

## CRITICAL NOTICE

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). x + 874, price \$39.95 hb.

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Charles Taylor's portrayal of the emergence and character of the secular modern West is a work of formidable learning and penetrating philosophical insight. That the narrative is, occasionally, annoyingly repetitious and lacks the flow of a continuous argument is also perhaps as much a virtue as a vice. For while the repetitions revisit old ground they often do so in terms that involve a subtle shift in perspective. Likewise, the development of the argument in the form of "a set of interlocking essays" (p. x) rather than as a seamless whole helps to restrain any tendency to downplay the awkward particularity of the evidence in the interests of compelling exposition. Taylor's hermeneutic method and refusal to rush to premature judgement reinforce this restraint.

Of course, secularity, like religion, is notoriously hard to define. Taylor deals with this difficulty by focusing his enquiry on Latin Christendom and seeking to understand the "move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others" (p. 3). One of Taylor's main themes is a critique of "subtraction stories" that try to explain the emergence of secular modernity as being an escape from or rejection of the errors, superstitions, or limitations of the medieval outlook.

Taylor exposes the historical amnesia of such stories by sketching, in contrast, a narrative of constructive change. Change not only of belief but, more fundamentally, of the background frameworks of understanding and practice and the related possibilities of experience and imagination. And it is this emphasis on background change – especially in its moral and social dimensions – that is most distinctive of Taylor's enquiry, reflecting his long-standing opposition to representationalism in epistemology. Since it is

constructive this change involves much more than liberation or loss. As such it cannot be fully explained by reference to supposedly universal features of human nature. This is not to say that the key differences between the medieval and modern outlooks lie beyond the reach of rational arbitration. But the arbitration required, like that between Kuhnian paradigms, is complex and will appeal inevitably to considerations of “hermeneutical adequacy.”

As Taylor sees it a key driver of change has been the determination “to make over the whole society to higher standards” (p. 63), in short the drive for “Reform.” The term is apt but potentially misleading. For what Taylor means by “Reform” includes but is by no means limited to the Reformation. It refers more broadly to those many currents of social, moral and spiritual renewal which, by virtue of their scope and intensity, tend to be highly interventionist, promote uniformity, and lead, often unintentionally, to a rise in the use of instrumental modes of reason. These currents first appear not during the Reformation but earlier, in the late Middle Ages. There, in the context of radically clearer theological conceptions of the natural/supernatural distinction, the currents of Reform begin to undermine the medieval conception of the self and its world. Taylor charts the processes of change over the next several centuries. What emerges is a transformed and recognisably modern conception of the self – that of the “disciplined, disengaged agent” (p. 142). This conception has two main and closely related components: disenchantment and instrumental control.

In the medieval era “porous” selves inhabited an enchanted cosmos. As such, they were sensible of and felt themselves vulnerable to a range of spiritual powers and forces. The boundary between mind and world was therefore hazy and unclear. By contrast, the emerging modern self inhabits an increasingly disenchanted universe. Immediate awareness of the spiritual realm and the related sense of vulnerability are in steady decline. For the modern “buffered” self the boundary between mind and world becomes more and more fixed while the world, losing its intrinsic value and spiritual power, becomes to an ever greater extent the object of instrumental reason. In parallel with these developments the boundaries between self and others are redrawn. Social order is no longer ordained by God or hallowed by immutable tradition. Rather, it emerges as a construct fashioned by responsible individuals acting for mutual benefit. As part of this change various modes of previously social intimacy become reserved for an expanding private domain. Within this domain enriched forms of self-awareness develop involving a more reflexive “distancing” from and control over a variety of powerful emotions and bodily functions.

The expansion of the range of instrumental reason goes hand in hand with another important dimension of disenchantment, the atrophy of the sense of sacred time. Time comes to be perceived in pervasively secular terms – as a resource to be measured and managed. And since this transformation takes place in the context of both a clear distinction between the natural and the supernatural and the rise of mechanistic science, everyday life is eventually experienced and understood as embedded within an “immanent” natural order – or “frame” – that stands over against a now merely possible “transcendent” spiritual realm. Indeed, Taylor maintains that “the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West . . .” (p. 543).

The “immanent frame” is, in important respects, ontologically indeterminate. Thus, while it is hospitable to atheistic materialism it may also be construed by orthodox religious believers as open to the transcendent. According to Taylor, what inclines us in one direction or the other is “our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings” (p. 550), which is not to say that the resulting positions are arbitrary or irrational. Taylor’s point is, rather, that the “over-all take” relative to which supporting reasons may be given transcends the reasons themselves, and its embrace therefore involves a degree of “anticipatory confidence,” a sort of “leap of faith.” The embrace is also, commonly, unwitting, and a particular strength of Taylor’s account is his discussion of the ways in which the background “take” may hold the imagination captive so securely that its influence is almost unchallengeable. In such circumstances, rival views may appear incredible, even eccentric.

Nevertheless, it is possible, albeit rarely, to both acknowledge one’s “leap of faith” and understand the power and attraction of a radically opposed position. This is to enter what Taylor, in honour of William James, calls the “Jamesian open space” – the position of “full lucidity.” To stand in this space is to experience those “cross pressures” that Taylor claims to be a widespread feature of life in the modern West. It is not that all or even most people actually *experience* being torn between atheistic materialism and orthodox religion but rather that almost all positions concerning the ends of life “are drawn to define themselves at least partly in relation to these extremes” (p. 676). And this includes the positions of those who decline to endorse either extreme, preferring instead one of the many modes of life whose ontological commitments remain vague and uncertain.

Taylor explores this “cross-pressured” terrain in a way that is notable for the range and quality of its imaginative sympathy. A unifying theme is the deepening sense of the self which arises in the 19th century as a legacy of

Romantic critiques of “Enlightenment” views of the meaning and ends of life. So influential is this legacy that Taylor maintains that “[t]he deeper, more anchored forms of unbelief arising in . . . [this] century are basically the same as those which are held today” (p. 369).

Three features of this legacy stand out. Firstly, the emergence of the aesthetic as an ethical category. Beauty becomes a key to the creative recovery of both the unity of self and world undermined by the dominance of instrumental reasoning, and a dimension of ethical depth felt to be absent in the 18th-century concern with a morality of correct conduct. The second feature of the Romantic legacy is the development of those “subtler languages” – a term borrowed from Shelley – in which creative artists sought to give expression to this enriched aesthetic sensibility. These “languages” are characteristically unclear in their ontological commitments. The third feature is the impact on the ethical imagination of the dawning sense that human life has emerged out of the obscurity of “deep time” in a universe that is not only unfathomably vast but also in constant evolution. Of particular interest here is Taylor’s treatment of those “post-Schopenhauerian visions,” which, in ascribing positive value to the irrational and violent dimensions of human life, advance the most radical of all challenges to humanism.

It becomes clear therefore that major fault lines are opening up within the rival camps of belief and unbelief. While atheistic materialists condemn religion and reject any good that transcends human living, they divide among themselves between secular humanists and neo-Nietzschean anti-humanists. A similar split opens up among religious believers, between those who repudiate and those, like Taylor, who broadly endorse the “practical primacy of life” (p. 637), which is at the heart of the moral outlook of secular humanism.

Against this background, Taylor depicts the heirs to the Romantic legacy as engaging with the contest between belief and unbelief not primarily as intellectual protagonists but rather as ethical subjects struggling to make sense of their lives. In this context, the varieties of belief and unbelief are portrayed as rival attempts to interpret and negotiate two central ethical and existential dilemmas. The first is the conflict between the cherishing of ordinary human desires and deep-seated aspirations to transcend their limitations. The second is the conflict between the moral imperative to root out human violence and the demand to acknowledge that violence has a “depth meaning” that manifests the numinous.

As a philosophical analysis Taylor’s consideration of these dilemmas is consistently stimulating. For example, he advances a cogent critique of

Martha Nussbaum's attempt to do justice, within a framework of atheistic humanism, to aspirations to transcend ordinary human living. Another highlight is his sympathetic reading of Georges Bataille's account of the significance of violence, disorder, and sexual abandon in realising a sense of immediacy and communion absent in the daily life of disciplined, instrumentally reasoning modern selves. Nor is Taylor's attention by any means restricted to the work of philosophers. To the contrary, the analysis of Bataille is complemented by a sensitive reading of Robinson Jeffers' aesthetic of suffering and cruelty. And there are similarly insightful discussions of figures as diverse as Schiller, Camus and Gerard Manley Hopkins. And many more.

But although philosophically stimulating, important questions arise about the relevance of this analysis to Taylor's overall project, which is to understand the emergence and secularity of modern Western *society*. For one thing, it is striking that, neo-Nietzscheans apart, very few of the creative exemplars of modern sensibility are drawn from contemporary culture. It is difficult to suppress a suspicion that this reflects the spiritual exhaustion of the Romantic legacy. It is also notable that the material considered represents very largely the perceptions of members of cultural elites. It remains far from clear what connection this has to the sensibilities and beliefs of the wider population.

The gaps in Taylor's argument raise matters of philosophical as well as sociological concern, most significantly in his depiction of the "Modern Moral Order" of the West. Taylor maintains – and it is a theme "central" to the whole work – that within this Order "universal human rights and welfare" is endorsed as "one of our crucial goals" (p. 608). Moreover, says Taylor, "I want to understand this as our stepping out into a wider, qualitatively different sense of inter-human solidarity," a step that is "analogous to certain precedent ones in history, inaugurated, for instance, by the Buddha, by Stoicism, by the New Testament preaching . . . and by Muhammad" (ibid.). Taylor illustrates this new moral sensibility with a quotation from Hemmingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; it is "a feeling of consecration to a duty toward all of the oppressed of the world . . ." (ibid.). Remarkably, Taylor provides no substantial justification for these claims. Indeed, he seems unaware that any is required. He concentrates instead on meta-ethical issues such as how best we can "make sense of our feeling of obligation to all human beings . . ." (p. 693). It is simply taken for granted that we feel this way.

The problem is not that there is nothing to be said in favour of Taylor's claims, it is that so much can be said against them. To take just one

example, Taylor cites the work of Médecins Sans Frontières as an instance of “altruism on a global scale” (p. 692). Quite so. But it is far from obvious that altruism of this sort is a value of any great importance in secular modernity. On the contrary, it is at least arguable that it is a reaction against the self-centredness that pervades Western society. This is not to deny that the behaviour of those who sacrifice themselves for the welfare of strangers in far-off lands is admirable. But such admiration, like admiration for Christians who love their enemies, does not necessarily entail either the existence or the recognition of a moral *obligation* to do likewise.

Sceptical objections arise also in respect of Taylor’s meta-ethical arguments. While he endorses the “practical primacy of life” central to secular modernity, Taylor also maintains that “the metaphysical primacy of life espoused by exclusive humanism is wrong, and stifling, and . . . puts in danger the practical primacy” (p. 637). He aims to show that a religious framework, although by no means unproblematic, both makes better sense of secular moral sensibilities and offers a richer “moral source” for their renewal.

But hard-headed secularists who share Taylor’s wariness of transcendental arguments are unlikely to be convinced by his appeal to considerations of hermeneutical adequacy. For by endorsing the “practical primacy of life,” Taylor accords ordinary human flourishing a very privileged place within the religious viewpoint whose interpretive power he commends. And this can hardly fail to intensify the scepticism of secularists who deny God’s existence precisely because of the ubiquity of apparently *meaningless* human suffering. Moreover, if God does not exist then orthodox religion is, in reality, a perversion of humanity’s true freedom, the freedom famously described by Russell as that of being “the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value.”

Taylor’s take on these issues raises the broader question of his overall approach to what we might call “progressive” readings of secular modernity. In general, he pays little attention to socially conservative as distinct from radical critics of progressive views. Thus there is space for Foucault and Bataille but none for, say, Leo Strauss or Harvey Mansfield. This has the effect of largely excluding from critical appraisal a range of social issues on which radicals and progressives are, in broad terms, allied. Which is not to suggest that Taylor is uncritically “progressive”; he is far too subtle and honest a philosopher for that. But all the same, his criticism, for example, of the oppressive excesses of political correctness, although wellmade does not extend as far as questioning the basis of feminism or affirmative action. It is thus a significant nuance, but a nuance nonetheless.

Nuance abounds also in Taylor's lengthy treatment of Roman Catholic responses to secular modernity. And since this is Taylor's most detailed consideration of a contemporary religious outlook it is of more than merely confessional interest. Once more Taylor's line is broadly progressive but far from unreservedly so. Thus, his trenchant criticism of the culture of "clericalism, moralism, and . . . fear" (p. 503), which was "largely repudiated" by the Second Vatican Council, is qualified by a recognition of the risks involved in carelessly abandoning the spiritual and ascetic disciplines of the pre-conciliar Church.

Unfortunately, the qualifications fall short of engaging in any substantial way with the conservative critique of progressive Catholicism of the kind advanced, for example, by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As a result, Taylor's progressive emphasis on the importance of freedom and diversity within the Church is never confronted by a robust conservative argument for the necessity of law and authority as a constitutive condition of authentic human freedom. This has damaging effects in a variety of areas, most notably in ethics, for in Taylor's hermeneutic reflection there is no counterpart to the conception of objective natural order, which underpins traditional Catholic ethical teaching. As a consequence, Taylor's vision of Catholic Christianity is more an array of thought-provoking insights than a candidate for a rationally compelling interpretive outlook. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Taylor's main sources are the works of Ivan Illich, Charles Peguy and Gerard Manley Hopkins. *It is, however, far from convincing as an argument for the merits of a religious perspective as a source for moral renewal.*

For all that, it would be wrong to conclude this review on an overly critical note because despite its flaws, when taken as a whole, this work displays an ambition in scope, a range and depth of learning, and a generosity of spirit that have few equals in recent Anglo-American philosophy. It is essential reading.

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