

Irreducibility

On occasion we run into a mood or situation when we feel that nothing can be reduced any further. We've broken up things into the most basic components possible beyond which it's impossible to go. By no means is this reflective of a negative experience but of that feeling we get when we run out of options and aren't sure where to go next. Such an experience is not uncommon during the month of December with the approach of Christmas and all that implies. The weather and darkness serve to re-enforce that sense of irreducibility with regard to life in general. It also served to highlight the awkward nature of this season with its manifestations of joy, but a joy which conceals dread and loneliness for many people. The month of December evokes a whole ball of wax difficult to get your hands on...and then it's followed by the bleakness of January. Even if you don't subscribe to the Christmas hoopla, it's bound to affect you by osmosis. The best antidote is to stick with the Advent season in which you find yourself. Its theme of expectation is wonderful but to tie into that requires going against what can be an almost insurmountable tide.

There's something mysterious about Advent, the perfect antidote to irreducibility. Most people consider it their favorite time of the year. Why is this so? Somehow Advent addresses that particularly human distaste for waiting which is unbearable in an age of instant gratification. The season capitalizes on this unease by elevating our innate desire for something better and sanctifies that which we consider the least sanctify-able part of our lives. On a deeper level, our aversion for waiting signifies frustration of not having achieved our goals and expectations. Advent offers no absolute solutions, just anticipation of fulfillment and the possibility that what we're waiting for may not be fulfilled. Such a precarious form of anticipation admittedly is exciting since we're completely unaware of what may lay ahead. On the other hand, chances are pretty high that if our uninformed desires were achieved, we wouldn't be satisfied anyway. That may be why when Christmas comes—the birth of Jesus Christ—we find it a let-down. In our hearts we know that he isn't with us fully but only through faith which for some doesn't sound palatable. Thus Christmas can have an echo of unreality about it. Advent lacks this let down. It takes our unrestricted desire for fulfillment and with uncanny wisdom inserts the right balance of completion and continued expectation. To experience this, you have to try out a given Advent season and see if it works.

Shortly before Advent I started reading Charles Taylor's **A Secular Age** for the second time. It's one of those books that require a second read to understand what he is saying. Taylor excels at giving us a roadmap of where we are today, especially for those who have a vested interest in things religious. Despite the impressive advancement and gains of Western Civilization, we as a whole remain immature, even the best and brightest among us. By that I mean collectively on the moral level which is connected closely with the spiritual one. Taylor makes frequent citations of well-known people such as Nietzsche, Hobbes, Descartes and Kant, all of whom continue to influence us today. They articulated their culture very well, each his own way having struggled with religion, either making peace with it or rejecting it altogether. Attention to their works reveals that they've rejected formal manifestations of religion which unfortunately gets identified with the spiritual content. The long and the short of it is that most of these geniuses had a disdain for any idea of transcendence which had been at the heart of human striving since time immemorial. They marshaled every imaginable argument against it, often convincingly. The solutions offered may have satisfied some people but over the long haul were disappointing. While we may acknowledge the brilliancy of their insights into the human condition, chances are they had a nagging sense for the transcendence that persisted despite their efforts of

dismissing it.

Let's situate better the term irreducible which forms the title of this essay because many of the authors cited by Taylor deal with this subject, albeit unconsciously, an undercurrent which comes to the surface in various forms. It helps to bring into clearer light that immaturity just noted which assumes the form of mental gymnastics, many displayed brilliantly, and which describe our innate poverty and desire to escape it. Behind this lies a pride at one's own intellectual prowess and refusal to be open to a transcendental reality at the core of all human striving. Such pride can be disguised yet eventually comes to the fore. Once you've heard one, you've heard them all. All have the same axe to grind even if they are essential to understand the development of Western Civilization.

Irreducibility applies to that which cannot be simplified further, the bottom of the proverbial bucket or the point beyond which we can not proceed. It was a term that popped into mind when reading Taylor's book, especially with regard to those persuasive arguments against transcendence and religion which supposedly had kept the human race in bondage for millennia. I wanted to capitalize upon that search for the bottom line, bring it into the light and see if I could discover anything in it. Since it was Advent, it would be a good a time as any to bring unexamined skeletons out of the closet and into the open air. Chief among them is our inherent poverty which comes to the surface when we're put in situations which require waiting. We tend to shrug off waiting, fritter time away with endless distractions and are unwilling to examine the anxiety lying behind them. Also I was conscious of the fact that people love Advent more than any other liturgical time. Maybe they see it as a kind of transformation of this waiting, so it has the potential of becoming a take-off point, a place to get started. Waiting makes us confront our innate irreducibility which we avoid like the plague. Yet should we muster the courage and look at it unflinchingly, irreducibility can end up as our most valuable asset.

Irreducibility compels us to confront all the stuff, usually negative and sometimes positive, that stands in the way to make life desirable. This "stuff" comprises our thoughts, memories and emotions which contribute to forming our self identity. An entire life can be lived out on this plane, unfortunately the case with most people. Why the negative stance? Because what is perceived as either positive or negative fades in comparison to the boon irreducibility has in store for us. This is a bold claim, so it demands some checking out. The obstacle we fear most, one we'd do anything to avoid, consists of humiliating experiences. Yet should we persevere through the initial shock, we discover that these experiences knock down the edifice of all thoughts, memories and emotions, leaving us in a state of *aporia*. That's a term close to Socrates' heart which means being reduced to perplexity. Usually after a humiliation we bounce back and continue until another one comes along and so forth down the line. Sometimes...and maybe sometimes...a situation so debilitating hits us that we don't know what to do (I leave aside more extreme circumstances such as alcoholism or drug addiction which require therapeutic programs). At this juncture a torrent of images and emotions rush across our minds, so quickly that it imprisons us in our own devices. This rush of thoughts is terribly confining. It is a palpable sense of carrying around a huge weight, heavier than any physical one, which won't go away. We may know what brought this about but precious little else about its nature. Normal circumstances can disguise awareness of this burden so we don't pay attention to it except when we're compelled to wait for something. The anxiety produced in this circumstance is idea for making us aware of that weight.

The nature of irreducibility is far from normal according to our standards and uncomfortable as it

appears, is worth inducing. We don't have to beat ourselves up to get there; humiliations come along anyway, so we might as well direct them towards this end. Yet instead of inducing humiliations, we can prime ourselves for them. That means we fall back upon something which always has been there within...irreducible...and can't be trimmed down further, even by death, a rather extraordinary claim. And so irreducibility has a structure so simple as to be immune to physical destruction. There's no proof for this, of course, but one can make a thought experiment used by philosophers and spiritual authors since time immemorial. Pretend that you have died, acting out all that is involved. Even then...after death...you would "be irreducible" but irreducible in a way which seems to partake of some kind of immortality. It's worth the effort, for we won't end up by actually dying, just pretending to die.

What makes irreducibility difficult to comprehend is that we are hard pressed to come up with images to describe it. Sometimes irreducibility has the feel of being locked up in a dark corner, sitting around with nothing to do, not a desirable situation. The image that comes to mind consists of the debilitating effects of old age and all that implies. Obviously, we're prone to concoct all sorts of images about the objects of our fear, best to avoid when dealing with a subject matter as the one here. Even better, we have to avoid incorporating these depressing images into our lives and allowing them to govern us. Granted, irreducibility is a vulnerable condition subjecting us to a myriad of thoughts and images. We're prone to roll around in this alien state with one image succumbing to another *ad infinitum* until finally we tire of such useless activity. Of course, the real danger is that we continue with this Sisyphus-like attitude. Hence a sound theoretical understanding is crucial along with plenty of consultation from persons who've been through this wearying experience.

Once we've decided to accept our irreducible condition, the best approach is to remain patiently within it in order to get our bearings. After all, one day or another we'll end up there provided we don't die a sudden death, usually unlikely nowadays. It seems better to adopt an active stance in order to take control which means not succumbing to the temptation of images, even benign ones, as they pass by. This is important because every whim and fancy coming down the pike has a way of drawing us under its influence. It is not an attitude where we refuse to give in, for an attitude presupposes reliance upon thoughts and images. The activity I have in mind is akin to remaining attentive without thought, difficult to do let alone conceive, because we're unaccustomed to it. That's why we fall down so much and have a difficult time recovering quickly. Painful, to be sure, but the insight gained from a recovery is so delightful that it makes the next effort worthwhile even if we know our chances of failing are high. Here the sense of time's passage (and thus the rise and fall of our efforts) loosens its grip and may disappear for an extended period. I suspect that a point of fairly complete exhaustion comes when we discover that what makes us truly happy does not consist in images. Images too are extended in time, so exhaustion means the disappearance of a sense of time's passage. In other words, the resulting joy is *formless* which means we make a quick recovery from the presence of images even should we fall back into the same old trap. Now we know the way out which is a joy no one can take away.

Let's say we have gotten some familiarity with being irreducible. What would be our state of mind in this condition? It wouldn't be blank, for we'd have a sufficient amount of thoughts to cope with both normal and abnormal conditions. Externally speaking, everything would continue to function only we would be parsimonious with regard to the expenditure of mental energy. That is to say, we'd exert enough energy to deal with a situation one by one or sequentially or as they arose. That means we'd refrain from putting A ahead of B and B ahead of C (and so forth). Such parsimony is not logical, strictly speaking, but follows what you could say an *akolouthia*, a Greek term used by Gregory of Nyssa.

The beauty about *akolouthia* is that it offers us a way of navigating within the deep, narrow valley of irreducibility. In a nutshell, Gregory situates the way we process experiences under two general headings: *taxis*, a comprehensive order, and within this *taxis* are more specific features or gradations...*akolouthia*...which flesh out the overall order. Both are interdependent; we cannot conceive of one part of this framework without the other. Such an observation seems to hold true regardless of the endless variety of attributes which these two realities delineate. The steps within a *taxis* are called *akolouthia* which more accurately mean a sequence or chain of events, that is, those particular “pieces” which compromise a given order. The normal way of getting an overall view of a particular *taxis* or order—again, keep in mind that we are concerned more with its form instead of its contents—is by becoming aware of the individual *akolouthia* within it. Applied to this subject at hand, we have a state of irreducibility (*taxis*). Within that state are degrees (*akolouthia*). That means following the dictates of our hearts with a tight discipline but a discipline which is not rigorous in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a way of adopting a mysterious, diffuse attention without dissipating ourselves or without getting hung up in thoughts and emotions.

There are simple daily instances which reveal what I call the joys of irreducibility. One is the enjoyment of everyday sounds we’d experience when sitting in a quiet spot. They rise and fall within the indistinct background, soft enough so as not to be distracting. This must have formed part of the experience of the poetess Emily Dickinson within her relative isolation in her second floor room. While not so much interested in her poems, I became more intrigued by the details of her life. Besides, the geographical area of Amherst (Connecticut River Valley or Pioneer Valley), along with Concord and Lexington, are special in that they are home to many important American authors, Thoreau being the most well known. Never have I been in her house, The Homestead, because I felt no need for it. Somehow I felt that Emily understood and left it at that. Over the past several years I had thumbed through accounts of Dickinson’s life, of how she turned into a recluse dressed in white, and started re-reading a major biography by Richard B. Sewall. By normal standards her life was unusual, but most observers fail to acknowledge that despite her hangups, Emily Dickinson was a contemplative who used these hangups to serve a good unseen by her contemporaries. Her Puritan culture had little or no conception of the contemplative dimension of life, so she had to beat her own path which must have been very difficult. Still, she persevered. I got a sense of Dickinson’s contemplative inclination by the way she’d receive visitors without seeing them through a half-opened door. Sometimes she would sit on the steps listening to people downstairs, maintaining a discrete balance of proximity and distance, so odd to her contemporaries, yet on another level makes perfect sense. Also I was fascinated by what someone in her circumstances did all day long up there in her room. Fine to read accounts of hermits and all that but again, what do such people do? Surely they were more focused on “being.” Fine and dandy. Nevertheless, they...like us all...must do “something” in the course of a given day.

It’s fascinating to be aware of such extraordinary people, for they are immovable like rocks and trees while the rest of us are moving around. We’re so much taken up with so-called normal activities that to conceive of time without them virtually is impossible. Characters like Emily Dickinson, Thoreau are recalled more fondly than those who’ve accomplished notable deeds, a tribute to their lasting impact across the bounds of time and culture. Among other things, I suspect that such non-conformists learned to live with their eccentricities and misunderstandings and therefore were able to flourish. At the same time they learned to employ them as an asset. That’s their real appeal. Should you read through their correspondence, often a better barometer than their formal writings, real personal struggles and joys transpiring behind the scene start to emerge. They had to maintain constant

vigilance as to their free time (after all, they had tons of it) and were more aware than most folks of their irreducibility. It was always present as they teetered on the edge of society around them so taken up with “normal” activities.

I've taken some pains to delineate the negative aspects of irreducibility because it's so alien to what we wish. Yet this condition has its pleasures, indeed the best pleasures imaginable. The early morning hours are most suitable for tuning in to this, a time when we are “more irreducible” in a natural way than at other times. As of yet we haven't donned those artificial masks we manifest before other people, even to ourselves. Here is a time...and I mean more specifically the pre-dawn hours...before beginning of a new day. Nothing has crowded in upon us yet, so we are free from any plans for the coming day. When situations arise later in the day which may confound, embarrass or even humiliate us, we're better prepared to navigate through them. Pre-dawn hours allow us to rehearse or prime ourselves by mentally going through potential scenarios of humiliations. I am reminded again of Emily Dickinson sitting on top of the stairs or being in a chapel where the early morning gives an opportunity to loll. This is a particularly inviting term which doesn't signify laziness but a way of hanging around with a diffused attitude. We take in everything that comes our way both exteriorly and interiorly minus any judgmental filters.

The diffusiveness of lolling precludes adopting fixed or rigid attitudes and is a delightful way to pass the time. Actually, I think this is a state missed by some folks who are attracted to pray in a disciplined manner. No problem with that but too serious over the long haul. A lot can be learned in this diffused state which continues indefinitely because of no pressure of a timetable or being answerable to others. Actually lolling creates its own field and has deflects anything harsh or troublesome that comes our way. We can loll at any time of the day. However, key times such as dawn, noon and sunset are more conducive for it. The same applies to physical places, especially empty ones. They are readily available and are function as gateways to a deeper awareness of activity going on in the same vicinity. Another favorite spot is railroad tracks in more isolated areas away from human activity. It makes no difference if a train comes by. Anticipation of one coming and listening for it is the real pleasure. Railroad tracks lead from some place and go to another, so being by them is a form of expectation, not anxiety, and therefore of lolling.

A chief obstacle we confront when in an irreducible state is unfamiliarity with the territory. Granted, it is very narrow and allows for little wiggle room. That's why more famous practioneers as noted above had an inbuilt instinct against traveling far from their home base. They were too busy discovering so much in their confinement and despite misunderstandings, knew they were going about their task in life. Better to have keener insight into the nature of one's being than to move around, a temptation in today's mobile society. As far as mobility is concerned, the nineteenth century saw just as a dramatic shift of peoples when the American West was opening up. Folks like Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau resisted this temptation while fully conscious of all the motion swirling about them. That's sufficient personal witness we can do the same.

When in an irreducible state your senses are sharpened because of minimal input. So when perceiving the swirl of movement around you, your sense of isolation is heightened. It's aggravated further because your imagination...your image-making machine...kicks into high gear to compensate for lack of exterior input. One practioneer recently told me that the biggest temptation is that everyone around you is going full steam ahead with meaningful plans. A way to test if you're on the right track is to exit

your irreducible condition and run with crowd, if you will, but only for awhile. Then retreat to your irreducible state. That helps discern whether you belong there or not. Going by the accounts of several persons I know who've done this, they can function well within society but freely relinquish this ability. Their relinquishment represents an accomplishment, not a defeat. If you don't try it out, you can have a nagging feeling that you may be missing out on something big.

There are instances when we can be pulled from our irreducibility and pulled away so quickly that it escapes measurement by temporal interval. The reason is that we're dealing with a mental switch, not a physical one. Perhaps it has duration, but we're unaware of it. It comprises going from one point of reference (irreducibility) to its exact opposite, in other words, getting caught up in thoughts and images. Sometimes this suddenness is so violent it leaves us unnerved. Getting the hang of irreducibility requires spending long periods of being alone and reducing our activity as much as possible. This differs, I think, from what people normally conceive as prayer and ties in with the notion of lolling discussed earlier. Here we're dealing with a more diffuse reality...diffuse not in the sense of allowing ourselves to be scattered...but to be ready to embrace all perceptions regardless of their source. Gratitude and joy, usually of the quiet variety, are chief characteristics of this openness. Where they come from is anybody's guess, really. They just come.

Fatigue...physical first and then mental...which results from the balancing act I've attempted to describe is a huge obstacle which may be described by the Latin term *curva* which translates as curve. It is an early medieval monastic concept for describing our inclination towards undesirable behavior originating in fatigue which quickly degenerates into listlessness. Why the compulsion towards a downward motion? Why do we seem destined to end up like this? It's so universal yet little understood. Part of the problem is traced to a pre-occupation with little things which become blown out of all proportion. That's why so much of meditative and monastic experience stresses watchfulness. It seems easy but try it out for a short time. Within minutes your mind is filled with countless distractions. Irreducibility requires a rigorous personal schedule to combat the downwardness of this *curva*. We need to adopt not so much an aggressive stance but a pro-active one. That means taking the downward movement of *curva* and channeling it into irreducibility. A genuine mystery is at work here. Suddenly that which is downward turns around and becomes upward, like going against gravity and the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Another way of putting this might be to follow Socrates who claimed famously that he knew that he knew nothing. Somehow I think Socrates' ignorance is why of lolling. For example, somewhere in Plato's **Dialogues** is a description of him standing around outside while a banquet is in progress. No explanation is given, just the description intended to intimate the joy Socrates takes in his ignorance.

I'd like to conclude this haphazard article with something profound but can't come up with anything of that sort. All I can say is that this has been a written exercise in lolling, that wonderful, diffusive sort of attention easily confused with laziness. Most likely other articles will follow to flesh out themes touched upon here. In time these little insights may jam together into a more coherent theme. Time will tell. For now, the most important thing is to engage in some lolling and not get hung up about all this.

