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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

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the opinion of group B'. My solution to that (and not only in this book) was to launch as soon as possible into the discourse of different positions, and even into their rhetoric; this in order to give a sense of why these positions are attractive to those who hold them. So there is lots of implicit *oratio obliqua* in the book. How hazardous a procedure this is I have more than once experienced. It is easy for a reader to fail to see that I'm reporting on commonly held positions, and to take these positions for my own. And indeed, because I think that full disclosure is also due to the reader in this kind of work, I also towards the end do make a couple of statements in my own voice, some of which partially overlap with passages earlier reporting on common positions.

So a great deal of implicit *oratio* obliqua somehow emerges as 'the tediously repetitive resort to an all-purpose notion of unmitigated 'malaise' that 'we' have experienced for 300 years' (page 639, bottom). I'm not quite sure what this is meant to convey, but perhaps McLennan thinks that my thesis really is that *everyone* since 1700 experiences the world this way. On page 642 he takes a quote from page 597 in the book which he construes with the propositional attitude ascription 'Taylor doubts that'; but the point was to articulate not my own view, but a challenge which arises in the debate.

Or again: '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' (page 638.) I think this refers to pages 307–310 of the book, but it is emphatically not my view.

Now it is not to be doubted that I am not totally even-handed. There are meta-positions, which assert that we can decide the question of belief or its opposite(s) in a few well-chosen lines. There are on one side those who might still believe in the traditional proofs for the existence of God, understood as binding proofs for any rational mind. And then there are those who would tell us that 'science has established' that there is no God or that religion is bunk. I think a) that both these positions don't cut it, and b) that they make impossible the really interesting debates about the meaning of human life, the nature and sources of violence, etc., etc, that we ought to be having, in a spirit of mutual respect.

As to (a), people like Dawkins and Dennett assume the adequacy of a mechanistic reductionist explanation of human life as a key part of their argument. Dennett's 'universal acid' eats away at all presumptions of ontologically grounded meaning. But who assures us that these reductive explanations really work? In fact, only such reductivists think that they are really relevant to the issue of belief or unbelief (in all their varied forms). Many of the most convinced atheists have also produced the strongest arguments against such

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reductionism (including my mentor Maurice Merleau-Ponty). We would do well to make short work of these too quick ways of resolving our metaphysical, or spiritual or religious issues.

Misunderstandings abound, and I could go on for quite a long time. But just a word about subtraction stories. These are defined by contrast with the view of history as exhibiting new constructions of meaning and practice. This is taken by McLennan as a radically historicist, relativist position (page 636), and admittedly, I didn't engage fully enough in dispelling this supposed link - between acknowledging the importance of construction and embracing relativism - which defines various 'post-modernist' positions. I have argued that elsewhere. But I make the point here, because it is obvious that this basic contrastive feature of what I called subtraction stories didn't get across.

I see once again how inadequately signposted my book is.

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