THE DEEP CONDITIONS OF SECULARITY

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In modern societies and cultures today religion is widely perceived as basically, even if not merely trivially, “optional.” This is a contention strongly advocated by Charles Taylor, most notably in his monumental A Secular Age. Throughout his career, Taylor has made the question of religion in modernity the core of his interests even though his own religious commitment as “a Christian who finds greatness in some facets of Islam, Judaism, [and] Buddhism” is not overly accentuated in most of his scholarly writings. In his most recent work, A Secular Age, Taylor addresses challenging issues of what he calls the “contemporary spiritual experience” and speaks to “the spiritual hungers and tensions of secular modernity.” There is a great depth and richness to this magisterial work and one would be hard-pressed to do justice to it within the confines of a single article. For present purposes, therefore, I wish to limit myself to three aspects of this immensely suggestive if not uncontroversial work. First, I wish to examine whether there is in fact a possible reversibility or revisability to the so-called ‘optional’ nature of belief that Taylors thinks is characteristic of the secular age; second, I wish to scrutinize Taylor’s notion of “immediacy” of belief in the same milieu; third, I wish to interrogate his use of the term “fullness” in delineating the temper of the secular age.

The Secular Age as Categorically Different, yet without Rupture

Taylor describes the secular age as an era of genuine newness. It would be categorically different from all earlier historical transformations, which may also have represented important breaks with their respective pasts, but hardly the near-total rupture that inaugurated the dawning of modernity as we know it. It is as if an irrevocable “learning process” (Habermas) lies behind us, blocking all possibility of unreflective return or reversal (either as nostalgia, psychological regression or political reaction). We simply can no longer inhabit our ideas (including the rhetorical and visual remnants of old lore) uncritically, in the same unquestioned way as did earlier generations before the arrival of the secular age. What has changed, then, is our “global” or “whole context” and “background”: “Naiveté is now unavailable to anyone, believer and unbeliever alike.”

This new “global” condition is not merely an empirical or even historical phenomenon, nor can it be attributed to the de facto presence of growing numbers of increasingly diverse social and cultural groups (as any purely sociological or demographic investigation would seem to imply):

We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably unclouded people, of good will, can and do disagree on. We are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently; that power, fullness, exile, etc., can take different shapes. The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as naïve and reflective, because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background. It is this shift in background, in the whole context in which we experience and search for fullness, that I am calling the coming of a secular age. How did we move from a condition where, in Christendom, people lived naïvely within a theistic construal, to one in which we all shunt between two stances, in which everyone’s construal shows up as such; and in which moreover, unbelief has become for many the major default option?

Whenever we look at others, whether groups or individuals, near or far away, with these “two stances,” when we “come of age” precisely by learning to live without dogma and prejudice; in short, to the extent that we are willing and capable of viewing other people’s (and, indeed, our own) positions and choices as plausible alternative ways of life, most of which are not necessarily incompatible (or which, where incompatible, do not necessarily need to “clash”), we do in fact embody this historical or, rather, historial transition and conversion. But also: whenever we do so successfully, we have been enabled at a deeper level to place ourselves within in a larger scheme of things, which we may come to accept and endorse along the way, even though we cannot see its grounds and consequences all the way through. At the same time, we do not claim that we came to this dual point of view by way of introspection and/or dialogue, deductive reasoning and/or empirical observation or, indeed, through any second-order philosophical reflection upon either one (or all) of these mental and experiential situations and procedures.
However much it may first manifest itself intra-psychically and interculturally, the transition and conversion to a "new kind of space"—for all its "immense combined draw of its superior efficacy" and, hence, pragmatic advantage—takes place at a subliminal, unconscious and affective level. Its subsequent realizations or effects are therefore mere echoes—small and grand tectonic shifts, of sorts—which elude the finest seismographic detection just as they escape the investigative gaze of archaeologists and archivists, geographers and astronomers, to the very extent that their methods of gathering and processing data remain merely empirical and, hence, external to the phenomena in question. To sense the shift and its effects, then, entails an altogether different approach. Here a more global perspective and—within the "immanent frame"—minimal metaphysics is called for and, indeed, de rigueur.

Belief as a Virtual Option

What exactly characterizes the "secular age"? In modern, especially North-Atlantic democracies, Taylor claims, there is a fundamentally different sense of "what it is to believe, stemming in part from the fact that belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option," compared to what it might mean to be religious in, say, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist societies. The supposed radical change that Taylor seeks to "define and trace" is the transition from "a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."

It is this diminishing yet remaining intelligibility and effectiveness of credal faith and ritual practice and all their successor forms or functional equivalents that interests Taylor as he investigates the historical, conceptual, and imaginary conditions of the modern mode of religious belief, that is to say, of its central motifs, moods, and motivations.

The modern sense of faith, which sees itself invited, forced or, perhaps, freed up to face the world, selves, and others in a virtually hypothetical—and, hence, distanced or disembodied—stance, is no longer grounded in self-evidence, let alone in some empirical given, whether discovered, codified, and canonized by naturalist empiricism or spiced up by natural theology. Far from being based on a facile culture of tolerance, it is enabled by the metaphysical no less than historical fact and acknowledgment of perspectives and aspects that exceed my own. In the secular age,

I may find it inconceivable that I would abandon my faith, but there are others, including possibly some very close to me, whose way of living I cannot in all honesty just dismiss as deformed, or blind, or unworthy, who have no faith (at least not in God, or the transcendent). Belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives.

yet to analyze and explain this sense of secularity in terms of "optionality" and "plurality"—further, to illuminate the very nature of the hypothetical stance and the virtuality of beliefs it entails—requires one to explicate "a whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place." To do so is to engage in a larger than empirical and, as it were, more than merely historical inquiry, one that is, if not metaphysical (but how could it not be?) then at least ontological or pre-ontological. It is, in sum, to stipulate that the question of the secular and its age has deeper conditions, a transcendental form, of sorts.

Those conditions should not be confused with the epistemological or, more broadly normative, criteriological terms and concepts that categorize and structure experience and the search for the spiritual and its fulfillment. As a consequence, neither specific elements nor forms of belief nor their successive repudiation, neither historical nor empirical, neither sociological nor psychological findings would ever allow us to determine where or when, exactly, secularity begins, nor even suspect whether or when its reign might, one fine or terrible day, come to an end.

What is required, rather, is to take a step back (a Schritt zurück, not unlike Heidegger’s) and to investigate why and how the advocacy of "public secularity" and the broader assumption of the eventual practical and existential demise because irrelevance of faith—which seems to have been falsified by recent trends and current affairs in "global religion"—could have emerged as a theoretical construct (and communis opinio) at all. If nothing empirical speaks for this assumption in the present day and age, why and how is it that the so-called secularization thesis succeeded in establishing itself as one of the most firmly held beliefs? No relevant data, no census polling, no margins of error, could explain this astounding given, which is a fact, not of reason, but more of a deeply metaphysical kind. Only a more ambitious, speculative analysis, then, based on an altogether different rethinking of the West’s self-congratulatory narrative, could hope to address the intellectual and affective mapping of the "secular age," also with a view to redressing some of its most disturbing predicaments.

Yet, in addition to looking backwards, and, as it were, inwards, this reassessment would also require one to look beyond the apparent historical demise and concurrent global transformation of individual beliefs and collective practices. And, since both such elements of faith and forms of practice were from the outset at the center of theories of modernization and secularization, Taylor’s more comprehensive view invites us critically to interrogate the very presuppositions and paradigm of what he calls the "immanent frame," upon which these theories and their cultural politics are based.

Taylor proposes therefore that we look into "new conditions of belief" or, more precisely, that we assess nothing less than the deep-psychological and affective mechanisms and symbolic logics by which one paradigmatic feature of an age switches from one expression—or Gestalt—to the next.
An important example of this Gestaltswitch leading up to the transition, away from traditional religion and (black or white) magic, to a disenchantment view of religious interiority and, ultimately, of secular humanism is, in Taylor's analysis, the “reversal of the field of fear.”

It is the new conception of the self and its sources which lies at the very origin of the naturalism and scientism, historicism, psychologism and culturalism, with which the modern “immanent frame” is typically associated, but whose deeper roots and meaning Taylor aims to diagnose and, as it were, work through in an almost therapeutic fashion.

That religion and credulity (superstition) are tied to “fear” is nothing new and has been noted by authors as early and diverse as Cicero and Spinoza. Yet to situate fear within its “field,” to place it against its motivating, if implicit or unconscious, background, adds something new to the equation.

Still, one wonders if there has in fact been a switching, a turning around, an about face, of the original “field of fear.” Might one not assume that alternative reversals—for example those regarding altogether different “fields” of concern and interest, such as desire and pleasure, giving and expenditure, but also hope and despair, patience and boredom, letting-be and letting-go—must have occurred at least as regularly and with equal or greater consequence?

Nothing stands in the way of deploying the metaphor of “reversal” in other domains than those of “fear” and its corollary affects. The number of other possible “fields” where major historical change might have played itself out is far from complete. One can think, for example, of what has happened to our sense or lack of “wonder”—and, by extension, of the eventful and fateful, the extraordinary and the everyday, of encounter and missed chances. Might not their shifts or fundamental changes have constituted a similar and no less important transition, leading us into different understandings of the present day and “age”?

Moreover, are there not many examples of “reversals” in moods and motivations, whose appreciation simply varies over time, allowing one state of mind to slowly fade into the next? The change in Gestalt would, in these cases, be no less radical, even though the modality of their “switches” might not be registered as such.

Further, nothing precludes that the eventual flipping over from one stage to the following might not be—in principle, if not always de facto—reversible in more than one direction, that is to say, be able to move (or switch) back and forth as well as sideways (the lateral move being the folding of one field into another or the proliferation of new ones). To preclude this would mean to relapse into a unilinear, unidirectional, and, perhaps, even teleological or cyclical view of how it is that historical—indeed, epochal—things take their course.

Taylor’s inquiry moves away from the laborious replay of detailed scenarios and predictions of worn-out sociologies of religion—based on polling data gathered from census and sample interviews, some of them highly unreliable. He rightly assumes that the decisive matter lies elsewhere, namely in how and why or to what extent—that is to say, in what modality or mood—people hold (onto) the beliefs they have. But what motivates and moves people is not taken in a flat-psychological sense, as if beliefs were ultimately grounded on mentalist representations or self-interests, whose interior deliberation takes their effect foro interno. The deep-psychological inquiry exceeds the limits of ego- and group-psychology and extends well beyond the forgotten and the repressed, into the direction, not of the archaic or archetypal, but of what I will call “the archive.”

Instead of revisiting the far from fatal historical challenges of “credal statements” by scientific theories concerning the “mechanization of the worldview” (Dijksterhuis), the evolution of life, neuro-physiological and cognitivist explanations of mental phenomena, computational or game-theoretic models of human beliefs and calculation; moreover, rather than reinvestigating the psychology and anthropology of religious participation in practices and rites—none of which provide an “adequate explanation for why in fact people abandoned their faith”—Taylor thus aims to provide what he calls a “deeper account.”

This alternative account does not satisfy itself with what the well-known “subtraction stories” have assumed all along, namely that modern experience has seen a steady reduction of—an unstoppable liberation from—illusionary and magical, mystifying or mythological elements and forms of religious belief and practice, based as they are on fear, superstition, and projection. Part of the problem is the fact that such “subtraction” theories assume (1) that rationalization and secularization come about as a “loss,” and (2) that they somehow imply the preexistence of “underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.”

Yet no such features can be assumed as an historical or anthropological given, just as no path from ancient times to the present is preordained to follow, say, a naturalist (mechanistic, materialistic, secularist) course of action and reflection rather than another. The transition or switch from the traditional and pre-modern to the modern and secular condition of “faith” is, on Taylor’s retelling, a unique creation/invention that changed perspectives once and for good. But it is a reversal that remains fraught with the risk of—incidental rather than categorial or decisive—relapses because it is surrounded by the innuendo of the old credulity and the oldest of fears.

Reductive abstractions and progressive eliminations may have been an option at some times, but so were additions and recombinations, reversals and reaffirmations at others. Each single one of them represented a now relatively new, then absolutely singular, phase of interpretation and intervention. So too the secular age, with its novel set of presuppositions. And post-secularism, should it announce or present itself as something distinctive—say, a newener age—will form no exception.
Modernity and its secularity “can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.” Indeed, only to a limited degree can it be understood as “a linear unfolding of a previously existing potential.” If nothing in the precondition of the modern age necessarily pushed toward secularity so as to ideologically overcome, naturalize, reduce, or neutralize religion over time; further, if its “previously existing potential” prepared instead a coexistence, if not harmony—a parallelism, but not convergence—of the secular and the religious (and did so as a self-limitation and, perhaps, self-correction or self-contradiction of its very own principle), what, then, does this mean for the force and stability of the secular regime, for its hegemony or permanence?

For one thing, Taylor’s dual perspective on the origins of secularity seems to explain how it is that the “immanent frame,” which he sees as a “self-sufficient” and “impersonal” order sustaining the secular, can yet be lived as “open to something beyond” so that while “some live it as closed,” it may nonetheless be seen as a cultural formation that merely “permits closure, without demanding it.”

For another, we could thus explain that whenever the immanent frame fails to close itself off in full—whenever we realize that we are, perhaps, not utterly confined to factors that fit within it—we find, if not a blatant sense of contradiction, contestation, or anomaly, then at least some sense of wonder and surprise, of sublimity and terror. In such moments we realize: “We are not necessarily as ‘modern’ as we think we are.” Nor are we necessarily free to opt for alternative options—call them pre- or post-modern, pre-Axial or post-secular—either.

The condition of the secular age was therefore never and nowhere that of a “previously existing potential,” waiting to be “unfolded,” whether linearly and progressively, cyclically or otherwise. Perhaps its supposed potentiality was always that of a virtuosity, which shared (and continues to share) with that of religion the same conditions for its non-exact existence and pragmatic realization. On this view, both the secular and the religious could be seen as coextensive and as either activated into relevance or receding into oblivion and insignificance, according to a paradoxical logic (perhaps an alternating rhythm?), whose nature and timing escapes us by and large. Hence, we would have no choice but to read the signs, unaided by any criteriological—i.e., epistemic or, more broadly, normative, moral or aesthetic—means.

Taylor’s narrative, however, does not insist on the conflict between faith and knowledge, ritual and other doings, as if these were ultimately “rival” theories. The modalities, moods, and motivations of belief and unbelief are rather “lived conditions” more than “theories or sets of beliefs subscribed to.” Indeed, he writes, “there is a way in which our whole experience is inflected if we live in one or another spirituality” and hence we are “differently affected in our sensibility.” It is against the foil of this fundamental possibility of spirituality and sensibility, creeds and practices, identities and communities, that the secular must be situated.

This said, Taylor’s emphasis is not exclusively concerned with what it is that—one a deeper level—allowed secularity to emerge and thrive, while simultaneously keeping its more dogmatic form (i.e., secularism) from mapping itself onto society in its totality. Nor is his focus primarily on religion’s proven capabilities to survive and reassert in almost every location, at virtually any point in time. Taylor’s concern, finally, is not with secularity’s societal make-up, that is to say, its political formations and institutions, which, in turn, are inseparable from the secular’s overall intellectual outlook, together with its much broader, cultural sensibilities. Rather, Taylor’s interest pivots around a sense of ontologico-existential value that, in all systems of thought—in fact, in all “ages”—is formed and informed by “a certain moral/spiritual shape” whose defining feature is that of a vast expanse, a greater density, an immeasurable depth, even though it may present itself in the most quotidian of life’s aspects:

Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worthwhile, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place or power: we often experience it as deeply moving, as inspiring.

The value of this “fuller condition,” which Taylor does not hesitate to associate with “salvation,” is relatively universal even though he acknowledges that its concrete historical form and material content are almost infinitely variable. As such, it carries and epitomizes the secular age as much as it did—and continues and will continue to do—the elementary and historical forms of religion, its predecessors, analogues, and successive manifestations.

“Optionality”

Jürgen Habermas, following Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, analyzed the transformative process of the “axial revolution” in terms of a progressive de-centering of worlds and of consciousness as it learns to deal with increasingly formal concepts of a world of natural facts, a life-world (Lebenswelt) of social interaction, and an autonomous subject of individual expression. Taylor likewise sees our entering into the new modern-secular age as a different—yet, apparently, no less reflective—mode of inhabiting the “constellation of orders, cosmic, social and moral,” which are not so much formal but “impersonal” and whose historically and contextually variable content has become not just principally but also experientially more and more “optional.”

Where such optional positions are dismissed outright or treated intolerantly, a reaction against the earlier redirection of society towards this plurality takes place. It seeks to obfuscate or downplay the latter’s epochal, intellectual and political, existential as well as institutional significance. Such
reaction, based on fear, has not much chance of success in the modern world, even though it can—at least temporarily does—create or rekindle some of its deepest conflicts.

Yet such fearful reaction is no mere external disturbance of the new cultural system of values in place. Indeed, the so-called immanent frame provides itself the very ingredients that enable it to cordon itself off in what Taylor calls “closed world systems,” even though they are set in motion from elsewhere. Or so it seems. The “spin,” to which subsequent actors subject the earlier opening of worldview by framing them categorically with the help of certain fixed images, is propelled and motivated by deep-seated needs which, Taylor suggests, cannot be expressed within the terms of the secular frame alone. For the original opening had inaugurated a certain equivalence and balance between opening and closedness, transcendence and immanence and thereby already contradicted the earlier magico-mytho-theological age of “immediacy.”

The “world structures” which close themselves off from transcendence “arise” within the immanent frame of the secular age, but, Taylor adds, also subsequently give it “a certain twist, a certain spin, not primarily as a conscious theoretical move, but rather through certain deep pictures, which give further specificity to the pictures which underlie the frame itself.” These pictures, often accompanied by powerful narratives about the virtues of heroic self-authorization, “function as unchallenged assumptions, rather than as unshakeable arguments.” That is to say, they are mostly grounded on illegitimate naturalization of what are in fact profound cultural mutations, and in general survive because they end up escaping examination in the climate in which they are taken as the undeniable framework for any argument. . . . It is easy to see how, if no other conditions impinge, they could generate anticipatory confidence in a take of closure within the immanent frame. But as conclusive arguments they don’t make the grade.26

What underlies such deeper pictures? What motivates us to draw up pictures in the first place? And are these pictures “deep” and “dogmatic” ones at that? Why and how do such pictures hold us “captive” (as Wittgenstein knew)?

According to Taylor, the tendency to close off the immanent frame takes place whenever a certain picture is no longer seen for what it is. There is a modern parallel here with the self-image of representationalist epistemology that recent thinking (from Heidegger to Merleau-Ponty, from the later Wittgenstein to Rorty, and from Derrida to Deleuze) seeks to “deconstruct.” Taylor describes the forgetting of a certain background and the self-forgetfulness of the subsequent picture that this thinking addresses as follows:

some move is being passed off as a simple discovery, which in fact is much more like a new construction; a change that involves also a new sense of our identity and our place in the world, with its implicit values, rather than simply registering observable reality. (To say that these are “constructions” is not to say that the issues here are unarbitrable by reason; that is a “postmodern” fallacy; but their arbitration is much more complicated, like that between Kuhnian paradigms, and also involves issues of hermeneutical adequacy) . . . What was once one possible construction among others sinks to the level of a picture, in Wittgenstein’s sense; that is, it becomes part of the unquestioned background, something whose shape is not perceived, but which conditions, largely unnoticed, the way we think, infer, experience, process claims and arguments.27

What the “picture” obfuscates is the historical fact—or is it a dimension of fundamental metaphysical depth and width?—that the epistemological regime was merely one optional stance among many: an “operative conversion,” in which “one moral outlook gave way to another,”28 but in which the new stance also succeeded in somehow naturalizing, if not essentializing, its own establishment (genesis and status). It thereby removed the emerging awareness of the provisional character of the optional stance and of optionality itself.

Building on his earlier work on the sources of the self in modernity, Taylor links this change of outlook to the deep-seated “attractiveness of an overall ethically-charged vision of agency.”29 It was, he claims, a distinctive and powerful vision of self-mastering, disengaged reason, and autonomy that gave so-called immanence its compelling “frame,” not the outcome of sustained theoretical argument per se.

But then, what drove or solicited—indeed attracted—this moral vision in the first place? And what made it so effective as to become the near unsurpassable horizon of our thinking, acting, and judging, indeed, of our “age”? Do we assume its frame and orientation to be self-founded, self-caused, and its effects automatic? If the epithet of “atheist” of “exclusive humanism” gave the immanent frame its defining signature, functioning almost as its default, as Taylor suggests, what, if anything, gave these designations their historical and empirical force? These are questions that touch upon the basic tenets of Taylor’s overall philosophical project, steeped as it is in a Christian theism and a mitigated Hegelianism or expressivism, premised as it remains upon what some have praised—and others have decried—as a “weak ontology”30 that allows for choices, options, and the like.

But optionality in the “secular age” is hardly an option itself.31 It merely has become one for us, here and now, in the so-called Western, “North-Atlantic” world from which Taylor’s analysis, unapologetically, takes it lead. In short, optionality has become a virtual necessity, just as it may sooner or later become one for others, elsewhere, as well (or—we cannot exclude this—wither away). But how, exactly, did or might this happen?
Is a world that is no longer characterized by uni-, bi- or multi-polar relations of power, but increasingly by what some have termed “non-polarity,” more or less likely to espouse and foster several (and at times incompatible) options? More importantly, is such a world more or less able to inaugurate and sustain a principle of normative optionality for subjects and citizens, nations and states, ethnic communities and international bodies alike? Or would such an eventual challenge undermine or modify the modern, secular principle along with its pragmatic considerations and existential needs, its aesthetic tastes and judgments? Could optionality one day turn out to have (gradually and imperceptibly) lost its appeal as we place ourselves with the idea that history and progress must inevitably be on our side so that we just need to go with the flow to be on the safe side of things?

Further, it is far from clear what it means to say that if in the modern world and secular age there are merely options, then this “one option is, as it were, the default option.” Is this a matter of classical or based on empirical generalization and normative stipulation? Was it the fruit of a process that for all its fateful deliberation must nonetheless be seen as “metaphysically contingent” (as Theodor W. Adorno mused in his Negative Dialectics)?

What would it mean to choose—or opt—for or against it, indeed, to opt out of optionality? Must such a gesture—a performative contradiction if ever there was one—still be considered a possibility for those who inhabit the secular age? Or is optionality now a necessity in its own right and thus, again, hardly an option at all? If this is the case, secularity might well be the very condition we—at least historically, if not metaphysically, speaking—cannot not accept. Unreflectively, we would already have “opted” for reflection, as subjects and citizens of modern worlds, even before the first thought was entertained, a word uttered, or a deed done. Paradoxically, secular optionality would be somewhat of a naïveté—the very myth and opinion, superstition and dogma, credulity and idealism—of our time. In any case, its regime of possibilities would not be something about which we can reflectively—or, more precisely, discursively—think and live or act upon as such or throughout. That is to say, if there were ever such a thing as optionality, then it could never leave behind a certain level of implicitness, an unthought and lack of choice, of sorts. Its eventual expression could never satisfy our need for discursive articulation and conceptual explicitness.

Yet holding even the firmest of beliefs requires that one has somehow freed oneself up—and then committed oneself again and again—to it. Moreover, it also implies that one could, in principle and in fact, have refrained from adopting or defending the belief in question, whether explicitly or otherwise. At the very least, we must assume that, having done so, one might still—at any moment—change one’s mind and heart, fidelity and solidarity, and then back again. For a belief that is not “held” or “kept,” which cannot be challenged, betrayed or lost, is merely an abstract specimen of mental content, an idée fixe. Were we to inhabit such position we would be mere automatons. But what has become, then, of optionality?

Faith as Option/non-Option

We could feel tempted to construe a dilemma: either faith is optional and thus does not quite live up to its very concept and intention, or it is not, and thus it remains immediate and naïve, a magico-mythical stance or apodictic certainty which requires no leap of faith at all. In either case, faith is, quite literally, not an option. What we are dealing with, rather, is either naïveté (albeit it in different degrees) or a reflective faith that must remain deeply aporetic. For faith to have consistency, coherence, or even substance and consequence, it would have to be dogmatic, unquestioning, sealed off, blocking us from—blinding us against—the alternative view, thus undermining the very meaning and importance of “optionality.” Faith that reflects upon itself is a mere form whose invariability—even when we call it “fullness”—remains the unattainable measure and criterion for any historically or empirically espoused belief.

This is a consequence Taylor is reluctant to accept even though there is much in what he says that points in this direction.

. . . belief in God isn’t quite the same thing in 1500 and 2000. . . . Even in regard to identical credal propositions, there is an important difference. This emerges as soon as we take account of the fact that all beliefs are held within a context or framework of the taken-for-granted, which usually remains tacit, and may even be as yet unacknowledged by the agent, because never formulated. This is what philosophers, influenced by Wittgenstein, Heidegger or Polanyi, have called the “background.” . . .

The frameworks of yesterday and today are related as “naïve” and “reflective”: because the latter has opened a question which had been foreclosed in the former by the unacknowledged shape of the background.33

But should we accept this much? Can I choose an option as such, that is to say, for what it is under modern conditions (i.e., nothing more than a hypothetical view or practice, among many possible and potentially equally relevant and valuable others) and at the same time live and express it to the fullest extent, without halt or reservation, as “fullness” and “fulfillment” would seem to require? Does the tacit character of background framing—the “taken-for-granted” of which Taylor speaks—differ significantly in the two (naïve and reflective) ages? Or does any belief, any engagement, imply that I immediately blot out the very background, precisely since the moment we hold any view or adopt any course of action, however habitualized, we must take for granted at least some things—indeed, a vast majority of things—even if we can never attain the level of explicitness that a meaningful use of “reflection” or “optionality” would require?
In the secular age, belief is challenged and no longer the “default option.” Indeed, this much, Taylor grants, is incontestable in the secularization thesis with its emphasis on disenchantment and rationalization, differentiation and autonomy. But this leaves the question of the practical and existential possibility of faith wide open. In this claim lie Taylor’s most significant correction and amendment of some of the more uncontested suppositions of the secularization thesis. Exposing its dogmas for what it has been one of the central contributions of recent, post-secular sociological and philosophical theories, but it is Taylor’s wager that locating this decisive shift at the very heart of the conception and practice of modern secularity opens a new and more fruitful perspective on the role of religion in the private and, especially, the public domain.

Whatever processes of learning and disillusionment, of demythologization and disenchantment, may have taken place in the not-so-distant past, the role, place, and function of faith in both individual and collective lives is, by Taylor’s account, far from over or irrelevant. In some regions of the modern world religion could even be seen to be on the rise, thus effecting a reversal of fates and fortunes that has caught not only secular theorists, but also demographers and investigative journalists, public servants and politicians, diplomats and military planners, completely by surprise. Nonetheless, it can hardly be denied, Taylor claims, that a sea change or epochal shift in our deep-seated conceptual frames, normative expectations, and overall sensibilities has, during the last few centuries, swept away earlier theoretical attitudes as well as moral alternatives and has profoundly altered our understanding of our tradition, our perception of currently available choices, and our prospects and hopes for the immediate and distant future.

A different “vector” must therefore explain why our world is not, as commonly assumed, on the path towards an “overcoming” or a “relegation” of religion that would profane, trivialize, or, at the very least, render secondary its earlier role and function in the constitution of selves and societies, of their identity and self-understanding. A one-dimensional picture of modernity only emerges when some of its central ingredients, elements or forms are exaggerated and bent to fit the mold of either old or new doctrinal assumptions that are not warranted by the data and do not stand the theoretical test these demand.

The future of the religious past as we now envision it is no longer that of our pre-modern and early-modern ancestors. There can be no simple returns to—or reruns of—the imagined (fan)sized or retroactively projected) Biblical, oral and scriptural, prophetic and evangelical, apocalyptic and eschatological, as well as confessional or ecclesial, theological and spiritual scenes and scenarios of old. Faith and ritual now entail a different dispensation, they require and inspire another mental and affective disposition whose traits we have difficulty identifying, let alone classifying, in traditional terms. And even the many appeals to “the modern” or “postmodern,” to “the secular” or “the post-secular” do not always dispel the descriptive haze, moral ambiguity, and aesthetic hype that surrounds the new constellation. To confuse matters more, when all is said and done, or acted out, it may well turn out that the new “frame,” when seen in a different light, was hardly unprecedented or completely novel. Indeed, the antidote to the unilinear one-dimensional theories of secularization may well be precisely a certain awareness of the simultaneity of existential, societal and cultural options as well as the reversibility in history’s ways of making us adopt one or the other. This complexity is what makes up the very nature of the historical archive whose depth and expanse finds no more telling expression than in the legacies left by religion, in its practices and rituals or imaginaries, but also in its attempts to systematize its concerns and suppositions in theological discourse, in canons and catechisms, doctrines and encyclicals.

Characterizing the Secular Age: Universal Concern or Regional Option?

Taylor suggests that the “default option” in modernity is “unbelief” or “exclusivist humanism,” both of which make up the major positions or viewpoints that the secular “immanent frame” solicits and fosters. But this seemingly unproblematic observation merits further scrutiny.

Is the option that we now almost naturally and automatically fall back on genuinely an “option,” in any rigorous determination of the term? Or is “unbelief” and “exclusivist humanism” imposed by the immanent frame as historic-metaphysical schematizations of modalities, modes, and motifs that must of necessity remain largely invisible and impenetrable, that is to say, hardly an “option” at all? Following Taylor’s own “master narrative,” it would seem that we are hardly dealing with a possibility that we could either choose or deliberately refuse.

Taylor multiplies several disclaimers and provisos that do not centrally confront these questions, but are important to note nonetheless. In speaking of the “global context of a society which contains different milieux, within each of which the default option may be different from others,” he makes no secret of the fact that his overall analysis takes its points of departure—and thus also its limitations—from within the world of “Latin Christendom.” Within these cultural and geopolitical confines, Taylor argues, the age of Reform (a category which, in his work, precedes and expands well beyond the Protestant Reformation) represents not only a particular historical and intellectual or theological formation of culture, but also a spiritual “option” that has now universally become the “default” position. It forms the contrasting foil against which all contenders must measure and prove themselves. This is not the whole story, of course, but for sound methodological reasons, Taylor claims, we might just as well start here, anticipating important corrections and nuances from a more elaborated narrative.
Eskewing any “rush to global generalization,” Taylor nonetheless proceeds by means of a methodic ascension from the particular to the general. Continually expanding and incessantly doubling back upon itself in ever grander “narrative” circles, a methodic ascension to a view from somewhere typifies the way A Secular Age proceeds. To be sure, Taylor’s cautionary remark does not fully explain why and how, exactly, we are compelled to start “here,” in the Western, North-Atlantic hemispheres, where we happen to find ourselves. But even if this question finds a convincing answer (after all, one cannot start out from nowhere and beginning elsewhere might pose a similar problem, albeit one that is rarely risked in Western scholarship on the secular), when all is said and done many difficulties still remain. Taylor is the first to point them out.

Not just beyond the Western world, but also within the very confines of its territorial and imaginary borders and communities, very different scenarios and, hence, different options—even “default options”—can be discerned. Taylor concedes that his “canvas” is itself already “on the verge of being too broad; there are many regional and national paths to secularity within the North Atlantic world, and I haven’t been able to do justice to all of them.”

Yet in “opting” for his largely Western and North Atlantic perspective, he recalls that he is merely following here the same line of argument set out in Sources of the Self, which likewise “took up a set of issues of universal human concern, but dealt with them within a regional compass.” This, of course, is a perfectly legitimate conceptual and narrative strategy and, yet, it is hard to suppress a series of questions.

First, does not the secular age, while clearly of “universal human concern,” aiming at nothing less than genuine cosmopolitanism and, ultimately, the restoration of “all in all,” ultimately turn out to be a merely “regional” phenomenon and preoccupation that as such remains unconvincing and ineffective in the rest of the globe?

Second, should our implicit loyalty or explicit commitment to the secular age be somewhat less than unconditional? Or is the framing of its option itself optional at all? But then, from what theoretical, metaphysical or theological angle, indeed, on what normative grounds or on the basis of which existential ethos could we want, let alone pretend, to formulate such far-reaching reservations? Could we not simply get along (and probably, as a result, get much farther ahead) in the absence of any need for such questions and answers? Secularists, naturalists, and pragmatists might all make this objection. It is not clear, in A Secular Age, which side Taylor sees himself as committed to.

Third, what exactly is the historico-metaphysical stance, the mental and affective disposition or overall “frame,” which is not yet an “option,” in the modern sense of the term, and from which modernity emerges and distinguishes itself by undoing its unhonored securities? If anything, it is a view of the world (I am not saying that it is yet a worldview), which is, somewhat paradoxically, characterized by its single aspect theory of reality and, consequently, its non-differentiation of (or indifference toward) the many.

The putative horizon from (and against) which the secular age emerges and distinguishes itself is, according to Taylor, based upon a historical and deeply speculative hypothesis of an age of “immediacy” that is deemed to have preceded it chronologically, logically as well as ontogenetically and phylogenetically. And yet, this so-called age of immediacy also enabled and sustained the “mediational epistemology” and “mediating elements” of the present era, i.e., its discourse and institutions.

True enough, this hypothesized, prehistorical and pre-mythological age of immediacy can be no more than a retroactive projection from the vantage point of modernity. This must be so, despite the fact that Taylor offers historical narrative and anthropological theory to fill in the blanks of these “archaic” times, which are not simply “traditional,” but actually predate the so-called “Axial Revolution” of which historians Jaspers, then Samuel Eisenstadt and Robert Bellah and other historical sociologists, have made so much.

But, then, its perspectival illusion creates a necessary distance which alone allows us to view our point of entry into—and possible disengagement from—our engagements in a near all-encompassing conceptual immanent frame and cultural imaginary of ‘global’ modernity. Indeed, it is precisely the way that the pre-historical alternative is vividly painted in all its unattractive colors which prevents the closed immanent frame and its reified world structures, dogmatic images, and the like, from opening up in the wrong direction.

In this sense, the putative, hypothesized pre-historical age of immediacy puts our modern options and predicaments in the widest imaginable perspective, and one, moreover, in which individual, alternative or competitive aspects and views, attributes and modes, affects and effects, cannot yet be differentiated or perceived. As such, it gives “optionality” its distinctive profile and functions similarly as the near-uninhabitable “Janesian open space,” where, Taylor reminds us, “you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief,” or to either the “open” or “closed” take or spin on inimmance and its transcendent beyond.

Contrasting opposed perspectives is an “imaginative exercise” which, Taylor concedes, is both difficult and rare enough under the conditions of secular modernity, given our proclivities to framing and buffering “beings” and “things” in one way or another. Moreover, our secular age bequeaths to us an ability to see “that there is another way of construing things,” the pull toward one frame or another or within one and the same (e.g., immanent) frame operates not in all directions with equal force. This makes the “open space” seem much less open and accessible and always already inflected or mythologized in certain definite (and, too often, dogmatic) ways.
We don't stand there [in the "Janesian open space"], because not only is the immanent frame itself not usually or even mainly a set of beliefs which we entertain about our predicament, however it may have started out; rather it is the sensed context in which we develop our beliefs; but in the same way, one or other of these takes on the immanent frame, as open or closed, has usually sunk to the level of such an unchallenged framework, something we have trouble thinking ourselves outside of, even as an imaginative exercise.41

Taylor nonetheless postulates, indeed assumes, a background-condition or original "frame" within which frames and construals, imaginings and options, could not yet have developed as such, even though it is only against the foil of this very same postulation that their subsequent "optionality"—and, hence, metaphysical contingency—can be thought or experienced in the secular age. Taylor is himself the first to point out that the archaic and pre-axial, pre-historical and pre-modern "world" or "mind" is not a frame or mindset at all. In its very substance it does not yet allow for the differentiation between transcendent or immanent modes of explanation and interpretation, just as it does not yet permit an inner articulation of subject and attribute, cause and effect, mode and affect.

But without this contrasting state (a virtual world preceding all actual states) and without the hypothetic-speculative stance it allows us to dream up, we would be unable to make sense of the crucial concepts of option and optionality that enable the very fabric of the modern identity: "So there is a condition of lived experience, where what we might call a construal of the moral/spiritual is lived not as such, but as immediate reality, like stones, rivers and mountains."42 And with this condition the secular age marks its decisive difference.

On the one hand, this assumption is the fruit of an abstraction that we could call methodological, like a phenomenological reduction and imaginative experiment of world (i.e., our life-world's) destruction, of sorts. On the other hand, Taylor's own examples of this contrasting foil of assumed archaic, pre-modern "immediacy" are the haunted, demon-infested universe of a Hieronymous Bosch, together with scenes from New Testament Palestine, and ethnographic reports on spirit possession in contemporary Africa.

And, if these examples sound all too specific (not to mention Western-oriented, if not Eurocentric), one might recall Emmanuel Levinas' invocation of the world of so-called primitive "participation" in which the very idea and reality of the individual and autonomous self or of other selves is (still) encapsulated and occluded by a diffuse-rapturous absorption into some non-rational Other. We would be dealing with a mysterious, magico-mystical world before "separation," "interiority," "economy," in short, before the both conceptual and ontological distinction between "the Same" and "the Other," which, in Levinas's eyes, represents and mimics a merely aesthetic-sensory realm of shadows, images, and rhythms that lacks all reality and freedom, truth and judgment. It is this indistinct, amorphous and sonorous world of the pure virtuality of the "there is" (il y a) that forms the backdrop against which thought and agency, responsibility and justice, critique and Enlightenment, humanism and secularism, can become "options" at all.

Taylor is thus not the first to have invoked an age-old or, rather, immemorial realm of immediacy, which, although somehow irrevocably—and happily—lost, nonetheless continues to contrast and be virtually co-extensive with the very differentiation between self and other, naiveté and reflectiveness, whose distinction propels itself forward in a movement of repulsion and flight away from the "originarily" and "earlier" stage of pre-history: the age before history, as we know it, the world before the modern life-world. Modernity thus thrusts itself relentlessly forward all the while affirming as well as hardening its mindset for fear of relapsing from conceptual and ontological rationalization and mediation back into the virtual indistinction characteristic of the supposedly extinct "age" and "world" of immediacy. The latter can be no real or genuine "option" for us, but only a conjured up image—which is a terrifying warning sign no less than a necessary postulate for thought, action, and judgment—signifying a reversal of the very first reversal (the "reversal of the field of fear," as Taylor calls it) that liberated us originally and freed us up for the "later" immanent, exclusivist-humanist stance that makes up secular modernity, even though, in its more open mode, it allows us to opt for alternative views (e.g., metaphysical or religious transcendence) as well.

To insist on the principled possibility of such reversibility, at any given moment and each step along the path that modernity charts for itself in its institutions, conceptual schemes, normative criteria, and aesthetic sensibilities, is the sole warrant against the amnesia and complacency that lead its immanent frame to close itself off from (or within) one particular stance, thus allowing what is merely one of its many options to assume a position of privilege. Such dogmatism can take the form of a hegemony of one culture over another; it can also result in an oblivion of "optionality" altogether.

A potential objection against drawing an analytical distinction between the "age" of immediacy and the secular age of mediacy arises here as well. Could one not argue that the mediated and mediated outcomes (and, hence, "optionality") of belief and unbelief that present themselves within the immanent frame do so in far more immediate and, indeed, diffuse ways than they did ever before? In other words, does not modernity in its acute form (i.e., hyper-ultra- or post-modernity) resemble something of the pre-modern era, even if only in this respect? As Theodor W. Adorno knew only too well, the radically new and the archaically old touch upon and, eventually, revert into each other. They also do so in our times.

A certain inevitable naiveté may well have become the default option in our perception of things as the latter are, paradoxically, rendered more immediate. This happens not in spite of but as a consequence of the most
sophisticated means of mediation and mediatization, whose “special effect” on us turns every “event” into a “miracle” of sorts.

Where perception becomes reality and policies are increasingly based on the psychology of markets and investors, shock and awe, but also on soft power and the symbols of the image, “optionality” becomes an “option” that is ever more remote to the extent that our choice, let alone our deliberation, seems little more than an illusion.

The Regulatory Role of “Fullness” in the Secular Age

Understanding the immanent frame against this background of the cultural logic of modern mediated and mediatized events, we can see that this frame—the very signature of the secular age—allows at least “two readings, without compelling us to either.” Analytically insoluble, argumentatively unsolvable, perceptually uncertain, and affectively confusing, deciding its meaning and value one way or another thus requires us to make “what is often called a ‘leap of faith,’” in which nothing (no criterion in particular) can guide us, yet everything (our general take on “life” and “things”) holds the greatest relevance as a virtual-potential matter of all-importance.

What pushes us one way or the other is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings. People’s stance on the issue of belief in God, or of an open versus closed understanding of the immanent frame, usually emerge out of this general sense of things... Our over-all sense of things anticipates or leaps ahead of the reasons we can muster for it. It is something in the nature of a hunch; perhaps we might better speak here of “anticipatory confidence.” This is what it means to talk of a “leap of faith” here.

Must one “leap” in one of two directions only? And, would one each time be motivated and moved by one and the same putative (or imagined) origin and destination of over-all sense and purpose—namely, what Taylor calls “fullness”—whose value, if not meaning, remains, for him, a somewhat incontestable given for humankind across the ages? Moreover, would radically contesting this supposition imply that one must do so in the name of yet another kind of “fullness”?

Taylor, like so many other important thinkers of a more hermeneutic bent (Paul Ricoeur comes to mind) seems to think so. While its specific expression may greatly differ, “fullness” is, for Taylor, the one indubitable given, the existential constant that even in absentia, in obliqua, “in exile,” governs and directs all human intentionality and behavior from a distance, that is to say, implicitly, indirectly, a tergo:

there is no escaping some version of... “fullness”; for any liveable understanding of human life, there must be some way in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should. The utter absence of some such would leave us in abject, unbearable despair. So it is not that disbelief shuns Christian ideas of fullness for nothing at all; it has its own versions.

To be sure, on all sides—whether believing or unbelieving—we find “unreal,” “non-genuine” instantiations of “fullness” in which the latter become mere “simulacra” or “mirages” of themselves. But this is an inescapable fact and merely fosters an ongoing “ethical debate” about the so-called “ends of life.” For example, even where belief in God is dismissed outright with a passionate or sober appeal to the accomplishment of modern science, this protestation may still be viewed as standing under the “attraction to the ethic of the austere, courageous knower of reality, and our sense that our residual draw to faith was less an indication of a real possibility than a residual weakness, a craving for comfort in face of a meaningless world.”

In the end, there is no serious denying of “fullness” (of whatever stripe), which is not proclaimed or enacted in the name of some other, further and higher, version of “fullness.”

Taylor’s book—and, indeed, his lifelong intellectual project—explicitly revolves around this desideratum naturale of human “fullness,” “depth,” and “richness” (all of them irreducible to human “flourishing,” which is nothing but a preoccupation of “closed immanence” rather than open towards “transcendence”). And yet, A Secular Age wisely defines modern society and culture mostly in terms of the (much messier and thicker) “cross pressures” and “middle positions” which articulate themselves in between the “crucial reference points” of these two somewhat abstract theoretical “extremes,” to wit: “orthodox” or “transcendental religion,” on the one hand, and “materialist atheism” or “reductive materialism,” on the other, each of them based on comprehensive doctrines, strong narratives, and equally strong moral virtues. These two virtual extremes, we quickly suspect, are never realized or realizable as such.

Where does this leave us? If “fullness” is not itself a genuine option but a necessary condition and configuration of our lives in all ages, including the modern secular one, then what sense can we have of the “optionality” that characterizes the immanent frame?

It is one thing to say that “we are aware today that one can live the spiritual life differently: that power, fullness, exile, etc., can take different shapes,” it is another to claim that such shapings are both fundamental and fundamentally “optional,” that is, true of all ages and yet distinctively modern. Nonetheless, on these combined claims Taylor stakes his entire project, postulating the creative invention and novelty of the immanent frame that makes up the secular age. However, as we have seen, options and optionality only go so far, even for the modern self.

Ironically, it is precisely when religion has already lost its status as an absolute or axiom (e.g., when we have entered a secular age where beliefs...
and ritual practices become “optional”), that one of the most central organizing concepts or, indeed, elementary forms of religious life becomes in fact something of a regulatory category for all currently available existential options, indeed, for “optionality” as such. In Taylor’s “master-narrative” the deepest and broadest meaning of “fullness” is projected both backwards and forwards into the recent past and imminent future. But how could the aspiration towards “fullness” have already been operative in archaic-primitive and pre-Axial times? Moreover, what assurances do we have that it might be of use and value in more distant futures about which we know (virtually, absolutely) nothing?

NOTES

1 Charles Taylor, A Secular Age, p. 21.
2 Ibid., pp. 11, 13, 12, my italics.
3 Ibid., p. 579.
4 Ibid., p. 3.
5 Ibid. My italics.
7 Taylor, A Secular Age, p. 3.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid., p. 74.
12 Taylor, A Secular Age, p. 74.
13 Ibid., p. 22.
14 Ibid.
16 Taylor, A Secular Age, pp. 543, 544.
17 Ibid., p. 546.
18 Ibid., p. 4.
19 Ibid., p. 8.
20 Ibid., pp. 11, 14.
22 Ibid., p. 6.
23 Ibid., p. 543.
24 Ibid., pp. 556–557.
25 Ibid., p. 557.
26 Ibid., p. 590.
27 Ibid., p. 565.
28 Ibid., p. 563.
29 Ibid., p. 567.
32 Taylor, A Secular Age, p. 12.
33 Ibid., p. 13.
34 Ibid., p. 605.
CHALLENGING ISSUES ABOUT THE SECULAR AGE

CHARLES TAYLOR

Fergus Kerr

I am grateful to Fergus for his very acute reading of A Secular Age in the light of other things I’ve written, which in a sense lead up to it, as he rightly observes. And he has put his finger on a big unresolved issue with which I’ve been struggling both in Sources of the Self (1989) and in A Secular Age (2007). I think there are demands on the kind of writing I am engaged with in these two books which are very hard to satisfy, but one has nevertheless to keep trying.

What are these demands? In both books I am trying to get clear on long term developments in (to put it shortly) Western civilization, which takes us from an epoch in which one outlook (or what we now are tempted to identify as one outlook, however contested the versions) dominated, to one in which several incompatible ones vie for our allegiance. Sources of the Self ends up talking about a plurality of moral sources, and A Secular Age presents a “nova” of multiplying spiritual and anti-spiritual directions which call on us to follow them.

In both cases, I argue that this kind of division or plurality is crucial to what we call “modernity” in the Western context. Sources of the Self perhaps highlighted the battle between “technologists” and “ecologists”; A Secular Age takes up the fault lines if you order the field in terms of believers and unbelievers. But both end up dealing with what is recognizably the same scene.

(Of course, in these two books I am trying to do more than frame the contemporary debate. I am also trying to give an account of how our existing situation of pluralism arose. But in fact, I believe that you can’t do the first without also doing the second. I haven’t got space to justify that here.)

Now why take up this kind of enterprise? There are lots of reasons, of course, but a crucial one is that this continuing division, and the debate that it ought to inspire, is often distortively misconceived, so that the kind of exchange and reflection that we need doesn’t happen. It doesn’t because very wrong conceptions of what in fact divides us become current, ones that allow us to foreclose debate without really examining the issues. This not only makes for an intellectual loss, a lack of clarity; but it also involves an impoverishment on the human level. That’s because there is much to gain from a serious exchange between the different positions. There are three related such gains: each party comes better to understand its own position; each overcomes the temptation simply to caricature the others; and through all this each learns to respect, and thus in many respects to learn from, the others.

This requires a certain kind of discourse. The goal here is not “neutrality”, in one obvious sense of this word. The positions are moral/spiritual/evaluative (whichever of these terms applies in a given case), and it is in the nature of these positions that they cannot be adequately expressed in “neutral”, in the sense of non-evaluative, language, nor in a “colourless” language devoid of rhetoric. This last point could take further argument, but I haven’t got space to do that here, so I’ll just take it as given. So we need expositions of the different stands, either by direct quotation, or in indirect discourse, which carry the sense and often take up the rhetoric which can make understandable why people often passionately espouse these views. Perhaps the ideal here is “even-handedness”.

But this doesn’t mean that one is “even-handed” in relation to philosophical theories, we might say meta-theories, which attempt to explain what is at stake in these debates. On the contrary, I have taken up one such, and I fight tooth and nail against the others, which I think are the cause of the distortion. Thus in Sources of the Self, I strongly criticize the notion that, rationally constructed, our moral views are essentially about the criteria of right action (hotly disputed between utilitarians and deontologists), and do not depend in any way on deeply held notions of the good. That’s because I think that we all draw on such sources, and that this is the deep and powerful issue that divides us. If we buy this meta-view that real questions can’t be debated, it can’t even be seen. It falls into a null zone of inattention. A parallel case in A Secular Age comes from reductive theories of scientific explanation, from which one can imagine arguing that “science” (that is post-Galilean natural science, which has sidelined all teleology and intentionality) can “disprove” religion. The really interesting and revealing debates don’t start until one has sidelined this (I think confused and illusory) view. Not accidentally, many of these attempts at short-circuiting real debate depend on post-Cartesian views of epistemology, very powerfully entrenched in our culture, which yield a very wrong and distortive view of the life of us rational animals. (Briefly, they
lose the animal and thus distort what is involved in the rational. But of course, there are also other forms of short-circuit, those precisely which depend on a caricatural understanding of religion, or of atheism, which forestall the kind of exchange that could discredit them.)

But to be fiercely partisan on the meta-level is not to depart from even-handedness on the substantive level. In making the arguments mentioned in the previous paragraph, I don't think for a minute that I've refuted Utilitarianism, defined as the view that the only thing that ultimately matters for moral choice is desire-satisfaction (another way of defining "utility"). There are arguments against this view, but they are part of the substantive debate, which doesn't admit of resolution by a knock-out blow, and where the parties owe it to themselves and to each other to understand the deep reasons of their interlocutors. This debate is engaged with "really existing Utilitarianism", that is, not with a view which has no place for the notion of virtue, but which is drawn to a powerful virtue of "rationality", peculiar to this position (i.e., very different from Plato's, and also from Kant's, and others).

Or again in arguing against, say, Dawkins' views about what constitutes proof on the issue of the "God delusion", I do not see myself as refuting atheism. I am just trying to clear aside a short-cut that has the effect of stopping real debate, and I might add, of increasing the degree and intensity of mutual misunderstanding and contempt. I'm trying to kick away a crutch on which some atheists want to lean, so that they can walk into a more fruitful debate; this is analogous to the demand on Christians to drop the crutch of Paleyan Design theory, which turns out to be another such argument-stopping short-circuit. Indeed, the present ill-tempered debate between these two kinds of crutch-hobbler is calculated to strengthen each in their stance of artificial life-support. Both substantive positions would benefit from throwing their crutches away.

But of course, to orthodox utilitarians, for whom the meta-theory about the good is fused with their substantive views, as for Dawkinsian atheists, such attacks don't look even-handed on the substantive level. That's too bad; as long as these post-Cartesian epistemological views command such support, we can't convince everyone to separate off the meta-level, and focus on the interesting debate. But nevertheless, people doing the kind of thing I attempted in these two books ought to aspire to even-handedness on what I'm calling the substantive level.

And that is what I have been attempting in these two books (and in other writings). In other words, one of the causes that I might hope these books might serve is that of helping to frame a debate with the various good features, epistemic and human, that I outlined above. Have I succeeded? Of course not, certainly not all around. I think that in some cases I have presented views which are in crucial respects opposed to mine in something like the full force of what makes them attractive to their holders; but this is far from being the case everywhere. This, however, is what I aspire to do, and I hope that I have not egregiously distorted opposing positions by casting them in terms dictated by my own. I think that in many cases where I have been accused of this, my critics are pointing to my attempt to clear aside short-cuts and elisions which impede the real debate. I hope this might be abundantly clear in the way I deal with accusations against religion as a cause of violence and anti-humanism, and the counter-accusations against the violence of atheist regimes (A Secular Age Chapter 17: both these accusations reflect the lamentable tendency to caricature one's opponent which bedevils [a specially apt word] our exchanges today); in fact both faiths and modes of atheism face puzzling questions of how they are led to betray their most basic allegiances; and they would gain from treating these questions together.

But nevertheless, I clearly fall short. But I plead that this kind of writing is very difficult. One is situated somewhere. I am a Catholic Christian. It takes a lot of learning to come to understand other positions as they are seen and felt by those who espouse them. So I think that books of this kind ought to include something else. They ought to include a frank admission of what anyway might be obvious, a kind of statement of "full disclosure". And this is what I have done in each of the books under discussion. In each of them there are passages in which I speak openly in my own voice. And then there are passages in which I present opposing positions. Of course, in some of these latter, I am expounding positions which partly overlap with my own, but the aim of these passages as a whole is to try to define what the issues are. I don't think either book would have been improved by suppressing the "full disclosure" statements. I think such exclusion would either be taken as a lack of frankness, trying to pass off my account as one from nowhere; or else might make the book appear as one with simply apologetic purpose. (Of course, on the meta-level, the books have a strong apologetic purpose; but this is not specifically Christian or even theistic; lots of atheists agree with me in condemning post-Cartesian epistemology and mechanistic-reductive accounts of human life.)

Somewhat to my surprise, these moments of full disclosure have been taken as evidence of apologetic intent. Which is not to say that I would not repeat them were I to rewrite either book. I still believe strongly in what I was trying to do, even though I fell short of the mark. My only resolution is to try harder next time. And I hope that others will enter the same terrain from other standpoints, or my own, and do much better than I did.

But I am very grateful to Fergus for his article which has induced me to clarify a basic feature of the logic of A Secular Age that was far from evident in the book, and not fully worked out in my mind either.

Graham Ward

I am conscious of how partial and incomplete my response to Fergus Kerr's article has been, and I am tempted to take up immediately Graham Ward's
very penetrating comments in order to continue and extend the discussion. Graham points out how far apart the discourses of philosophy/history/social science, on one hand, and theology on the other, have been. I admit that I have tried to use them together to illuminate one and the same matter, and no doubt there is much here of the naïve novice who doesn’t understand what he is getting into (I mean this principally in relation to theology, of course, but the remark might just as well apply to social science, to which I stand as an interested amateur).

Once again, I want to separate my actual, rather deficient performance from the project attempted. I think this latter, joining up these discourses in the same argument, is not only desirable, but absolutely indispensable. Of course, Christian theologians make claims to truth. And of course, these claims will be rejected by many practitioners of social science or philosophy. But that is also true of most of the claims made within these disciplines. They are all more or less hotly contested. It is hard to find an equivalent to what one can recognize in physics or chemistry, a core of pretty universally accepted findings and theory.

But the idea that some intervention in a social science debate, which happens to emanate from theological reflection is somehow “offside” in social science, and should be considered null and void, is a symptom of threatening sterilization. I am sure that Graham agrees with me, but let me drive the nail in a bit deeper. The very concept of “methodological atheism” is either irrelevant or terminally confused. It is irrelevant if we are talking about sciences like physics which by their very nature seek immanent causes (see my response to Hauerwas and Coles); what would a “theological” intervention in these debates look like, unless it be one of the deliverances of “Creation science”? It is deeply confused if it seriously meant a social science of history.

The hypothesis that there is something like a “désir d’éternité” in human beings, however one might want to formulate it, is one that has direct relevance to social science, and in particular to the debate about modern secularization. Not that it could be taken as a hypothesis for which evidence might be sought through interviews, questionnaires, and so on; but because it is an interpretive hypothesis which structures the kinds of things one looks for, and the ways one makes sense of the findings one has established. What I tried to show is that some sociologists just assume that there is no long term convincing power for religious faith, once the historical conditions which have rendered it plausible have disappeared. And secularization theory must try to identify what these conditions have been (closed horizons, tight communities, little room for individual difference, absence of technological progress, or whatever). If that is a sociological interpretive hypothesis—albeit one which often goes unexpressed—then surely it is conceivable that it be wrong; and that is just what the “désir d’éternité” hypothesis posits. We wait perhaps for a twenty-first-century Cromwell: “I do beseech you, in the bowels of Popper, behold ye that ye might be mistaken”.

Social science, history, always operate on what might be called philosophical anthropologies, views of human life and the human condition which are often only partly articulated. These should always remain open to criticism. But some of these see human beings in a wider than natural context, as possible loci of access to nirvana, or as creatures made in the image of God. None of these, atheist, theist or of some quite different form, can be ruled out a priori. The claim that one can do so on “methodological” grounds is irreceivable. Seen from one side, that was the message of John Milbank’s Theology and Social Theory.

Graham no doubt agrees. In certain situations, and before certain questions, you may indeed have to draw on theological sources to make sense of what you’re examining. But this might be seen as a misuse of theology; so the thinker of mixed discourse is not yet out of trouble. If the telos of theology is apologetics, then this thinker is engaged in an abuse, using a theologically-based formulation (like the “désir d’éternité”) to formulate the interpretive basis for an explanation of a social science fact (e.g., the surprising [to some] persistence of religion).

But all this brings us to a deeper question, which Graham raises, and which was implicit in Fergus’ paper: what really does apologetics consist in? I argued in the response to Fergus above that my efforts to situate what I think the real debate consist in required that we clear away certain too facile proposals to settle the issues on mistaken epistemological grounds, and also certain gross caricatures that each side puts forward of the other; in many cases, I have been dealing with caricatures of faith, because in our present intellectual/academic milieu these are the most prominent. Out there, in particular in the US Bible belt, equal and opposite caricatures are cherished, e.g., of latte-sipping, permisive, Northeastern liberals, but I didn’t anticipate many readers there (but I’d be delighted to be proven wrong).

These attempts to sideline the shortcuts to non-faith could also serve an apologetic purpose, in those cases where readers are deeply invested in one of these, and are shaken loose by argument, so that they are ready to take faith seriously as an option; or in the commonly-encountered case where someone is leaning towards faith and is discouraged from taking it as a serious option by one of the shortcuts or caricatures. Lots of arguments in this way could serve an apologetic purpose in one context, and a quite different purpose in others.

And in my case, the principal goal of my meta-level arguments was to foster an eventual debate about the real issues which would have the effects of self-clarification, overcoming caricatures and mutual respect that I described above in responding to Fergus. For epistemic and human reasons, I think this is something we should try for, and that all can gain from. In addition, I have very strong theological reasons (which I will just gesture towards as involving the close relation between Christian faith and the dialogue) to want to bring this about.
But, and this is perhaps surprising, this goal amounts to a kind of “accommodation”, which Graham identifies as an alternative to apologetics as traditionally conceived. Whereas in the mixed discourse that I am (perhaps somewhat confusedly) cobbled together they in some ways not only go together but each other.

This sense of the value of a certain kind of exchange between different faiths, and between faith and non-faith, I feel to be the adequate response to the “signs of the times”. And this brings me to another place where something like apologetics—or at least advocacy—comes in. Earlier, in response to Ferguson, I described both Sources of the Self and A Secular Age as having moments in which I expressed my own commitments. But in fact, these “moments” are much more developed in A Secular Age. Most notably, this emerges in the last chapter on “Conversions”, but it obtrudes at different places earlier.

I didn’t plan on this last chapter when I started writing. I got carried along. This was partly because I wanted to say something about this; I wanted to get something off my chest. But it is also because the issues of how Christians respond to this “secular age” just got more and more pressing; in the argument of the book, but also in the life of the church. So there is a lot of advocacy in the end, intervening in an internal debate in the Church. Here I am not just setting the stage, but trying to convince people, or so I must confess. Graham picks up on the crucial points in his piece: that we not write the history of these centuries (1500–2000 in Latin Christendom) either as “progress” or as “decline”; that we see these different ages rather the way we see different cultures in which the faith has been differently “inculturated”; and that we see the demands of our age as including the kind of conversation that I have been outlining.

This does not entail a negation of apologetics. On the contrary, the conversation I envisage is one in which different, incompatible views meet, and in which arguments are exchanged. If this is absent, the exchange becomes anodyne; it ceases to be mutually revelatory, and ends up in an “agreement to disagree” which gives everyone a good feeling, but doesn’t foster real respect. Much more needs to be said about all this. And many more insights find expression in Graham’s very thought-provoking article, which I haven’t been able to do justice to here.

Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles

I am very much in agreement with the thrust of the comments of Hauerwas and Coles. This thrust is in a sense continuous with A Secular Age, but also as they say, it raises important questions for it. One set of questions concerns what is left out. And there are lots of things left out. I could have mentioned a great number of other people, movements, actions, thinkers in our contemporary world, from which lessons might be drawn about how one can respond to the “immanent frame.” I have been aware of this throughout the writing of the book. Every facet of it calls for supplementation; it concentrates on a few countries in the North Atlantic world (which defines its scope), and a few confessions, movements, etc. The truth of the basic hypotheses about Reform, the buffered self, the Immanent Frame, and so on, would have to be tested in relation to a great number of other periods, churches, confessions, secularizations. That’s why I described it in the preface as more like a set of interlocking essays than a continuous story. The book is in a sense a first draft, of some basic theses which could eventually be tested and refined (but not by me, and I hope not refined out of any recognizable shape).

But the challenge that Hauerwas and Coles raise goes beyond incompleteness. It concerns whether some of the things left out, and in particular a host of instances of “daily liturgical work” (page 15), could just be added, in an expanded edition, as it were, or whether the possibility of these has been perhaps foreclosed by the basic terms of A Secular Age. One of the big obstacles in A Secular Age blocking this extension they identify is what they take as a very strong distinction between the immanent and the transcendental, which seems to merge on the watertight.

I think they have a very strong point here, and I now can see more clearly that the book has an important weakness at this point.

I must admit right here that this distinction as I make it in the book has been enormously contested in the discussions I’ve read or participated in on the book. Very often the objections go along with pleas for other, wider definitions of transcendental, by those among others who would like to argue for a “horizontal transcendence”, forms of self overcoming which remain in the immanent world, which is not quite the issue raised by Hauerwas and Coles. But in one way or another the distinction is troubling and very unclear, and I begin to regret having used the terms.

But they aren’t that easy to avoid, and I’d like to explain why. In fact I wanted to make two points with this terminology. One is that the distinction it marks is indispensable; the second was that as an absolute distinction, it is wrong. I spent a lot of time making the first point, and I gave only disconnected hints in favour of the second.

First, why indispensable? Under some terminology or other, it was essential to my explanatory story. This culminates in a social imaginary of what I call the “immanent frame”. This is the fruit of a development which I believe to be its origin unique to Latin Christendom, although it has since been borrowed, or imposed, much more widely. In every civilization, and through smaller societies which have existed before or outside the great civilizations, we can see some distinction between the beings of our everyday world, on one hand, and higher beings, on the other, be these spirits, or gods, or higher levels of the cosmos—for instance, Plato’s Ideas, or the concept in traditional China that we translate as “heaven”, as in “the mandate of heaven”. In all these cases, these two levels were not seen as rigorously separated.
contrary, events or beings on the higher level were necessary to understand and explain what happens at the lower level. Plato’s Ideas have to be invoked to explain the things in space-time function. Actions of Gods or spirits explain success or disaster that we experience in our world.

Latin Christendom breaks the pattern, in that it developed in the modern period the conception of the lower, or immanent order, as in a certain sense self-sufficient; that its operation could be explained in terms drawn from itself, without necessarily appealing to the higher level. It is this new distinction, which in a way deserves the description “watertight”, which we see developing in our world in modern times. This emerges in a number of forms, but I want to mention three, because they play a particular part in my story. The first is the universe as understood by post-Galilean and Newtonian Natural science. Of course one can argue (as Newton among others did) that the magnificent order exhibited by the universe bespeaks a benevolent Creator, but the actual unfolding of things requires only immanent factors, force, mass, etc. As Laplace answered to Napoleon when the Emperor asked him what he made of God, “Sire, je n’ai pas eu besoin de cette hypothèse”.

The second is the social-political order, as understood by the modern Natural Law theory, which posited a Social Contract. Society is built from the bottom up; and while we can see the principles on which they should be built (natural law) as willed by God, this is quite different from pre-modern notions of political order as reflecting the order of the cosmos. The third domain is that of modern moral philosophy, which developed out of natural law, whether in its consequentialist (mostly utilitarian) or deontological (most prominently Kantian) forms. This sees the moral law as emerging from “natural reason”, whether or not that coincides with what we can identify as the will of God.

These and other immanent, in the sense of self-sufficient, orders have come to constitute our world, in that they are implicit in our political, economic, scientific-technological practices. Consequently, we have come to live within a social imaginary which takes the split for granted. This is what I have called the “immanent frame”, a this-worldly order that we have come to imagine together, whether or not we take this to be the final word on reality, whether we live it in other words, in an “open” or “closed” fashion.

So the distinction is indispensable, because without it we couldn’t understand our dominant social imaginary, and hence the world it helps constitute. And this would make it difficult to understand some of the ways in which the issues of belief and unbelief are inevitably posed for us, whether there is something “beyond” this order or not, whether it exhausts reality or not.

But at the same time, the watertight distinction is wrong, and needs to be challenged. This is clearly a necessary condition of living any form of Christian faith, as Hauerwas and Coles clearly show. They invoke Henri de Lubac, and John Milbank’s commentary on his *Surnaturel*, and I am entirely in agreement with the common direction of their thought, even though there are problems with the detailed formulation of this thought which may never be entirely resolved. (Compare the parallel, and related, attempts to overcome the radical mind/body split with which many thinkers today are engaged.)

There is thus an important dimension missing in my thesis in *A Secular Age*, and this remains the case, however one works out in detail, not just the theory, but the practice of “daily liturgical work” in a world in which both the immanent frame and the temptations of a Constantinian Christianity weigh so heavily on us.

**Gregory Bauman**

I largely agree with Gregory’s article, which offers what might be thought a series of “friendly amendments” to the main thesis of my book. The critical element mainly concerns omissions from my text. But I have also to note that Gregory raises questions about my use of the immanent/transcendent distinction, which show in their own way the difficulties already raised by Hauerwas and Coles, and other critics. Gregory raises the question, whether “immanent humanism committed to universal well being lacks... a transcendent dimension”? (page 5). Connecting to the earlier discussion, one can see this issue in two lights: a) must one not describe the aspiration to go beyond not only one’s self-interest, but also the allegiance to one’s own community or nation, towards the good of all mankind, as a move to self-transcendence, in some sense of this word? And this, even if there is no recognition of a power beyond the immanent. This raises the issue of what I called above “horizontal transcendence”. But one can also take the question in another way, one specifically addressed to the Christian: b) picking up on the passage from Matthew 25 that Gregory quotes, does not the Gospel recognize as doing the will of God acts which are described in purely “immanent terms”, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting prisoners? I take both of these as valid challenges, and I presume that Gregory probably meant them both. (And of course, they are related.)

There is also another criticism which I’d like to take up. My way of presenting the important changes of the late twentieth-century was in one way very inept, and Gregory’s remarks point this up. Of course the Age of Authenticity doesn’t simply replace the Age of Mobilization as a basic understanding of social existence, in the way that this latter replaced the ancien régime. We are still very much in the Age of Mobilization, and it is even hard to imagine our leaving it, short of some terrible civilization-destroying catastrophe. But within this age, there was a crucial shift in understanding of the relation of our spiritual options to political society. The new understanding is the one I identify with the ethic of authenticity. We are far from unanimous in our reaction to this change; for many people the move away from neo-Durkheimian fusions of spiritual outlook and political identity is a regrettable decline. Sometimes this is seen as a betrayal of faith: refusing, for
instance to see America as “one nation under God”. But this can also be seen as a betrayal of the nation. And clearly many of those who object to this refusal see it in this double light. But it is not only religious nationalists who are troubled by this. For certain Jacobin-leaning French “republicans”, the notion that the Republic can be dissociated from a “laïque” philosophy of emancipation-through-reason is anathema. The republican tradition would be thereby eviscerated.

I am trying to say all this in the book, but I admit that my talk of three Ages is very misleading in that it sounds as though there were three watertight periods, and I am grateful to Gregory for pointing this out.

With the main thrust of his article, I am very much in agreement. What Gregory calls the “back and forth” movement is very much the lens within which we should see the process that has been called “secularization”. This is the lens that I propose to replace the idea of a linear causal story which was the essence of the mainline secularization theory, that the more the basket of changes we describe as “modernization” advances, the more religion declines, and/or is marginalized or privatized. Not only is the movement not linear, not only are the responses to “modernization” various, but there is not a single thing, called “religion”, which is declining throughout the period.

On the contrary, various modernizing changes destabilize earlier forms of religious life, giving rise to new forms, which often flourish but may face destabilization at a later moment. Neo-Durkheimian confessionalization was a response to the French Revolution and its aftermath, but this was destabilized by the changes of the late twentieth-century. What we call “religion” changes and becomes more diverse; and at the same time, atheist and unbelieving outlooks also immensely diversify. Each is impacted on by the other; none of them develops in isolation.

Gregory gives a rich description of part of this process in describing the great range of movements, both of immanent humanism, and of people of faith, which have changed the face of our world; and will go on doing so, as our global civilization confronts a mounting and in some ways terrifying crisis.

Hent de Vries

Hent’s fully developed and subtly-argued paper points up a number of facets of my argument in *A Secular Age*. There are a number of important challenges here. But I felt, as his argument proceeded, that there was also a growing misunderstanding between us.

One locus of misunderstanding seems to rest in the notion of “immediacy”. On page 23, for instance, he refers to “the putative, hypothesized pre-historical age of immediacy”; I have the sense that thinkers like Hegel, or modern theorists of the “primitive”, are being described, but not *A Secular Age*. In this too-grand term, a number of different points that I tried to make seem in danger of losing their contours.

One very important distinction for me was “naive” versus “buffered”. Here I wanted to grasp the very important shift which amounts to “disenchantment”. This involves, I believe, a change in the way we experience the world. In the first condition, the actions of spirits or “magical” forces is sensed as something we experience, as we can the wind, or the elements, or human or animal aggression. The self is “porous”, and one can be to different degrees “taken over” by such “magical” agencies. By contrast, for the “buffered” self, the agency here has to be “occulnt”, that is, it is something one might accept as a hypothetical cause of events which would themselves be “naively” experienced, such as my falling ill, or suddenly losing a capacity I counted on.

In disenchantment, there is a very important change in our relation to a (possible) spiritual world, but it doesn’t consist in a change of belief or hypothesis. Rather, considering different hypotheses belongs to the second stance. What changes is our way of being in, experiencing the world. I am far from satisfied with my account of this change. We have trouble finding the language which will capture it. But I think this shift is of very great importance, and is an important component in the coming of the secular age. But we lose sight of this change if we swallow it up in some supposed massive move from “immediacy” to “mediation”. These words all have many meanings.

Another more circumscribed change is what I described as mutual fragilization of different positions, and the resulting sense of optionality. Of course, our society is different from earlier ones in which virtually everybody believed in or experienced the same shape of spirituality. But it is also different from other societies, such as India has been for centuries, and the Ottoman Empire was, to take two examples, in which everyone was aware of many spiritual positions being lived in one’s society. But this could be so without one’s feeling that some other position was a real existential option for one. Someone living in the Greek Orthodox milieu of Ottoman Turkey was used to sharing his world with Muslims, but it didn’t necessarily seem a live option to become a Muslim; and the reverse was, if anything, even more the case (since there were possible gains in conversion for the minority).

But for many people today, members of their own family live some other position; moreover, there have been shifts within the family, and new changes are always taking place. Moreover, everyone is aware that this isn’t a rare fact about my family alone, but is very widespread. There are indeed, milieux in which this variety is less salient, and this sets up a powerful “default position” in such micro-worlds, but their inhabitants are well aware that this stability stops at their boundaries. This is what it is to see one’s stance as in this sense an option. There would be nothing weird or outlandish in my changing.

This sense of “optionality” is part of my perception of “what goes on”, of “how things go” in our society. It has nothing to do with my being ready or...
even vaguely tempted to exercise an option to change. I may be very firmly rooted in my atheism, or faith, or some such position as I would describe as “spiritual but not religious”, or any other of a host of available stances. That perhaps is a weakness of my term “fragilized”. I meant just that sticking with the position you’re in is now minimally protected by the social inconceivability of changing. But it doesn’t mean that faith or anti-faith cannot be robust.

In this connection, I couldn’t disagree more with Hent’s claim on page 34: “For faith to have consistency, coherence, or even substance and consequence, it would have to be dogmatic, unquestioning, sealed off, blocking us from—blinding us against—the alternative view, thus undermining the very meaning and importance of ‘optionality’”. Taint necessity so. Indeed, there are clear cases of people leaping into dogmatic and militant forms of a faith that they feel may be slipping, as we see with some Islamist terrorists.

Another source of cross-purposes attends my term “fullness”. This has given a lot of trouble. I was looking for a term that was unattached to any particular position, faith or non-faith. But it tends to drift towards a particular way of filling it out. Maybe I should have chosen another word. I wanted to use this as something like a category term to capture the very different ways in which each of us (as I claim) sees life as capable of some fuller, higher, more genuine, more authentic, more intense . . . form. The list of adjectives is indefinitely long, because the positions we may adopt have no finite limit. Why do this? Because I think that it is valuable to try to grasp a position you find unfamiliar and even baffling through trying to bring into focus the understanding of fullness it involves. This is particularly the case if you want really to understand it, to be able to feel the power it has for its protagonists, as against simply dismissing it. And this kind of understanding is crucial for me, as I explained above in discussing Fergus’ article.

But the term “fullness” seems to have led to more misunderstanding than communication. A lot of readers saw it as applying only to religious conceptions of fullness. I guess the term can be pronounced in a way which has a religious or metaphysical ring. But this doesn’t have to be the case. Take Sportin’ Life in Porgy and Bess. “Methusaleh lived 900 years; but who’d call that livin’ / when no gal would give in / to no man of 900 years”. Who’d call that living? Some living isn’t the real thing. There is real living; living to the full, as you might call it. My claim is that analogous distinctions crop up in all life forms. This distinction and its analogues are a human universal.

Maybe I’m wrong about this. I don’t think so. But in all likelihood I need another term.

In this and the other cases above, I recognize that the misunderstandings have been largely of my own doing. Crucial points should have been made more carefully. But I’m learning from this and other discussions, and I am very grateful to Hent for pushing me further towards clarity in his interesting and very suggestive article.

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anti-Cartesian—character of Pascal’s account of subjectivity. Both scholars recognize that Pascal is frequently motivated by theological concerns. Still, without wishing to denigrate their work, it is also the case that neither Marion nor Carraud gives Pascal his due as a theological thinker. Their account of human sin is thinner and less nuanced than Pascal’s own. For Pascal, as for Augustine, sin is duplicitous and so duplicitous subjectivity is sinful subjectivity. Once we recognize this point, we can read the Pensées as a theological text from beginning to end. By contrast, Carraud insists that Pascal’s only properly theological account of the self is found in the dialectic of greatness and wretchedness; he thereby misses the fact that the rest of Pascal’s thoughts about duplicitous subjectivity also concern fallen subjectivity and are therefore equally theological. Marion, for his part, correctly argues that Pascal’s Augustinian account of the self equals subje
tivity with love, but he does not fully explore Pascal’s own insight that tyrannical self-love is also socially expressed and duplicitous and therefore can manifest, paradoxically, as a kind of dependence. Furthermore, as I discuss below, neither Marion nor Carraud grasp the full weight of Pascal’s brief account of non-duplicitous, Trinitarian subjectivity. More work therefore remains to be done.

In this article I aim to develop a fully theological, yet still Pascalian account of human subjectivity. Exegetically, I argue that the Pensées themselves present two such accounts, both developed as rival answers to Pascal’s explicit question “What is the self?” (L688/S567). The first account is a portrait of fallen subjectivity, selfhood under the reign of sin. On this account, Pascal argues that the self is imaginary, in a special sense. It is one’s own imaginative construal of oneself. What I call my “self” is just the story that I tell to myself about myself, my subjective narrative identity. This subjective self is an imaginary construct that typically does not correspond to the way I really am. It is in fact doubly imaginary because one always sees oneself through the eyes of other people. My subjective narrative identity is therefore the story that I imagine that other people would tell about me. Pascal calls this doubly imaginary self “the moi.” Pascal’s second account of the self is a portrait of authentic subjectivity. This account is explicitly Christological and even Trinitarian. Pascal argues that authentic subjectivity derives from one’s membership in the body of Christ. This account of authentic subjectivity is tantalizingly brief, but it is clearly present in the Pensées.

Constructively, I use Pascal’s two accounts to argue that whether sinful or saved, our subjectivity is performative and imaginative; whether under sin or under grace, to be a self is to imitate God. As sinners, our duplicitous subjectivity is a dreadful parody of God’s loving act of creation. Conversely, as authentic Trinitarian subjects, we imitate Christ, the only fully real human being, by turning away from the self and loving God above all things. Either way, at the deepest core of our subjectivity we cannot help but imitate God.

What is the Self?

Before I present Pascal’s two accounts of subjectivity, it is helpful to see how Pascal himself frames the question those accounts are meant to answer. In fragment L688/S567, Pascal straightforwardly asks: What is the self? (Qu’est-ce le moi?). Pascal asks but does not answer this question—the fragment ends in aporia. As he dismisses various solutions to his question, it becomes apparent that to be a self is to be a proper object of love but we are not told what kind of self, if any, could be such an object.

What is the self? (Qu’est-ce le moi?)

A man goes to the window to see the people passing by; if I pass by, can I say he went there to see me? No, for he is not thinking of me in particular. But what about a person who loves someone for the sake of her beauty; does he love her? No, for smallpox, which will destroy beauty without destroying the person, will put an end to his love for her.

And if someone loves me for my judgment or my memory, do they love me? Me, myself? No, for I could lose these qualities without losing myself. Where then is this self, if it is neither in the body nor the soul? And how can one love the body or the soul except for the sake of such qualities, which are not what make up the self, since they are perishable? Would we love the substance of a person’s soul, in the abstract, whatever qualities might be in it? That is not possible, and it would be wrong. Therefore, we never love anyone, but only qualities.

Let us then stop scoffing at those who win honor through their appointments and offices, for we never love anyone except through borrowed qualities (L688/S567).

Rather than giving a direct answer to the fragment’s opening question, Pascal presents three scenarios: a pedestrian casually spotted from a window, a woman loved for the sake of her beauty, and someone else loved for the sake of his mental attributes. It is immediately striking that in all three scenarios, the “self” in question is presented not as an agent, but as the passive recipient of the attention of others. Furthermore, the nature of that attention is also specified. In this fragment, at least, to be a self is to be the object of love. Even in the first situation, the wish that the man in the window should be “thinking of me in particular” connotes love.

This fragment bears close scrutiny. It is significant that Pascal investigates the nature of the self by asking “what is the moi?” rather than “what am I?”, as Descartes asks in his Meditations. The French word “moi” has no exact English equivalent. It corresponds to the regular pronoun “me,” of course, but it can also mean “the self,” “myself,” “the I,” or personal identity generally. As I discuss below, Pascal also uses the ordinary term “le moi” in a theoretical way, to name the doubly-imaginary, socially-constructed persona.
In this fragment, Pascal’s emphasis on the objective case instead of the nominative (Qu’est-ce le moi?) clearly anticipates the major themes of the fragment. The picture of the self on display here is seen most clearly when contrasted to that of Descartes. Indeed, many scholars believe that this fragment is a direct reaction to the Meditation, and that Pascal deliberately borrows and subverts key Cartesian images in it.

At the broadest level, this fragment rejects Cartesian claims of autonomy and self-transparency. Pascal implies that introspection cannot reveal the nature of the self because the self is not constituted from within. Whereas the Cartesian subject is separate from the world, separate even from the body that it inhabits, Pascal takes it for granted that to be a self is to be embedded in a network of relations, a world. Indeed, the self considered as “moi” is dependent upon others for its very existence. Alone, I am “I” but I need others to be “me.” Consequently, if it is “me” I am investigating (or, better, if I am not really an “I” at all, but a “me”) then I cannot properly study myself in isolation.

Recall that toward the end of his second meditation, as Descartes seeks to understand the nature of the self, he speaks of looking out his window at the men on the street below. He judges that they are indeed men even though, strictly speaking, all he really sees are coats and hats. He concludes from this experiment that it is his mind, and not his bodily senses, that grasps the men, just as it is his mind that grasps the underlying essence of a piece of wax that is melted and reshaped until all its contingent qualities are stripped away. He then concludes that he himself is fundamentally mind, not body, and that he can perceive his own mind more clearly than anything else.

Pascal presents a similar scene, but he inverts it. In Descartes, the self is the watcher at the window, the one who melts the wax, the one who voluntarily performs the philosophical therapy of meditation in order to establish its own certain existence and (only after doing so) the existence of others. In Pascal, the self is watched from the window, and its qualities are progressively stripped away as if it were the wax. When its qualities are stripped away, Pascal seems to suggest, nothing at all remains of the self and so nothing remains to be known or loved.

In the fragment’s first scenario, the self as such is not really encountered at all, because it is not the object of loving affection. The second scenario declines to identify the self that must be loved with the transient physical attributes that often elicit love. The third rejects the equation of the self with one’s subjective mental life (one’s judgment or memory) for the same reason. Pascal also specifically declines to identify the self with the substance of the soul. He thereby departs from the Aristotelian and scholastic traditions, since in classical metaphysics, a substance, by definition, is what underlies change. In those traditions, the substance of my soul could indeed be construed as that which I must truly am because the substance of my soul would preserve my identity through all temporal and physical changes. Pascal refuses to identify the self with the substance of the soul, because an abstract “soul-self” cannot be a proper object of love.

In this fragment, Pascal thus presents what might be called a negative ontology of the self. We are told that the self is not isolated from the world, not fully autonomous, not exclusively an agent, and not a unitary, imperishable substance. As is frequently the case with vies negatives, however, the fragment seems to end in aporia: it does not tell us anything about what the self actually is. Pascal suggests that we need to be seen, thought about, and, ultimately, loved in order to be; but what others see, know, and love is not us, but only “borrowed qualities.” At the fragment’s end, we have been given no answer to its opening question, nor have we learned what kind of self can be an object of love.

The False Self

We learn Pascal’s first answer to this question elsewhere in the Pensées. If our subjectivity is called into being by love, it follows that the kind of self we are determined by the kind of love that calls us into being. Thus, in the fallen world, under the reign of sin, our idolatrous, disordered love can only call into being a false, imaginary self. The story of the birth of the false self is what I am calling Pascal’s first account of human subjectivity.

According to Pascal, only an imaginary self can seem worthy of love and so each person pretends to possess desirable qualities that he does not really have: We are not satisfied with the life we have in ourselves and our own being. We want to lead an imaginary life in the eyes of others, and so we try to make an impression. We strive constantly to embellish and preserve our imaginary being, and neglect the real one. And if we are calm, or generous, or loyal, we are anxious to have it known so that we can attach these virtues to our other existence; we prefer to detach them from our real self so as to unite them with the other. We would cheerfully be cowards if that would acquire for us a reputation of bravery. How clear a sign of the nullity of our own being that we are not satisfied with one without the other and often exchange the one for the other! For anyone who would not die to save his honor would be infamous (L806/S653).

Pascal here posits a duality in the self, a separation between our “imaginary being” that exists only in the minds of others and our own, “real” being, the precise nature of which is not specified. It seems fairly straightforward to map the imaginary being of L806/S653 onto the moi of L688/S567 (discussed above) and conclude that the imaginary being, the self as it exists “in the eyes of others” is the moi that is constructed by the world.

In contrast with the motif of passivity in the earlier fragment, however, now it appears that each person actively welcomes and constructs this separation. Pascal uses an array of first-person plural action verbs to paint
a picture of a self that is not only an agent but a whirlwind of activity. It thus corrects the rather one-sided picture of the self offered by L688/S567. We are not merely constructed by the world with no agency of our own; rather, we are co-authors of our imaginary selves. But we must also note the kind of activity to which fragment L806/S653 refers. The verbs Pascal deploys are, without exception, verbs of desiring, and collectively they paint a picture of the self as an agent whose only activity is craving: “we are not satisfied . . . we want . . . we try . . . we strive constantly . . . we are anxious . . . we prefer . . . “ And what we crave, without exception, is the esteem of others. Note, however, that our desire for esteem is markedly not the desire actually to be worthy of esteem, but rather a desire for esteem as such, regardless of whether we deserve it. Pascal writes:

Greatness of man. Our idea of man’s soul is so lofty that we cannot bear to be despised and not enjoy the esteem of a given soul. All the happiness of men lies in this esteem (L41 1/S30).

For whatever possession he may own on earth, whatever health or essential amenity he may enjoy, he is dissatisfied unless he also enjoys the good opinion of his fellows. He so highly values human reason that, however privileged he may be on earth, if he does not also enjoy a privileged position in human reason, he is not happy. This is the finest position on earth; nothing can deflect him from this desire, and this is the most indelible quality in the human heart (L470/S707).

The “most indelible quality in the human heart “is the desire to” “enjoy the good opinion of his fellows.” Yet this desire does not call forth virtuous projects of self-improvement, in which we seek to become ever more worthy of the esteem of others. Far from it. The desire for esteem is essentially duplicitous. In a slogan: the desire for esteem creates the desire to seem.

It is easy to miss the full force of Pascal’s critique. He does not claim merely that the desire for esteem is one activity among others, activities performed by an otherwise substantial self. Rather, the relentless activity by which we pursue the esteem of others just is the moi, the false self identified by the fragments discussed above (L688/S567, L806/S653) and, furthermore, the moi just is the self—or at least the only self to which we have any epistemic access. Thus, for Pascal, the self is essentially duplicitous. Better—it is essentially an act of duplicity, duplicity in act.

Elsewhere in the Pensées, Pascal presents and develops this claim. In a long and polished fragment entitled “self-love” (amour-propre), he argues that our subjectivity depends on social relationships, which themselves depend on joint projects of deception, pretense, and hypocrisy (L978/S743). The dialectic is complex. A person’s amour-propre causes him to deceive both himself and others, but it also causes him to pretend to believe those trying to deceive him. Pascal intends this complex dialectic as an account of subjectivity as such. Indeed, the fragment’s opening line asserts an equivalence between selfhood and self-love: “The nature of amour-propre and of this human self is to love only self and consider only self” (La nature de l’amour-propre et de ce moi humain est de n’aimer que soi et de ne considerer que soi. [L978/S743]).

The nature of amour-propre and of this human self is to love only self and consider only self. But what is it to do? It cannot prevent the object of its love from being full of faults and wretchedness: it wants to be great and sees that it is small; it wants to be happy and sees that it is wretched; it wants to be perfect and sees that it is full of imperfections; it wants to be the object of men’s love and esteem and sees that its faults deserve only their dislike and contempt. The predicament in which it thus finds itself arouses in it the most unjust and criminal passion that could possibly be imagined, for it conceives a deadly hatred for the truth which rebukes it and convinces it of its faults. It would like to do away with this truth, and not being able to destroy it as such, it destroys it, as best it can, in the consciousness of itself and others and it cannot bear to have them pointed out or noticed.

It is no doubt an evil to be full of faults, but it is a still greater evil to be full of them and unwilling to recognize them since this entails the further evil of deliberate self-delusion [illusion volontaire]. We do not want others to deceive us; we do not think it is right for them to want us to esteem them more than they deserve; it is therefore not right either that we should deceive them and want them to esteem us more than we deserve . . . (L978/S743)

The link between selfhood and self-love asserted in the fragment’s opening line follows from Pascal’s claim that love calls the self into being (L688/S653). It quickly becomes apparent that any self called into being by self-love must be essentially duplicitous. Accordingly, in the fragment’s opening salvo, Pascal opposes self-lucidity to the desire for the love and esteem of other people. The self not only wants esteem of others, it also wants to deserve it. But it also sees that it is wretched, small, and imperfect. Pascal writes that the self “wants to be the object of men’s love and esteem and sees that its faults deserve only their dislike and contempt.” Since it cannot (we may suppose) successfully attack its own imperfections, it attacks the awareness of its imperfections, both in its own consciousness and in the consciousness of others. The self “conceives a deadly hatred for the truth which rebukes it” and it “would like to do away with this truth” but it cannot. Instead, it destroys the truth “in the consciousness of itself and others”—not completely, however, but only “as best it can.” It is clear that Pascal is describing a complex process of outwardly-directed pretense and inwardly directed self-deception. Yet, recalling the fragment’s first line, we must understand this process as an account of the self as such: selfhood as duplicity in act, once again.