way to accomplish a full return. But there is the recurrence of a primitive, elemental, imperishable energy, comparable to a “phoenix rising from the ashes”. This is the human soul determined to rise. Despite the growing insistence on rationality and surrender to a single, ultimate authority, the need for personal, sacred, and transcendental experiences of life is innate and lives on within each person, despite the efforts put forth against our intrinsic and instinctive appetite for the truly sacrosanct.

For Kontos, What makes one rise is an aspect of a person that thrives within the tension of many felt divine forces and when making choices that will have a determination of one’s fate, and not simply the illusion of choice and self-determination. Choice that will truly shape one to rise to a life of greater authenticity, which is not simply forced upon them, but is the result of struggle, self honesty, and heroism. Re-enchantment is the process of revival of one’s essential inner self which is connected to all spheres of life, senses the divine within nature, and sees purpose and meaning in the cosmos once again, from a new place, and from a new perspective that can appreciate the struggle to achieve this relationship in a world which fights against contact and connection.

One of the places in our modern era that this contest towards re-enchantment is evident is within the practice of astrology, and among astrologers. Curry and Willis believe that astrology represents the effort to re-enchant the world, though astrology like any other human occurrence does not exist outside the context of the modernity. Astrology is affected by the culture it finds itself in, and also has an affect on the social climate. Astrology is an act of resistance in that its divinatory aspects have challenged the rationality of which disenchantment relies upon for its incessant re-enforcement.

Curry and Willis argue that Scientism and disenchantment have had their influences on modern astrology, resulting in a significant aspect of astrology losing its fundamental divinatory aspects. Though the separation of astrology and predeterminism could be seen as a survival mechanism on the part of this ancient practice, it is in the loss of astrology as divination that astrology becomes a reflection of disenchantment. It is the divinatory model that allows a pronouncement of the interconnection of the human being to the natural world through utilizing the larger cosmos, thereby facilitating re-enchantment. Though Curry and Willis acknowledge that this stance is controversial to both adherents to Scientism and some advocates of contemporary astrology, it is exactly this stance of participation that is required when re-enchantment through astrology is successful.

The potential of astrology to re-enchant is strong if considered within the context of divination. Curry and Willis state that astrology is the leading form of divination in the west, and its constant possibility to re-enchant continues. Although astrology has been repackaged so that its participatory aspects are de-emphasised, if not largely ignored, the potential remains to experience wonder and profound transformation through the recognition of cosmic interdependence. Astrology requests and summons a contact with a cosmos fused with meaning, within a

context of modernity branded by estrangement and isolation. Astrology manages to accomplish re-enchantment when it is translated symbolically and its ritualistic aspects included. In a world that has been stripped of its soul, conceptualized as inorganic and inert, and denied any appreciation of subjective experience, astrology offers the opportunity for nourishing the aspect of one's self that disenchantment has almost stripped away. The experience of astrology can allow for some of the mystery and magic to be reintroduced into the cosmos. As Kontos earlier noted, it is a magic that humanity has, at our essence, been longing for.

What astrology offers is the opportunity to reintroduce wonder that is hopeful and consequential. Curry and Willis further articulate that astrology is a pathway to re-enchantment by placing one within the sphere of the visible firmament, with the planets and stars as witness to one's increased awareness. The skies offer direct interaction and contact by responding to a specific matter of importance when one poses a divinatory question to the heavens. Astrology as divination thus becomes an encounter, which is simultaneously earth bound, celestial, and personal at once. The cosmos is experienced as deeply intimate and yet larger than one's self at the same time.

Curry and Willis assert, "divinatory astrology is ecological in the broadest and truest sense". It allows for involvement in a never-ending myriad of connections and inter-reliant agencies of which one is not only a participant but also an intimate facet. The astrological map may represent a specific moment within time, but also includes a ritual component, which encompasses the very centre of the practice. Astrology reinforces our home as vast and immense, inclusive of the celestial. In this paradigm, the world no longer is disenchanting, and we are no longer alone, alien, or within an iron cage. Astrology allows the

world to be re-enchanted, and allows the entire cosmos to be experienced as family and home.

Critiques

There are those who criticize Max Weber's Theory's, particularly his position that modernity, with its particular prominence of capitalist ideals, necessarily contributes to disenchantment. Full elucidations of the benefits of capitalism, particularly the positive aspects of individualism, fall outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, there are critics of disenchantment as a theory, and argue for the benefits of capitalism.

The other danger can arise when one believes themselves to be engaged in the process of re-enchancement, but is actually furthering one's own disenchantment. Taylor explains that disenchantment is reflected in the values expressed in our culture today, mainly the value of relativism. Taylor argues that relativism is a by-product of individualism, which asserts that each person is just in finding for him or herself what one's values will be, and thus live according to one's individually founded values. With importance placed on individuality, one is only required to be "true to themselves and seek their own fulfilment". What is required to be true to one's self is fully self-determined. No one other than the individual is accountable in determining what the contents of this true-to-one's- self place is. This is the "individualism of self-fulfilment".

The problem with this form of relativism, according to Taylor, is that it creates a further remoteness of the individual, and can give the illusion of re-enchancement. It contributes to remoteness and segregation by creating a situation where one is only responsible for one's self, and thereby is subversively encouraged to remain further removed from societal concerns or participation in politics. By following this ethic, the

daunting, massive bureaucracy that one feels powerless against is even further placed on a platform. Any sense of citizen responsibility is removed with relativism, which makes one responsible only for one's own attainment of happiness, and those who are not happy are fully self-responsible.

Taylor further clarifies that the illusion of re-enchantment arises when it is not re-enchantment, with its characteristics of a reconnection with nature and the feeling of interdependence, which is sought. Rather, what is occurring is that the urge to be "true to one's self" grows into a passion that is in fact meaningless and incongruous ambition, which leads to dependence on anyone who could possibly have the answer to the deep seated alienation that is driving one to experience a re-enchantment, without one knowing that is actually what they are seeking. Being true to one's self can lead to a self-indulgent reliance on self-help gurus, self-styled authorities, and so-called spiritual leaders who clothe themselves in the veil of science or tradition to add validity to their stance.

This point is further elucidated by Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, who have described the celebration of a brand of spirituality that fits nicely within the capitalistic framework defining our modern disenchanted times, which reinforces the individualistic paradigm for those disillusioned within it. Carrette and King say that:

Spirituality is celebrated by those who are disillusioned by traditional institutional religions and seen as a force for wholeness, healing, and inner transformation. In this sense spirituality is taken to denote the positive aspects of the ancient religious traditions, unencumbered by the 'dead hand' of the Church, and yet something which provides meaning and solace in an otherwise meaningless world.

The problem, according to Carrette and King, is that capitalism uses the sign-post of spirituality to tap into the disenchantment that people feel within our contemporary times. Capitalism uses spirituality as a commodity that uses religion to suit the ultimate purpose, which is to return a monetary profit. Under the influence of capital, "consumerism is the new esoteric knowledge". The history of religion as a place of social rebellion is ignored in our current 'new age' of revolution from within, so that spirituality is used to certify one's potential for material attainment. Personal, self-serving ambition is marketed as a pathway to reconnection with the divine. The characteristic of re-enchantment is sold to disenchanted buyers hoping for integration and interconnection, without the end result being attained.

The other concern raised is that related to astrology, and touched on earlier via Curry and Willis. Even astrology, as facilitator to re-enchantment, has been submitted to a process of increasing "rationalization, abstraction, and naturalization". What began as a reflection of polytheistic values, mainly the pluralistic understanding of our place in the cosmos and the variety of influences available to us, has now morphed into what is presented by some astrologers as simply "supernatural". The consequence of modernity on astrology has meant its removal from its enchanted roots. Insolvency to its inherent symbolism has steadily decreased astrology's history of enchantment, and thereby its promise of re-enchantment, characterized by existential awe.

Curry and Willis place the loss of astrology's potential to re-enchant on astrologers themselves. By typecasting astrology as a misapprehended science, whose validity need only be proved in time with the right kind of testing, astrologers have placed themselves in the position of furthering their own disenchantment and personifying astrology as, at worst, a model that ultimately will only reinforce disenchantment, and at best, a

distortion of what it actually is. Curry and Willis reinforce that it is only through the conception of astrology-as-divination and the active ingredient of participatory judgement of what planetary and star placements actually mean to real, lived human experience does astrology hold the promise to re-enchant.

Conclusions

Curry and Willis state that astrology has played an extraordinary function in encouraging the imagination of people since pre-historic times. It is exactly the lack of imagination that has characterized the disenchanted state that most find themselves in within the era of modernity. Astrology's potential to re-enchant is based in its mystery and correlation to one's life and to the movement of the cosmos. As the stars and planets stage timeless myth, one engages in a constant conversation with an intelligent universe, which converses, addresses, and articulates the concerns that have brought one to look to the heavens 'for a sign'. The re-enchantment of the cosmos means that one is no longer alone on the earth, and reminds of the participation one is actively engaged in when considering a whole cosmos. We are less alone in the appreciation of this ancient art. The connection we feel reaches right into our bones, and the truth of the stars reaches to one's deepest ancestral roots.

It is perhaps this feeling of interconnection and reconnection that one is seeking when on search for one's 'true self'. It is perhaps the desire for meaning and purpose that is the promise of divinatory astrology. The knowledge that before modernity there were people looking up to the heavens for the indication of divine will, and one's part within it, can perhaps aid one to address the iron cage of modernity. Though the oppression of disenchantment can be felt more acutely by some than others, methods of resistance are revealing themselves as well. Astrology, for some, holds the potential to facilitate a religious

experience, an awakening, which comes from recognizing that one is not so isolated and alone. An awakening that can characterize re-enchantment.

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Originally presented as an academic paper at The University of Kent, Canterbury. Full references available on request.