New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394.x

Uplifting Unbelief

Gregor McLennan

Abstract

This article analyses three of Taylor's principal theoretical moves: his basic account of secularity and related rejection of secularist 'subtraction stories'; his comprehension of historico-empirical realities in the light of a sort of philosophy of history; and his presentation of the transcendental quality of the experience of 'fullness'. Motivated to contest Taylor's framing of the 'unbeliever' as spirituality deprived and intellectually complacent, the coherence, content and rhetorical overkill of his argumentation in each of these areas is questioned.

Keywords

post-secularity; rhetoric; subtraction stories; transcendence; unbelievers

There is an echo of Kant's 'What is Enlightenment?' in the governing rubric of Charles Taylor's project. Just as Kant's 'age of enlightenment' did not, for him, entail an *enlightened age* as such, so, for Taylor, living in a secular age is not (necessarily) a matter of widespread and increasing secular*ism.* Yet Taylor declines to flag up this seemingly neat – and neatly ironic – parallel. This is probably because, contrary to those who have praised upon him for having seen off the 'challenge of secularism',[1] Taylor feels that challenge acutely, regarding secularism, in the words of a subsequent discussion, as an 'essential feature of religiously diverse societies, aiming to secure freedom of both belief and non-belief as well as equality of citizens'. Secularism is therefore 'much too important a matter to be left to "secularists"'.[2] But who or what, if not the secularist and secularism, is the main target and bugbear of Taylor's monumental argument in *A Secular Age*? The answer would seem to be 'the unbeliever',

[1] Robert Bellah, 'The Challenge of Secularism: Is God Absent?', UDMcast, (Detroit: University of Detroit Mercy, 2008).

[2] Charles Taylor, 'Foreword: What is Secularism?' in Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood, eds., *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. xxi–xxii.

© 2010 The Author. New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society. Published by Blackwell Publishing Ltd. 2010, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK, and 350 Main Street, Malden MA 02148, USA
https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

especially the 'comfortable' (727) or 'untroubled' one (268). This doubly negative, blank persona – unbelieving, untroubled – is central to the script, either in its own right, or as undoer of whatever might perhaps be acceptable in other expressions of unbelief, whether 'exclusive humanism' and 'utopian secularism' on the Left or 'heroic' and 'vertical' unbelief on the Right.

Partly because, today, many 'defences' of religion are couched in terms of collective *practice* rather than epistemologically, so that the claims of faith and science can be more comfortably negotiated, it is worth underscoring how deeply *A Secular Age* is organized around the belief/unbelief couplet. Of course, Taylor has much to say about 'incarnation', its loss and possible return, and he specifies that belief and unbelief are not so much rival *theories* as different modes of *experience* and moral *orientations*. But still, in the opening pages (esp. 3–5, 12–14), the main issues quickly emerge: what is it like to live as 'a believer or unbeliever', and how it has come to be that whereas five centuries ago it was impossible not to believe in God, today the 'presumption of unbelief' has become 'for many the default option'. 'Secularity 3' is the notion under which such matters are thought best addressed, referring to the ontological and figurative 'conditions of belief', our whole 'context of understanding' through which a dramatic 'shift in the background' can take place. Accordingly, the historical sections describe how the 'bulwarks of belief' have been steadily eroded; the more analytical ones show how the 'modern cosmic imaginary' is caught in a no man's land between belief and unbelief (351); and the contemporary ones canvass the new possibilities of belief and unbelief that may be emerging (61). Striving to give the rationale for unbelief its fair due, Taylor is nevertheless on a mission, so both in its historical and analytical aspects, as well as in its overarching normative thrust, the rhetorical weight of *A Secular Age* 'tilts towards the believer' (7). For Taylor, the fundamental 'lack' at the centre of modern social being can neither properly be perceived nor strenuously be addressed from within the allegedly closed frame of unbelieving immanence.

In this assessment, I question the force of the central contentions in *A Secular Age*, with a view to lifting unbelief out from under the shadow that Taylor casts over it as an intellectual and personal stance. But I also want to underline that much agreement is there to be found. This is important given Taylor's characterization, late in the book, of the current 'field of debate' as a 'three-cornered' affair involving exclusive humanists, anti-humanists and 'acknowledgers of transcendence'. This seems too restrictive, not least if we are to take seriously his assertion that 'we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane' (300). There are unbelievers, for example, who are indeed troubled by the limitations of exclusive humanism without thereby being much

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

troubled about God; and Taylor's own style of believing, in which some important part of 'the self-narrative of the Enlightenment' is accepted, is explicitly separated out by him from a fourth corner occupied by transcenders who make no such concessions (636). As for the influence of the 'immanent counter-enlightenment', this line of thought, in social theory circles anyway, has rather morphed into new articulations of the ineffable in various disquisitions featuring vitalist ethics, the face of the Other, and the numinousness of the particular. In other words, lying between untroubled unbelieving and belief 'in the strong sense' (510) is a wide spectrum of postsecular stances and spaces where the 'post' signals a reflexive re-thinking of religion and science, faith and reason, morality and politics, rather than a religious revival in thought.[3] The postsecular moment is *intra*-secular rather than *anti*-secular.

The Story of the Secular

Taylor's account of the emergence of 'the secular', and of the growth of humanist, naturalistic, and social-ist sensibilities, is a signal contribution: his arresting phraseology alone is likely to dominate discussion for years to come. The tale is told of the symbiotic entanglement of 'religious' and 'secular' elements as the modern moral 'package' unfolds; of how the major 'disembeddings' and 'breakouts' that paved the way for immanent humanism were driven almost entirely by spiritual, scriptural and devotional motivations; of how the secular itself was a Christian conceptual invention, slowly evolving a status of its own through reiterated institutional settlements between various 'rages for order' within Latin Christendom, and the various (no less 'religious') responses to them. These 'zig-zag' developments were also deeply *contingent*, possessing a kind of logic, but no intrinsic necessity as the shifts registered: from an enchanted world ('charged' objects, portentous occurrences, spirits actively entwined with earthly doings) to a disenchanted world; from a *porous* self (people 'possessed by' and 'receiving' supernatural influences) to a *buffered* self; from subjectivity prone to and seeking of God's love and intervention to a fortress-like, self-sufficient self, keeping the world and its deeper currents at a distance; from God's functional kingly cosmos to an impersonal, causal universe; from a life close-to-chaos, punctuated by timely revelry and periodic symbolic overturnings to disciplined and purified conduct; from multiple, simultaneous, higher, and 'kairotic'

[3] Gregor McLennan, 'Spaces of Postsecularism', in Justin Beaumont, Arie Molendijk and Christopher Jedan, eds. *Exploring the Postsecular: the religious, the political, the urban* (Leiden: Brill) 2010: 41–62 and Gregor McLennan, 'The Postsecular Turn', *Theory, Culture & Society,* 27(4), 2010: 3–20.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

times to a singular linear time; from 'vertical' social relations and ethical norms to 'horizontal' ones; from a sociality collectively orientated to the divine, to a society of individuals governed by the hidden hand of mutual benefit; from the 'incarnation' of holy physicality to mentalist 'excarnation'.

The book being essentially a history of ideas, Taylor paints a long series of thought-pictures and thinker-portraits. Augustine it was who first presented the compound logic of the distinction between the earthly/heavenly city, without which secularism makes no historical sense. Lipsius's neo-Stoicism first contrasted the virtues of detachment and constancy at the expense of compassion reflective of God's love. Descartes was *the* theorist of the mechanical universe and the ethics of disciplined, reasoned charity. The natural law philosophers confirmed that men are essentially reasonable and sociable, and thus rights-worthy. Providential deism, with its impersonal order under a creator, but not interventionist, God represents the 'great disembedding' of Spirit out of its previously mundane setting. And then comes the 'turning point', when, after the 'anthropocentric turn' taken by various Enlighteners, 'exclusive humanism' emerges, shorn of all theological trappings.

These tropes are consolidated in the *modern social imaginary*, governed by characteristic 'metatopical spaces' (civil society, the public sphere), and 'metatopical agencies' (above all, *the people*). The presumptively beneficent ways of the market and virtues of the citizenry mean that the world of pastoral mediation and trials of access starts to disappear; hell is 'eclipsed', divinity itself is eclipsed. The Nineteenth century (chapter 9) witnesses a 'great rise in unbelief', mainly intellectual in tenor but beginning to be 'anchored in the lifeworld'. Yet this is no single decisive consolidation; rather, in a veritable 'nova effect', secular thought develops as a fissiparous 'expanding universe of unbelief' (chapter 10). Thus, many different critical discourses sprout up apart from plain atheistic ones, some running along 'romantic' axes, others 'tragic': the ethics of art and play, intimations of the sublime, tragic heroism, searches for the meaning of our 'dark genesis', visions of tamed and untamed wilderness, secular substitutes for salvation. And new types of quasi-sacred discourses announce themselves in response, above all those artistic languages, 'subtler' than philosophy, and exemplified by Hopkins, Messiaen, Eliot, Beckett, through which multiple temporalities can be rejoined and the ineffable glimpsed.

Taylor gathers all the notes struck into a slow-release crescendo: intense 'cross pressures' and contrary 'solicitations' are configured and reconfigured, between the 'draw to transformation', and resistance to it. Competing moral world views mutually 'fragilize' each other, increasingly so in the present *super-nova*, the 'age of authenticity' that spirals out from the 1960s onwards. Dogmatic forms of secularism

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

having failed (Jacobinism, state socialism, Marxism), the sacred continues to erupt, sometimes in 'neo-Durkheimian' forms (One Nation under God), sometimes in moments of 'post-Durkheimian' effervescence (raves, pilgrimages, grief for Princess Diana). The inexhaustible push for (re)incarnation and ecstasy is expressed indirectly through increasingly explicit sexual mores, health consciousness, therapy, carnival. Even if there is no going back, opportunities for transcendence continue to arise, whether through sudden perception of saintly example or patient schooling in 'God's pedagogy'. Taylor scrutinises what secular humanist thinkers offer by way of resolving our common 'dilemmas' – the persistence of violence, the 'mutilation' of ordinary sensuousness, the meaning of life – ultimately deeming them to be 'very unconvincing'. If immanent closure is 'permitted', Taylor concludes, it is not 'demanded'; the transcendent cannot just be 'sloughed off'. There may yet be different ways of living towards the divine, of edging towards the communion of the good. Thus we stand at the 'unquiet frontiers of modernity'(chapter 19), 'restless at the barriers of the human sphere' (726).

Taylor's narrative, we can all agree, is evocative and eloquent. But its *content* turns out to be surprisingly uncontentious. One could certainly take issue with the claimed dominance of exclusive humanism, even in intellectual circles, from the age of Adam Smith onwards. The 1960s is arguably the only remotely conclusive posit here, in the ever-difficult matter of who amongst us really believes what. For most British people in the 1950s, for example, and for most dons in its universities, Christianity surely remained a solid and regular reference point, to that extent remaining a firm part of the dominant worldview. One might also counter Taylor's belittling portrayal of Victorian scientific rationality as a stilted discourse according to which intellectual 'maturity' chastised religion's mere 'childishness', on the grounds that virtually *all* Victorian thinking and argument, including its upright muscular Christianity, was cloaked in the garb of respectable grown-up manliness. And against Taylor's keynote idea of the modern self as not only 'buffered' against the external world, but self-understood as 'invulnerable' – he repeats this many times without the slightest hesitation – we could just as easily argue that the modern self is nothing if not internally torn, doubtful, reflexive.

Ironically, such reservations suggest that Taylor may have given *too much* away to the storyline he seems to most want to contest: the relentless coming of unitary secular unbelief. Be that as it may, Taylor's account, for all its emphasis on non-linear zig-zaggery, *is* one of overall secularization, and concomitant growth in the status and extent of 'unbelief'. Something very important, he accepts, deserves the name of secularization, and that something has been on a very 'long march' (176). Christian monotheism itself played a key role in this process, tearing us away initially from the societal immediacy of

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

archaic religion, and in due course experiencing the cessation of its own cultural hegemony as a 'shattering development' (514). And now that we are inside the 'immanent frame' of the secular age, there is no going back beyond the anthropocentric turn to the pre-Deist status quo (649, 653).

Thus portrayed, Taylor's version of the secularity story, at least in broad outline, does not seem greatly to differ from those of rationalistic thinkers like Ernest Gellner, who in an intriguingly parallel career made similar assessments of many of the same thinkers and trajectories, and who shared Taylor's sense of our contemporary predicament as profoundly moral exposed.[4] Being a defender of the intellectual and technical achievements of the modern scientific mindset, Gellner was correspondingly withering about any kind of hermeneutics that would play down the unprecedented historical novelty, and irreversibility, of humanity's leap over the second 'big ditch' in our collective cultural history. Still, in Gellner's ironic modernism, the 'cognitively expansive' outlook that he favoured was accepted to be 'morally mute', just as 'cognitively stagnant' views were conceded to be likely to prove far more 'morally satisfying'.[5]

Subtraction Stories

That sort of comparison, of course, rather flies in the face of the 'continuing polemic' (22) that throughout his book Taylor directs against *narrow* secularist accounts. But when the relevant formulations are examined, it is not obvious that anything very decisive follows from his problematization of what he terms 'subtraction stories'. Several issues here are worth developing.

One or many? Taylor sometimes talks of *the* subtraction story (531, 572), just as he talks of the 'master narrative' of modernity and the orthodox or mainstream secularization thesis. Despite several rehearsals of the critique, however, it remains a moot point as to whether these singularities are the *same* singularity, multiply expressed; or whether any kind of firm secularization thesis must *ipso facto* involve a subtraction story; or whether subtraction stories are just 'thinner' versions of potentially 'wider' and 'richer' secularization stories (431). At any rate, more often than not, a *plurality* of subtraction stories is signalled (267, 290, 560–1). In one articulation (573–4), the 'coming of modern secularity' account is elaborated as having 'four connected facets', each of which constitutes a slightly

[4] See the following works of Ernest Gellner: *Legitimation of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974); *Plough, Sword, and Book: The Structure of Human History* (London: Collins, 1988); and *Reason and Culture: The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).

[5] *Plough, Sword and Book*, op.cit. p. 201.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

different subtraction story: the removal of God from the meaning of life; the rise of humanism as a stand-alone set of values; the sentiment that religious belief is not an important human motivation; and the 'recession' of religion in the face of science, technology, and rationalisation.

Simple or complex? Even the list just mentioned is rather variegated and compound. Something is extracted – the main (entwined) candidates being God, religion, and belief-led motivation – and, once the extraction has been completed, something supposedly more important is left by way of residue – the possibilities including the essentially human, humanistic motivation, ordinary human desires, non-belief in general, scientific belief in particular, technological development *per se*, and rationality. In addition to this menu, further subtraction stories are instanced: when religion 'falls away' for example, we are understood to have subtracted childishness from the advent of cognitive maturity (575). When religion begins to disappear, *metaphysics* too, controversially construed as religion's close relative, is also held to be depleted (253). And as well as the 'anthropocentric shift', there is the (logically distinct) subtractionist concern to understand *nature in itself* (90, 290). 'Humanism' itself can be couched in wholly different ways, whether as the aboriginal 'human nature' that was always there, or as the encultured benevolent sociability of the modern moral and commercial order (294).

Now we are evidently dealing here with a whole *range* of implied attitudes and arguments, some of which run right against others, and which can be very differently combined or nuanced, partly depending on whether our focus is analytical/historical or normative/ideological. Thus, it is perfectly possible, indeed entirely credible, to be irreligious yet keen on metaphysics, to be resolutely secular yet deplore much of the modern moral order, to be progressivist about developing (some) ordinary human desires and capacities whilst rather despairing of other human traits, to be concerned with nature-in-itself partly as a means of *deflating* humanistic hubris rather than as a support for it, to be unbelieving oneself yet recognize the energies that religious motivation brings out in others; and so on. In rounding up these diverse, tensed outlooks and throwing them into the one 'whole package' of modern unbelief, Taylor is constructing a large subtraction story all of his own.

Form or content? As we saw, Taylor broadly endorses something like the familiar account of the 'coming of modern secularity'. He accepts the pertinence and reality of most of the factors that he thinks 'mainstream' accounts highlight – functional differentiation, disenchantment, privatization, urbanization, the technologization of everyday problems, the growth of science, and the decline of paternalist authority (429) – and indeed goes out of his way to emphasise how robust the mainstream view is. He feels that it can survive

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

the properly challenging protest that devout believing may not have been nearly so pervasive as routinely assumed, prior to secularization; and that it can bounce the complaint that religion is obviously alive and well today if only we broaden our sense of what religion involves. Along with sociologists such as Casanova and Martin, Taylor certainly wishes to 'cavil' at some of the details of the mainstream view – though we should note that those authors are more in the sociological mainstream than the 'secularist' sociologists they criticise – especially its tendency to associate 'disenchantment' with the decline of religion as such. But Taylor does not basically 'quarrel' with what someone like Steve Bruce says, either about what constitutes religion (it should not apply promiscuously to anything vaguely spiritual), or with Bruce's explanation for religion's decline over the long-term. He also fair-mindedly spots that Bruce is no straight 'eliminationist' with respect to religion, or that he thinks of it as false consciousness (434). Yet, remarkably, Bruce is the only 'standard' secularization theorist encountered at any length in the entire book. Understandably, then, Taylor has to pinch himself, as if having slightly lost his place, by asking again: 'So what beef do I have with (orthodox) secularization theory?' (431).

To clarify, he builds a house of debate, the ground floor of which (decline of belief over the long run) and most of the basement (the explanatory factors of urbanization, differentiation, rationalization, and so on) he is happy to share with secularizationists. But in the more normatively constructed upper story, things are not quite so cosy. It is there that contrary 'unthoughts' – shadows and foretellings – collide and cross uncomfortably. The secularist cannot but figure that if religion has declined in key respects, and if socio-cultural factors go a long way to explaining this, and if those socio-cultural factors persist, then religion's grip on our central understandings of what is going on in our social and personal worlds will continue to weaken, if fitfully. For Taylor, however, even if this line 'might be right', it is still *not* right, chiefly because of its seeming denial of the independent quality and force of religious motivation. Despite undeniable worldview pluralization, mutual fragilization, scientific hegemony and the rest, no inductive generalisation can be formed that guarantees religion's demise/dilution or that might move us to *expect* this – though his claim that the number of available positions is 'increasing without end' seems to support just such an inductive generalisation (437). But Taylor stands his ground, finding even the most nuanced secularizationist view 'deeply implausible', because he 'cannot see "the demand for religion" just disappearing like that' (435).

What this all means is that it is not exactly the *content* of secularization theory that is 'woefully inadequate' (267), but the subtractionist *form of comprehension*, which, we might say – Taylor never quite puts it like this – is too generically necessitarian,

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

singularist and discontinuous for his liking. To the imagined necessitarian, Taylor replies that things did not have to happen just like that, that the path to secular humanism was neither straight nor obvious, and that even now nothing says that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, cannot once again come to trump exclusive humanism. Against the singularist, he speaks of belief-pluralism and *multiple* modernities, with corresponding latitude in the forms and scale of spiritual meaning (21). And secular discontinuists must inevitably 'grievously misdescribe' our situation because, generally, 'our past is sedimented in our present', and specifically, prior to the Eighteenth century there had been many centuries of non-exclusive humanism (29). Given such entanglement, it is reasonable to assert that even today secular unbelief makes sense only by reference to God or denial of Him.

Qualifying or reversing the story? The unbelieving interlocutor need not rise to dispute most of these salutary counsels to be careful, except when they flip over into an unsustainable 'reverse' logic: that because of the important element of continuity in change, there has been *no* fundamental change; that because secularism started out as a Christian concept, it *always* has to remain such (the genetic fallacy is heartily at work in many such deductions); that because modernity is multiple, it holds *no* general implications that confront traditional believers with acute intellectual challenges; that because pluralism and contingency hold ever-open the *possibility* of continued and enhanced religious life, they make the latter *likely* too, at least as conventionally understood. These are all palpable, and damaging, *non-sequiturs*. Occasionally, in advocacy mode, Taylor does fall headlong into such 'reverse subtractionism', as in the dreary *a priori* ploy in which secular unbelief is summarized as just so many 'ways of denying transcendence' (61).

More worrying, because near-obscurantist, are the sections (556–70) in which philosophical articulations of the evidential standards of modern science are condemned as closed world structures and cramped horizons; in business, allegedly, for nothing more than spinning a vision designed to screen out that which is uncomfortably super-sensible. This commitment not only to the 'deconstruction of epistemology' but to its veritable overturning (559) represents a cavalier discounting not only of the defensible aspects of 'positivism', but also of the vibrantly imaginative and quintessentially 'open' character of the post-positivist mind set itself. This is because the latter, qua science, is not one iota less bound to the constraints of tough and public evidential reasoning than its more scientistic predecessors. But these aberrations aside, Taylor's main goal is just to try to get to evens: if believing is in trouble, so is unbelieving; if religious worldviews rely on something beyond verification, so does any firmly materialist metaphysic held to underlie the scientific quest. When social science

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

distances itself from faith-led perspectives on modern life because they seem to lack the appropriate epistemic neutrality, beware: there is a value-laden 'unthought' that grounds this very mode of critique. This '*tu quoque'* case-making certainly counts, but at most it carves out a space for agnosticism – and much further argument – rather than visibly 'beating out' the unbelieving 'package' as such.

Additions not subtractions? An intriguing part of Taylor's campaign against 'subtraction stories' is his Foucauldian proposition that core truths and powerful concepts, just like the social rules and norms with which they are associated, are novel *productions* rather than disclosed structures (255). Thus, the sociable and malleable 'human nature' of the Enlightenment, just like the latter's uncovering of the beneficent workings of the commercial marketplace, are remarkable *inventions*, *interventions*, *constructions*, and *achievements*, not a peeling back of inherited blinkers to reveal intrinsically progressive essences. The problem for Taylor, however, is that this is a radically *historicist* mode of apprehension, highlighting the transience and cultural relativity of *all* modes of belief that present themselves as unchanging verities. Religions of all types, but especially revealed religions, together with general anguished meta-concerns about 'faith', could hardly be expected to escape the harsh sceptical glare that such historicism happens also to cast upon paradigms like rationalism and humanism. The eternalist aspect of devotion to 'the God of Abraham' might particularly be thought to shrivel under this unwavering lens. Regimes of truth, with their distinctive 'ontic placements', come. . .and then they go.

Empirical and Interpreted History

I have been suggesting that what many will consider the intellectual heart of the matter in *A Secular Age*, namely the demolition of the 'subtraction stories', is by no means wholly successful or unambivalent. That being so, Taylor needs something more if he is to resist, other than emotionally, the inductive conclusion that seems to follow from his own portrayal of centuries-long pluralization and mutual fragilization of belief orientations, namely that diverse forms of unbelief will in due course spread further and that they will probably cease to need to define themselves 'negatively' against strong, traditionally understood religious belief. Three moves seem possible – these are my analytical handles, not Taylor's – to counter this prospect of, so to speak, the secularization of Secularism itself.

One move would be to contest the strength and precision of the apparent empirical trend. This could be done formalistically, through the familiar logical objection to inductive reasoning: just because things seem to be moving in a certain direction doesn't mean that

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

they will continue to do so; thus, anything can happen. Taylor certainly leans on this principle here and there, but I think he knows that it doesn't begin to address the important substantive matter, being a little like declaring that under conditions of steady global warming the weather may not in fact turn out to get unprecedentedly volatile or the ocean levels rise, and leaving it at that. A more direct approach would be to question the assumed empirical projections, either by taking a more global perspective, as in Berger's 'de-secularization of the world' thesis,[6] or, relatedly, by suggesting that various forms of revivalism, now that they are clearly present in western societies, will simply push back the anyway exaggerated progress of unbelieving secularism. Taylor would hesitate about that too, partly because he is trying to stick to western historical trends and values, where the broad story of secularization does apply, he thinks, and where the contemporary facts of revivalism are to say the least contestable – there are manifest continued tendencies towards secularity and secularism in, for example, Ireland, Spain, Italy, and Portugal.

More importantly, Taylor is not enamoured of the prospect of religion coming back courtesy of either fundamentalism or sheer demography; he wants to deliver arguments and evidence that show the route to transcendence emerging through the 'immanent frame' itself. If that is right, then conclusions like those of Norris and Inglehart[7] represent the real challenge. This is because these researchers, whilst giving strong indications of the outnumbering of people in secular families/societies by those in religious ones, persuasively posit nonetheless that in democratic states with high levels of material well-being and education, the tendency towards secularism and unbelief/agnosticism prevails. This is normatively as well as empirically challenging because it suggests that *should* the world become a better place, in terms of democracy, education and well-being – and what political progressive would not want *that*? – then such a place would be tendentially less believing.

A second theoretical move is available, one that takes the course of historical emergence more as a matter of epochal interpretation than one of empirical extrapolation. Taylor does not overtly platform this quasi-'Hegelian' approach, but it steers some of the songlines of the book. We cannot do without 'broad framework pictures of how history unfolds' (573), he tells us, within which our descriptive understanding must be placed. And subtraction stories seem most tangibly inadequate under that light rather than (only) in empirical

[6] Peter L. Berger, 'The Desecularisation of the World: A Global Overview', in Peter L. Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Michigan: W.B. Erdmans Publishing Co., 1999), pp. 1–18.

[7] Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

terms, simply because they do not conform to 'our best phenomenology' (609). According to the latter, there is some kind of collective 'we' that is the subject of historical understanding and change, a self-consciousness that must try to inhabit and own the changes that have led from solid belief to increasingly questioning belief-and-unbelief. And the main experiential-phenomenological expanse of history that secular outlooks fail comprehensively to grasp in this mode is their own heartland of lived modernity. Far beyond the agreed retreat of enchantment, modernity represents nothing less than a moral *malaise*, a 'terrible flatness' and pervasive cultural negativity, requiring and encouraging a diminished horizon of human spiritual expectation, and leaving unmet an awful, aching sense of emptiness. Thus, 'everyone understands' that there is a 'lack of thickness' in the culture of modernity, and understands its inability to supply a higher resonance and appropriate solemnity (307–10), notwithstanding the availability of alternative discourses, such as the artistic subtler languages.

Now, given Taylor's relentlessly dismal portrayal of the modern moral sensibility – it is as though Dickens's *Hard Times* said it all and still applies – we might think that modernity is something that simply needs to be *reversed*, and the cultural aspirations behind it *rescinded*. But Taylor is clear that there is no going back, and that traditionalism *per se* will not do. Rather we must see that in its very negativity, moral modernity can turn out to hold lessons for the good, as long as we boldly take up an 'anticipatory confidence' (550). The more we can take the moral modern order as one of those hard-earned zig-zags of development, the more we can transcend its limitations, seeing it as the negation that in turn has to be negated. Moral modernity might then be regarded as the externalized *expression*, the socio-material *form*, and the historically alienated *moment* of human consciousness as it ascends towards proper (spiritual) self-realization. Indeed, in a sense Reflexive Spirit could *only* come to full and final self-realization through recognition of the *necessity* of its having this negative moment, with the latter then taking on a newly figured significance, something preserved in and through its dialectical supersession.

This is perhaps to over-Hegelianize Taylor. But it serves to capture his sense of the necessity-in-contingency of the modern moral order, and his conviction that good can and must come of it. It also underlines Gordon Graham's forceful argument – one that unbelieving intellectuals should find discomforting – first, that that no contemporary philosophy of history can quite free itself from the influence of Hegel, and secondly, that all philosophy of history is ultimately 'sacred' history.[8]

[8] Gordon Graham, *The Shape of the Past. A Philosophical Approach to History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

But what to make of this? (as Taylor might put it). One problem – complex of course, but substantial nonetheless, and barely broached by the author – is the 'Popperian' complaint about the *unfalsifiability* of philosophies of history of this kind, and the related question of the extent to which interpretative frameworks are mutually incompatible and in a sense imprisoning. At times, Taylor seems committed to a relativist take on such matters – your 'unthought' clashes with mine as though we occupied different cultures (817), your 'closed' world structure, and my 'open' stance are entirely and pre-empirically 'shot through with "values" '(560). Yet, against that: 'I am not arguing some "post-modern" thesis that we are each imprisoned in our own outlook, and can do nothing to rationally convince each other' (428). Another highly contentious issue concerns the legitimacy of any phenomenology featuring a collective 'we' as its self-conscious Subject. How can the 'we' of the archaic societies, for example, be the very same we of western monotheism, or the we of industrial modernism, or the we of communism, feminism, or contemporary Islam?

Then there is the element of arrogance involved in Taylor taking it upon himself to decide what understandings conform or don't conform to the reality of 'our' situation and experience. What if 'our best phenomenology' is just his own subjective impressionism, however interesting that might be? Like it or not, this is partly an empirical matter, around which we need to take a little more distance from any set of preferred concepts. What exactly, for example, is to count as telling evidence for something by turns so dramatic and so vague as that terrible, utter sense of emptiness? Why exactly should we now (presumably) translate such things as existential angst, educational underperformance, lack of self-esteem, youthful violence, social inequality, and so on, into this loosest of registers? How many people has Taylor consulted in deciding that *everyone* understands that what is lacking in modern culture is 'thickness'? And is the 'everyone' of 1892 *the same* 'everyone' of, say, 1982? Is the variety of practices that people engage in to repair whatever sense of spiritual lack they feel always appropriately designated as *'religious'* and always to be seen as *'thick'*? Such pertinent questions quickly proliferate, and they puncture Taylor's perspective partly because of his relentlessly single-line message to the effect that utilitarianism and scientism in the bourgeois age were uniformly repressive and soul-crushing, just as everything in modernity testifies to that terrible lack and ache. Far from being phenomenologically adequate, Taylor's account signally fails to get properly 'inside' the considerable variety and creativity of experience (as well as the crushed potentials) that life in the modern west has visited upon people of many sorts. The tediously repetitive resort to an all-purpose notion of the unmitigated 'malaise' that 'we' have experienced for 300 years thus represents another massive subtraction story in its own right. To the contention that 'everyday' life

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

in modernity is nothing but terrible flatness and keeping the 'lack' at bay, one is tempted to retort: try being a slave, serf or peasant.

Transcendence, Fullness

Taylor's third anti-subtractionist impulse, implicit in the other two but normatively primary, features the idea of transcendence. As noted, Taylor cannot accept that just anything vaguely spiritual constitutes religion. He does think that 'post-atheist' spirituality is growing (534–5), and that out of 'undemanding spirituality' a bigger commitment might come (512). But these suggestions support only the bland version of the main thesis: that modern science and materialism are not *bound* to lead to unbelief. For a more bracing prospect, one that brings Taylor's Christian convictions to the fore, a 'strong' sense of religion is required, and he couches this in terms of the distinction between transcendence and immanence (15). As with the other moves, this one's clarity and drive can also be queried.

In terms of basic coherence, a number of observations can be made. The transcendence/immanence couplet, Taylor says, is imperative 'for the purposes of my principal thesis' (632), yet, earlier he owns that transcendence is a 'very slippery' notion (16), indeed an 'extremely unclear and unsatisfactory' one, such that its very contrast with immanence – and this may not be 'the right term' either – is accepted to be problematical (632). The initial formulation certainly appears straightforward enough, and *firm*: whereas the immanent frame posits all normativity and explanation in terms of this-worldly existence and human flourishing, transcendence refers to our threefold orientation towards a higher good, a higher power, and a realm of existence *beyond* all nature and human life (20). However, complications soon arise. For one thing, Taylor seems caught between defining transcendence in the strictest, threefold sense, and accepting that the three different dimensions are logically and experientially separate from one another (430–31). Moreover, if for exclusive humanists 'the door is barred against further discovery', due to their utter commitment to the immanent frame, the proper sense of transcendence also eludes 'many believers (the fanatics, but also more than these)', though presumably *not* because of their commitment to immanence (769). So the transcendence/immanence contrast does not after all map on to that of religious believing/unbelieving.

Secondly, a curious fractal replication of the main idea occurs (544–49). At first, the primary bifurcation is that between the transcendent and the immanent frames *tout court*. It then turns out that the 'two great polar positions' are not so much these, but rather a pair of correlates operating within the immanent frame itself, namely open-ness to transcendence, and closure to it. These 'two readings'

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

still reflect contrasting 'overall takes on human life', and indeed movement between them requires a kind of 'conversion', but still, they are not exactly two completely clashing frames as such; rather they signal different psychological pulls, two 'solicitations' – the 'draw to transformation', and a 'congeries of resistances' to that – both operating *inside* the kind of immanent understanding that Taylor's secularity story accepts as 'common to all of us in the modern West'.

However, this fractal replication seems to breach Taylor's elementary specifications of the very meaning of immanence and transcendence. The immanent order, after all, is something that is unequivocally 'self-sufficient', and so needs to be 'understood on its own, without reference to interventions from outside'. And it is all-encompassing too, comprising an impersonal 'constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral'. This is why only exclusive humanists and scientistic reductionists are set up by Taylor as its consistent defenders. But in that case, it simply does not seem possible to have *two takes* within the immanent frame, one of which does not actually accept the immanent order *qua* self-sufficient. He tries again: the immanent frame refers to this-worldly structures, without reference to the supernatural or transcendent, but this does not rule out the possibility that for 'final sense making, we might have to invoke something transcendent' (594). Yet if immanence is *defined* as referring to self-sufficient this-worldly structures, and even if, by this stage, the non-immanent position is becoming patently weak (we '*might*' have to invoke '*something*' transcendent), then that possibility surely *is* ruled out? *Either* transcendent final sense-making is ruled out, *or* the foundational concepts that organize the whole book need replacing by others far less binary in character. Taylor *asserts* that the immanent frame can be lived 'inherently open to transcendence'(545). But by his own ruling, what *inheres* in immanence are natural existence and human values, nothing more. Given such inconsistency, the moral quality as well as conceptual stability of Taylor's rhetorical 'tilting' comes into question. This is because he steadily cranks up a scenario according to which, counter-intuitively, it is those positions within the immanent frame that cleave most closely to his own specification of immanence that are deemed to be wholly a matter of 'spin', cramping us with pictures that hold us captive (549–51). Contrariwise, those positions – again, let us mark, positions supposedly still within the *immanent* frame – that manage to be primarily oriented to transcendence are the ones we are pushed to see as refreshingly emancipatory and on no account a mere matter of spin.

Leaving to one side such evident problems of cogency, the considerate unbeliever must still face the charge that immanence alone cannot provide explanatory or normative satisfaction in the way that open-ness to transcendence can. On the explanatory front, Taylor

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

develops this line only in brief clips. For example, in a discussion of archaic religion, he poses the issue of whether we can regard 'socially established religious life' in terms of some ontic/psychic capacity, an 'inescapable dimension of human life', or whether reference 'to some human-transcending spiritual reality' is required (147). Passing up the opportunity here to introduce and debate a variety of immanent approaches – from evolutionary psychology to 'human nature' to 'socio-cultural development', none of which, it can be agreed, are (yet) fully convincing – Taylor simply confides that he has 'strong hunches' about such matters. But if we are to prefer his transcendent approach over any or all of the immanent options, we need to know precisely what the explanatory hunch *is* concerning, presumably, the purposes and investments of a monotheistic God in a 'paleo-Durkheimian' epoch in which He could not possibly be recognised.

In another passage, Taylor doubts whether we can account for the force of creative agency, or ethical demands, or the power of art 'without speaking in terms of some transcendent being or force which interpellates us' (597). Now, one half of this deduction seems right enough: under any stringently reductionist regime of naturalism it is indeed hard to compute aesthetic transportation or any kind of intrinsic moral ascent. But we need to bear in mind, first, that immanent perspectives are available that are almost as anti-naturalistic as Taylor's. Roberto M. Unger, for example, praises the animating energy of many religious people and straps together a raft of 'spiritual' qualities in his prescription for the kind of 'awakened' social self that would be adequate to the higher phase of experimental democracy that he recommends. Yet Unger's thinking about people's lives and capacities remains utterly historicist, offering no room at all for any 'evanescent spiritual substance that escapes nature and its laws'.[9]

A second point would be that if naturalism has typically, to date, come in reductionist forms, this only signals the continuing need to develop more appropriately complex, fallible and revisable versions. There is no reason in principle why, under such a broadly conceived naturalistic horizon, the specificity of human qualities and the sometimes dramatic shifts of consciousness that we undergo cannot be perfectly well acknowledged. Indisputably, we are a naturally evolved and evolving species, but our kind of being, naturally, is a social and creative kind, one that is capable of intervening in the workings of other natural tendencies and some of our own. We may not get definitive explanations under this complex and socially-embedded form of naturalism, but we must ask if Taylor is not for his part seeking an

[9] Roberto M. Unger, *The Self Awakened: Pragmatism Unbound* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 49.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

impossible kind of certitude, and one that jumps too hastily to its conclusions. For example, from the initial observation of 'moments of fusion which wrench us out of the everyday' (516–7) it is immediately affirmed that these represent 'an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond life' (638) and a veritable 'yearning for eternity' (722) that puts us in contact with something beyond ourselves. Well, that may be how it *feels*, *sometimes*, for *some*; but it isn't necessarily how it *is*. When Taylor counters that 'it is not obvious a priori that the sense of something beyond, inherent in these fusions, can be ultimately explained (away) in naturalistic categories'(518), we can go along with this to some extent, not least because naturalism as a mode of thought is constitutively critical of both the obvious and the *a priori*.

Explanatory questions then drift into normative ones, especially with Taylor's phenomenological drive in gear. The pivotal transitional concept in that regard is 'fullness', something that he is sure 'we all' understand as a heightened experiential state, touching us at least occasionally, and always touching upon altogether higher things. Paradigmatically, he relates how the young Bede Griffiths encountered fullness, apprehending in the intensity of birdsong and sunset a wonderful, awesome, holy vista – as though the sky 'was but a veil before the face of God' (5). Taylor accepts that unbelievers too have such moments, and that experiences of the relevant type are 'incredibly various'. But he still avers that such epiphanic moments show how paltry is the recourse simply to notions of human flourishing. The exclusive humanist, therefore, while not untouched by a sense of fullness, perforce must be 'misrecognizing' it (768).

The starting point in any critical evaluation of this run of thought must again be to query the soundness and universality of the phenomenological 'we' that is invoked. What, we might ask, does empirical psychology or cultural history tell us about just how, and just how frequently, we 'see our lives' in such terms? And just how unfathomably 'transcendent' are the experiences themselves? There surely has to be more to go on here than the testimony of Griffiths, whose account appears to be a reconstruction, texted later in life and after a religious conversion, of a remembered youthful episode. Absent the intermediate conversion, and we seem to be dealing with the kind of thing witnessed by many a romantic hillwalker, first time parent, inspired academic, marvellous musician, or one of her fans, from which nothing specifically religious follows, however tremendously energising those moments might be. Part of the problem here is Taylor's susceptibility to something like the fallacy of misplaced concreteness: from the existence of a *sense* of fullness his wordplay insistently has it that there is a *place* of fullness, which can then only be couched as existing somewhere decidedly beyond-the-human.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

That aside, unbelievers are *not* required to renounce all notions of the transcendent 'beyond' the human. If 'exclusive humanism' serves to capture many unbelievers' moral and political inclinations, our broad naturalism, and the state of scientific knowledge, force us to a more expansive view of how 'we' fit into a vast universe, something that could never be fully encompassed by any single cognitive or imaginative frame. So, in addition to holding some confident this-worldly orientations, some unbelievers are continually – epistemically and existentially – 'troubled' by the implications of our essential historicity, vulnerability and smallness in that kind of gigantic, ever-changing spatio-temporal context. We are also continually troubled by the parallel fact that our personal or collective place within the vastness and complexity of our own social world can never be guaranteed either. But none of this represents, as Taylor reductively alleges, 'nostalgia for transcendence' as such, nor does it mean 'closing the window' on transcendence 'as though there were nothing beyond' (7, 638). Rather, it is a coming to terms with what we have good grounds for thinking actually does lie beyond and within the human. Taylor seeks to rebut Martha Nussbaum's presentation of a similar argument either by wrongly characterising her stance as advocating a self-defeatist 'pox on all transcendence' (629–30), or by stigmatising it as an inferior sort of *internal* transcendence. But the argument is rolled out by way of grand stipulation only.

Conclusion

I have been tracking down what I think are the core positions of *A Secular Age*, taking issue with their coherence, content and rhetorical overkill. But I also hope to have shown that Taylor's extraordinary construction still allows many points of contact between secular believers and considerate unbelievers. If those contact points are unlikely, in metaphysical or explanatory terms, to generate consensus, there is still plenty to be working on together towards moral and political uplift. Overall, the exchange certainly sharpens the realization that we are in a 'postsecular' phase of thinking. This does not mean that unbelievers have any new reason to soften their scepticism about higher non-natural entities and non-human moral agencies. But it does provoke the thought that 'atheism', as such, is only one consequence of a naturalistic and humanistic worldview, not something especially important or 'leading' in its own right. And it also means that further theorization is needed on just what kinds of naturalism and humanism now need to be articulated and woven together. Such renewed reflection can only gain through strenuous engagement with Taylor's special intervention.

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

Gregor McLennan
School of Sociology
Politics and International Studies
University of Bristol
4, Priory Road, Bristol B58 1TY
Email: G.McLennan@bristol.ac.uk

Charles Taylor replies:

I read this paper with a mounting sense of non-communication. The essential points of my argument hadn't come through. This is not the first time I see this happening. I can see that I did a very poor job of expressing my main theses in the book. Let me try to do a little better here, around at least a couple of points.

The first reason for much misunderstanding around *A Secular Age* is the way I chose to portray the ongoing exchange and debate and mutual reaction which is central to (what I want to define) as the modern secular age in the West. This is characterized by multiplicity, and very often by mutual reaction. That is, we define our positions often in part by a sense of the absurdity, or moral unacceptability, or implausibility of a benchmark view that we are rejecting. Common benchmark targets of this kind of self-clarification through negation are (what is seen as) the orthodox theism which has dominated our civilization for centuries, on one hand, and various kinds of reductive mechanistic materialism on the other. Lots and lots of people distance themselves from both these benchmarks. Those who do so occupy a wide and growing range of different positions (this is part of what I call the 'nova').

This galloping plurality is one of the central theses of the book. But somehow I failed to get it across. There is a paragraph starting bottom page 633 of McLennan's paper which begins 'now we are evidently dealing here with a whole *range* of implied attitudes and arguments … This goes on to enumerate a number of different ways of not believing in God which are very different from each other', and then concludes: 'In rounding up these diverse, tensed outlooks and throwing them into the one "hole package" of modern unbelief …'. 'Whole packages' are exactly what I'm not trying to engage in. My point is that there are lots and lots of positions which only have in common that they would like to distinguish themselves from both benchmark targets, but very widely vary from each other. Some of these are enumerated in the heart of the paragraph I've been quoting from McLennan.

One problem I faced was: how to give a sense of this swirling debate/exchange/mutual reaction? How to set out different positions without repeating again and again: 'in the opinion of group A'; 'in

© 2010 The Author
New Blackfriars © 2010 The Dominican Society

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2010.01394_1.x Published online by Cambridge University Press