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Conceptions of God and Narratives of Modernity
A hermeneutical interpretation of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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Mémoire présenté à la Faculté de Théologie et Sciences des Religions en vue de l'obtention
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Ce mémoire intitulé :

Conceptions of God and Narratives of Modernity
A hermeneutical interpretation of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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RÉSUMÉ

A Secular Age représente le produit du projet de l'Anthropologie Philosophique de Charles Taylor développé tout au long de quarante années. Dans ce travail, Taylor expose une narration positive de la modernité qui explique la condition moderne de la croyance tout en décrivant la relation contemporaine entre la religion et la sécularité. Sa narration compte trois segments : une analyse historique des origines de l'identité moderne ; une évaluation des représentations contemporaines de la religion et des attitudes envers la croyance ; et des suppositions sur la présence future des croyances dans la société occidentale.

Taylor affirme que les explications des pratiques humaines reflètent le cadre de référence de l'auteur. Ce mémoire démontre l'influence du cadre subjectif de Taylor sur sa narration de la modernité, à travers une analyse herméneutique de *A Secular Age* et des autres travaux de Taylor reliés à son projet de Philosophie Anthropologique. Sa définition des termes, sa théorie morale ainsi que sa représentation narrative de la relation entre la religion et la sécularité sont donc révélatrices de son propre cadre moral personnel.

Les cadres moraux modernes font plusieurs références à Dieu, même si celles-ci sont relativement absentes dans la société séculaire. La théorie morale de Taylor présente une connexion importante entre la compréhension de l'agence de l'être et la conception de Dieu. Son exposé de la modernité soutient que la connexion entre l'être et Dieu nécessite la conception de Dieu pour une vie morale. Taylor prétend que les croyances religieuses sont perpétuelles dans la société humaine et que leurs pertinences et leurs significations vont devenir plus apparentes dans le futur.

L'orientation religieuse de Taylor et sa foi catholique sont évidentes dans les théories de la religion présentées dans *A Secular Age*. Ce travail conclut que la présence des croyances de Taylor dans ses textes est pertinente. La présence même des convictions personnelles tout au long de son exposé quant à la modernité démontre la force de ses suppositions sur la nature des théories de modernité. Ces convictions religieuses personnelles permettent à Taylor d'adresser cet ouvrage à un auditoire qui se situe au cœur d'un débat continu, énergique et polarisé sur la légitimité des croyances religieuses.

SUMMARY

A Secular Age represents the product of Charles Taylor's forty-year advancement of his Philosophical Anthropology project. In this work, Taylor constructs a positive narrative of modernity, which explains the modern condition of belief and describes the contemporary relationship between religion and secularity. Taylor's narrative involves three components: an historical analysis of the origins of modern identity; an assessment of contemporary representations of religion and attitudes towards belief; and suppositions about the future presence of religious belief in Western society.

Taylor asserts that the explanations of human practices are reflective of their author's subjective frame of reference. This paper demonstrates the influence of Taylor's subjective frame on his narrative of modernity, through a hermeneutical analysis of *A Secular Age* and the works related to Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology project. Taylor's definition of terms, moral theory, and narrative depiction of the relationship between religion and secularity are therefore revelatory of his personal moral framework.

Modern moral frameworks make numerous references to God, even though such references are relatively absent in secular society. Taylor's moral theory presents a strong connection between the understanding of human agency and the conception of God. Moreover, his narrative of modernity implies that the conception of God is necessary for moral life. Taylor contends that religious belief is a perennial feature of human society, whose relevance and significance will become more apparent in the future.

Taylor's religious orientation and Catholic faith are evident in the theories of religion presented in *A Secular Age*. This paper concludes that the influence and transparency of Taylor's beliefs are both unavoidable and purposeful. The presence of Taylor's personal convictions in his narrative of modernity is demonstrative of Taylor's suppositions about the nature of theories of modernity. In acknowledging his religious beliefs, Taylor directs his narrative at an audience caught in the middle of the ongoing, energetic and polarized debate over the legitimacy of belief in Western Culture.

KEYWORDS

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Secularity, Secularization, Religion, Modern Condition of Belief,, Conception of God, Narrative of Modernity, Identity, Morality, Philosophical Anthropology.

MOTS CLÉS

Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Sécularité, Sécularisation, Narration, Religion, Foi Moderne, Identité, Moralité, Philosophie Anthropologique.

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INTRODUCTION

I General Presentation

Charles Taylor is a prolific contemporary, Canadian philosopher. He is recognized for his contributions to the fields of moral and political philosophy, in addition to his advancement of Philosophical Anthropology: the interpretive study of theories of human agency and selfhood.¹ Taylor's 1989 book *Sources of the Self*, which presents an historical analysis of the modern identity, was critically appraised and has been widely commented by philosophers, theologians, and sociologists.² In 2007, Taylor published his most recent manuscript: *A Secular Age*. In 2007, Taylor was also awarded the Templeton Prize, which honors research in the field of spirituality and religion, in recognition of his lifelong achievements.³

Prior to *A Secular Age*, religion represented a secondary, yet consistent, theme in Taylor's body of work. *Varieties of Religion Today* and *A Catholic Modernity?* were originally presented as lectures and later published as independent works. Considered a secondary theme to Taylor's philosophy of morality and identity, his views on religion and secularity have been greatly overlooked by academics. Taylor, however, offers an interesting perspective into the modern condition of belief in *A Secular Age*. His narrative explanation of secularity and modernity is unparalleled in the fields of philosophy and religious studies, and deserves greater critical attention from scholars of modernity, religion, and secularity.

This thesis presents a hermeneutical analysis of Taylor's narrative of modernity, articulated in *A Secular Age*. His narrative involves three components: a description of the past, an analysis of the present, and suppositions about the future. Taylor states that his

¹ Smith, Nicholas H. *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*. (Cambridge : Polity, 2002) 1-9.

² See Morgan, Michael L. "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*. Ed. James Tully. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) n.50

³*The Templeton Prize Home*. Ed. John Templeton Foundation 29 June 2009.
<<http://www.Templetonprize.org/>>

narrative is an alternative to the prevalent “anti-religious negative narratives of modernity”, which explain modernity as the result of the regression of religious belief and the shedding of manipulative, illusory ideas about human nature and society. Central to Taylor’s narrative is the discussion of how the conception of God has changed overtime, corresponding with changes in the conceptions of nature and human agency. Taylor asserts that modern secularity represents neither the decline of belief, nor the regression of religion from the public sphere. He demonstrates that the conception of God remains significant in the modern West as it is deeply intertwined with the modern identity. He consequently demonstrates the relevance of religious belief in modern, Western, secular culture through an historical account of the relationship between religion and secularity.

This paper will demonstrate that Taylor’s narrative of modernity implicates the necessity of God and religion for modern moral life. The first chapter will situate *A Secular Age* within the body of Taylor’s work and explain the significance of narratives in Taylor’s moral theory. The second chapter will examine Taylor’s definitions of secularization, secular, secularity, religion and transcendence. The third chapter will explore Taylor’s description of past and present conceptions of God, and their relation to the moral and spiritual condition of Western society. Finally, the fourth chapter will examine Taylor’s solution for the ethical dilemmas of modernity and his own conception of God.

II Contextualization of the Research Question

II.I Research Question

The purposes of this thesis is to contextualize Taylor’s narrative of modernity within his project of Philosophical Anthropology, to clarify the definitions of the concepts involved in this narrative, to explain the significance of historical changes to the conception of God for understanding modernity, and to elucidate Taylor’s analysis of the contemporary, modern condition of belief.

II.II Pertinence of the Question

Secularity, religion, and modernity are consistent themes in Taylor’s work; as is Taylor’s criticism of the mainstream, academic approach to these topics. Taylor explores

the plurality of religious practices in democratic societies, and the implications of freedom for the modern condition of belief in “Religion in a Free Society.”⁴ He criticizes the hermeneutical approach of the social sciences towards modernity, in “Inwardness and Culture of Modernity,” he contends that this approach results in singular, linear descriptions of plural phenomenon.⁵ Taylor also expresses an unresolved sense of dissatisfaction with existing scholarship related to secularization in *Sources of the Self*.⁶ Taylor explores the multiple forms of secularism, each of which implies a different relationship between the state and religion, in “Modes of Secularism.”⁷ He proposes that the plurality of secularism renders the phenomenon unsuitable for singular theories.

The theories expressed in *A Secular Age* are evidently the product of Taylor’s long and focused deliberation, which must be considered in relation to his previous publications. Academic analysis of Taylor’s explanations of secularity, God, and religion, however, is severely lacking. The research question presented in this paper is therefore highly pertinent to future scholarship and analyses of *A Secular Age*, and the topics of secularity, religion, God and modernity.

II.III State of the Research Question

Taylor is known for his work on language, identity, morality, modernity, religion, secularity, politics, communitarianism, multiculturalism, and the history of theory in the human sciences. Associating Taylor with a particular field of study presents a difficult task, in part, because his works address such a wide variety of themes.⁸ Furthermore, Taylor does not fit comfortably within a philosophical tradition. Taylor received philosophical

⁴ Taylor, Charles. “Religion in a Free Society” *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace*. Ed. J Davison Hunter et O. Guinness (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1990)

⁵ Taylor, Charles. “Inwardness and the Culture of Modernity” *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*. Ed. Axel Honneth, Thomas McCarthy, Claus Offe, and Albrecht Wellmer. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992) 88-108.

⁶ See Taylor, Charles. “Fractured Horizons” in *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 305 -320.

⁷ Taylor, Charles. “Modes of Secularism” *Secularism and its Critics*. Ed. R. Bhargava. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

⁸ Smith writes: “None of these works is easy to classify. They are all philosophical, yet none of them is pure ‘philosophy’, as that term is used by bureaucrats of knowledge at least in the English-speaking world.” Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning Morals and Modernity*, 11.

training in the Analytic tradition at McGill University and Oxford University.⁹ This orientation to Analytic themes is evident in his interest in language, and his usage of ordinary language to express philosophical theory. Taylor, however, is often critical of the Analytic tradition.¹⁰ Moreover, his work is strongly influenced by phenomenology and hermeneutics, which are staples of the Continental tradition.¹¹ Taylor's philosophical approach, however, avoids exhaustive theorizing and, as Ian Fraser contends, there are many Marxian elements in Taylor's philosophy.¹² The combination of Analytic and Continental perspectives is an example of Taylor's multidisciplinary approach to philosophy, which incorporates political theory, history, sociology, and theology.

Sources of the Self reveals Taylor's penchant for theology and religious faith. In this work, Taylor addresses the negative opinion of religion among academics, who suggests that modern persons "have to choose between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds."¹³ He contends that the supposed connection between violence, tyranny, and religious faith, should be reconsidered, as "there is a large element of hope [...] that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided."¹⁴ This strong affirmation of thesis was highly criticized by commentators. Many consider Taylor's professed faith¹⁵ as in conflict with the object of his philosophy, the modern human identity.¹⁶

Michael L. Morgan denies the accusations that Taylor's work is corrupted by theism. He contends that Taylor's theistic assertions are limited to the proposition that the explanation of modern cultures must consider their religious heritage.¹⁷ In contrast to critics who maintain that Taylor is advocating for the return of unilateral theism, Morgan writes:

⁹ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 10.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² Fraser, Ian. *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*. (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2007) 1.

¹³ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989) 520.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 521

¹⁵ Taylor, Charles. "Reply and re-articulation". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*. Ed. James Tully. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 226.

¹⁶ Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*, 31-32.

¹⁷ Morgan, "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 49-50.

“Taylor’s enterprise encourages tolerance, receptivity and pluralism, and hence in one sense, the dismissive and even angry criticism of his skeptical readers ought to surprise him, for one of his goals is to discredit such one-sidedness.”¹⁸ Morgan suggests that the retrieval of Christianity proposed by Taylor is for the purposes of understanding the modern identity. Morgan concludes the article by stating: “to develop his project in the direction of religious advocacy [...] would be beyond his goals, which, in the present circumstances, are ambitious enough.”¹⁹ His article was published in 1994, four years before the publication of *A Catholic Modernity?* and thirteen years before *A Secular Age*. In these texts Taylor defends the prevalence of religion in modernity, and presents the moral benefits of belief in the transcendent. Morgan’s comments should therefore be considered only in relation to work prior to *Sources of the Self*.

Morgan’s defense of *Sources of the Self* reflects the negative association between faith and academia prevalent in the humanities. In commentaries and analyses of Taylor’s work, his theories of modernity, religion and secularity are generally sterilized of any religious or theistic content. Moreover, Taylor’s theistic-driven works, such as *A Catholic Modernity?* and “Une Place Pour La Transcendance”, are often treated in isolation from the main body of his work. Interpretations of Taylor’s perspective of Catholicism, presented in *A Catholic Modernity?*, abound. Ian Fraser,²⁰ George Marsden,²¹ Jean Bethke Elshtain,²² William Shea,²³ and Rosemary Luling Haughton,²⁴ have all commented on *A Catholic Modernity?*. Few such commentators, however, connect Taylor’s interpretation of Catholicism and God to his wider philosophy, specifically his analysis of the modern identity.

¹⁸ Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse”. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 50.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*, 30 -60.

²¹ Marsden, George. “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture”. *A Catholic Modernity?*. Ed. James L. Heft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 82-93.

²² Elshtain, Jean Bethke. “Augustine and Diversity”. *A Catholic Modernity?*. Ed. James L. Heft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 95-103.

²³ Shea, William M. “A Vote of Thanks to Voltaire” *A Catholic Modernity?*. Ed. James L. Heft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 39-64.

²⁴ Haughton, Rosemary Luling. “Transcendence and being modern”. *A Catholic Modernity?*. Ed. James L. Heft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 65-81.

Fraser's commentary is highly critical of *A Catholic Modernity?*. He argues that Taylor chooses a poor exemplar in Matteo Ricci to present a modern interpretation of Catholicism, as Ricci is un-accepting of difference.²⁵ Fraser also contends that Taylor's interpretation is "far more restrictive as an orientation to the good than he realizes."²⁶ He further states that Taylor's "theism is the Achilles heel of his moral theory."²⁷ Fraser suggests that Taylor's theistic beliefs restrict his philosophy and reduce the relevancy of his moral theory.

In contrast, George Marsden praises Taylor's efforts at merging contemporary moral issues with Catholic tradition.²⁸ He suggests that secularist academics are less likely to address the concerns of average Canadians, the majority of whom affirm some form of Christian belief.²⁹ Marsden states that Christian scholars should not deny their Christian beliefs in order to appear unbiased. He writes: "Christians who are scholars also need to be parts of Christian communities. [...] there is a danger that our identification with modern academia may become our primary identification. [...] Good arguments are essential to the Christian case, especially for clearing away the impression that such arguments do not exist [...]."³⁰ Marsden proposes that the anti-religious view of Christianity as antiquated and irrelevant is perpetuated by scholars who distance themselves from their beliefs. He maintains that Taylor represents a positive role model for other religious academics, including Jews and Muslims, who must negotiate the tension between religion and secularity in their fields of study.³¹

This brief discussion of commentaries demonstrates the overwhelming presence of moralist critiques aimed at Taylor's work. His views on religion, morality, theism, and Catholicism attract evaluative opinions and statements normally avoided academic writing.

²⁵ Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture". *A Catholic Modernity?*, 88.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

³¹ *Ibid.*, -91.

Moreover, comprehensive analyses of Taylor's philosophy, such as Ruth Abbey³² and Nicholas H. Smith,³³ generally overlook the theistic or religious aspects of his work.

Identifying the reasons for the apparent avoidance of these themes in academic critics of Taylor's work is beyond the scope of this paper. So stated, this paper will present an unbiased analysis of Taylor's views on religion, modernity, secularity, and Catholicism, with the intent of advancing the general understanding of Taylor's moral theory and philosophy of identity. More specifically, this paper will provide a detailed examination of *A Secular Age*, which is currently an understudied area of Taylor's work.

III Methodology

Taylor's career spans over 50 years.³⁴ His bibliography³⁵ includes over 20 books and a plethora of articles, chapters, reviews, and even contributions to an on-line blog.³⁶ This thesis provides an explanation of Charles Taylor's narrative of modernity through a hermeneutical analysis of a wide selection of his works. The selection of material for this paper is determined by the themes and topics addressed in *A Secular Age*, as well as the background information required to explain, contextualize, and clarify the relevance of Taylor's narrative of modernity.

III.I Justification of corpus

My research began with *A Secular Age*, in which Taylor articulates a narrative of modernity that explains the contemporary condition of religion and secularity in the modern West. In comparisons with other Taylor works on the subject of religion, such as *Modern Social Imaginaries*, *Varieties of Religion Today*, and *A Catholic Modernity?*, I became

³² See Abbey, Ruth. *Charles Taylor* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 31-33

³³ See Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 199-236.

³⁴ Taylor's first publication appeared in 1957: "Can Political Philosophy be Neutral?" *Universities and Left Review* (Spring:1995) 68-70.

³⁵ For a complete bibliography of Charles Taylor, visit Ruth Abbey's online bibliography. It is routinely updated with new publications and includes a comprehensive list of secondary and tertiary sources, and dissertations. *Charles Taylor Bibliography*. Ed. Ruth Abbey, 14 June 2009, 28 June 2009 <<http://www.nd.edu/~rabbey1/index.htm>>

³⁶ See *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere* Ed. Ruth Braundstein, Social Science Research Council, 20 Jan. 2009. <http://www.ssrc.org/blogs/immanent_frame/>

aware that large portions of *A Secular Age* duplicate these other texts. I had previously assumed that Taylor's analysis of secularity was connected to his political theory; however, Taylor reveals in *A Secular Age* that secularity is by and large a moral issue.³⁷ I therefore directed my investigation into Taylor's moral theory, his philosophy of identity, and his Philosophical Anthropology project.

The articles and books involved in this analysis represent a selection of material related to Taylor's moral theory, philosophy of identity, Philosophical Anthropology project, and narrative analysis of modernity and secularity. *A Secular Age*, *Sources of the Self*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and *A Catholic Modernity?* feature heavily in this paper. I consulted many of Taylor's articles and books, which contributed to my general understanding of Taylor's perspective, but did not advance my research. A full list of all consulted texts appears in the bibliography. Moreover, the first chapter provides a more complete justification of the texts I selected for this paper.

Over the course of Taylor's career, an overwhelming number of thinkers, philosophers, and scientists have had an influence on his work. Taylor avoids mentioning his sources and references within the main body of *A Secular Age* relegating them to the extensive notes section at the back of his book. In terms of Taylor's concept of religion, Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Emile Durkheim, Robert Bellah, William James, and Karl Jaspers all had a marked influence.³⁸ Similarly, for his understanding of secularity, Walter Benjamin, Benedict Anderson, José Casanova, David Martin, Steve Bruce, and Peter Berger emerge as prominent.³⁹ While Taylor quite readily identifies thinkers that support his view of naturalist theories, such as John Milbank, H. Frankfurt, and Catherine Pickstock,⁴⁰ he seldom identifies his intellectual opponents. Stephen Jay Gould, Daniel Dennett, the infamous Richard Dawkins,⁴¹ and Ludwig Wittgenstein⁴² represent the few

³⁷ Taylor associates "secularism" with politics and bureaucracy, and "secularity" with moral theory. Due to the brevity of this thesis, Taylor's views on "secularism" will not be discussed here. See Taylor, Charles. "Modes of Secularism" *Secularism and its Critics*. Ed. R. Bhargava. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998)

³⁸ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2007) n.781; n.793; n.829

³⁹ *Ibid.*, n.815-823.

⁴⁰ See Taylor, "What is Human Agency". *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*. (New York : Cambridge University Press, 1985) 15; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, n.851.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 561-562; n.835.

scholars whose theories Taylor directly contests. He frequently refers to his intellectual opponents as nameless “proponents” of x, or y, theory.

As my research aims to situate the significance of Taylor’s narrative of modernity within his philosophical career, I will not embark on an analysis of Taylor’s own sources. Taylor presents his conclusions as his own, though he borrows many ideas, terms, and concepts from other authors; I have consequently deemed it more pertinent to contextualize his narrative within his own body of work, than within the corpus of Taylor’s secondary sources. In the following chapters, I will therefore consider Taylor’s ideas independently.

All secondary sources consulted in this work were published after *A Secular Age*. Taylor’s theory of religion and secularity has been neglected by the majority of analyses and commentaries. The majority of this thesis thus represents new scholarship. Texts frequently referenced include: Nicholas H. Smith’s *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*; Ruth Abbey’s *Charles Taylor*; Michael L. Morgan’s “Religion, History and Moral Discourse”; and the commentaries by William Shea and George Marsden, published in *A Catholic Modernity?*.

III.II Research objectives

The research objectives of this thesis are to situate Taylor’s narrative of modernity, elucidated in *A Secular Age*, within his greater Philosophical Anthropology project, by demonstrating continuity between Taylor’s polemic against naturalist theories and his polemic against anti-religious negative narratives of modernity, and to clarify the historical relationship between the conception of God and the understanding of human agency presented in Taylor’s narrative of modernity, in order to demonstrate that, from Taylor’s perspective, God is necessary to moral life.

To accomplish these objectives, I will clarify the moral significance of narratives for Taylor’s philosophy of identity and narrative of modernity, and demonstrate the application of Taylor’s hermeneutical approach in *A Secular Age*. Furthermore, I will describe Taylor’s

⁴² Taylor, Charles “Theories of Meaning” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*. 248-292

definitions of secularization, secular, secularity, religion and transcendence, in reference to his polemic against anti-religious negative narratives of modernity, in order to explain his choice vocabulary employed in *A Secular Age*. Additionally, I will recount Taylor's narrative of the changing conception of God and explain how these changes have contributed to form the modern understanding of human agency and selfhood. Finally, I will examine Taylor's analysis of the contemporary conditions of morality and religious belief. I will describe Taylor's solution for the ethical problems of modernity with regards to his interpretation of Catholicism and demonstrate the practical application of this solution, through a brief discussion of Taylor's life experiences.

CHAPTER 1

Contextualization of *A Secular Age*: Philosophical Anthropology, narratives of modernity, and hermeneutical analysis

In this chapter, I will trace the development of Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology project, which involves two, interrelated, polemics: one, against naturalist theories in the human sciences, and another against negative narratives of modernity. These polemics define Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology project and are deeply interrelated. I will explain how Taylor counters naturalist theory with his own moral theory of agency and identity. Additionally, I will explain Taylor's critique of negative narratives in light of his concept of narrative identity. Finally, I will explore the hermeneutical approach underlying Taylor's project, which, I shall argue, pre-determines the structure of Taylor's own positive narrative of modernity.

Taylor introduces Philosophical Anthropology in his first book: *The Explanation of Behaviour*. Following works – *Human Agency and Language*, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, *Sources of the Self*, and, his most recent publication, *A Secular Age*, demonstrate Taylor's dedication to this project. Taylor explains Philosophical Anthropology as “the study of the basic categories in which man and his behaviour is to be described and explained.”⁴³ Nicholas H. Smith identifies two tasks of Philosophical Anthropology: to disprove the claims of naturalist theories, and explain how these theories have become normative in the human sciences.⁴⁴ Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology is defined by polemics against naturalist theory⁴⁵ in the human sciences and anti-religious, negative narrative explanations of modernity.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor opposes negative narrative explanations of modernity, specifically those that are characterized by an anti-religion perspective. Negative narratives explain the genesis of modernity through epistemic losses, or the shedding of illusory ideas.

⁴³ Taylor, Charles. *The Explanation of Behaviour* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1964), 4

⁴⁴ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 7.

⁴⁵ Under the banner of naturalist theories, Taylor includes behaviourist theories of human agency, instrumentalist explanations of society and culture, and naturalist theories of identity.

Anti-religious negative narratives explain modernity in terms of the decline of religious faith. Taylor maintains that such narratives ignore the prevalence of new ideas, social constructions, and religious behaviour in the modern age, and are thus inappropriate as explanations of modernity. These narratives are highly valued in naturalist discourse.

Negative narratives assume that human beings are motivated by instrumental concerns and that religion and spirituality misdirect modern persons from these goals. Taylor argues, however, that human agency is purpose driven; frequently, the purpose of human action is to realize moral goods. A good is something that a person values, or finds meaningful and significant. Moral goods are mutually recognized by human beings, and transmitted in society through moral frameworks of meaning. Taylor further proposes that selfhood is defined by an agent's moral vision. Explaining human identity, Taylor contends, thus requires the elucidation of the moral frameworks which inform an agent's moral vision.

Taylor maintains that selfhood is also constituted by narrative identity, as a person's sense of self must carry some thread of continuity over time. By composing a narrative identity, agents assess the progression of their lives in reference to their moral vision. Taylor proposes that narratives of modernity influence an individual's understanding of the term "modern", thereby affecting their identity as modern persons. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor constructs an alternative positive narrative of modernity, which defends the significance and relevance of modern religious belief, to counter the harmful influence of anti-religious negative narratives of modernity.

In constructing this narrative, Taylor adopts a hermeneutical approach, which supposes that human practices are only comprehensible through an examination of contemporary understandings of human agency and selfhood. Taylor thereby defends the relevance of religion in modernity by demonstrating that religion is a fundamental feature of the modern conception of selfhood and human agency.

I argue that *A Secular Age* differs from Taylor's other works of philosophical anthropology by his engagement of diachronic, causal explanations. Taylor proposes an account of the historical genesis of modernity, which considers the religious and spiritual

condition of modern Western society. I thus propose that *A Secular Age* represents a third, distinct task: the elaboration of an explanatory, narrative of modernity intended to replace anti-religious negative narratives of modernity.

1.1 Philosophical Anthropology and the Polemic Against Naturalist Theories

At several points during his career, Taylor reveals that his Philosophical Anthropology is motivated by a desire to discredit naturalist, or behaviourist, explanations of the human agent. He argues that naturalist theories of human agency and selfhood are problematic because they are altogether dismissive of the multiple understandings of what it means to be a person in the context of different cultures. These theories present only one view of human agency and apply this view to a host of historical and cultural contexts.⁴⁶ According to Taylor, naturalists purport that human beings ought to be studied and understood from a scientific perspective and that human behaviour is driven by innate, biological needs such as reproduction and survival. In other words, human agency has no deeper meaning and no greater purpose than the fulfilment of instrumental goals.

Taylor argues these theories obscure and encourage a reductionist view of all expressions of meaning and worth in human culture, language, and society. From the perspective of naturalism, meaning does not influence human practices. Smith explains: “For naturalism, the meaning-dimension of human existence is ultimately a realm of subjective illusion. It assumes that the layers of pragmatic, linguistic, moral, social and religious meaning that appear to constitute human agency are really something else, something that is only properly understood when considered from the point of view developed by modern natural science.”⁴⁷ According to Taylor, this view is a denial of the fact that “human beings are self-interpreting animals.”⁴⁸ They analyse and interpret their own subjectivity. Human beings routinely question the meaning of their experiences, their lives, and their selfhood. Taylor writes: “the claim is that our interpretation of ourselves and

⁴⁶ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 3.

⁴⁷ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 6-7.

⁴⁸ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 45.

our experience is constitutive of what we are, and therefore cannot be considered as merely a view on reality, separable from reality, nor as an epiphenomenon, which can be by-passed in our understanding of reality.”⁴⁹ To ignore the significance of these questions -- and their responses -- in favour of mechanistic and instrumental explanations of what a human being is, is to ignore the very activity which distinguishes human beings from other animals.

According to Smith, Taylor’s *Philosophical Anthropology* involves two tasks. The first task involves investigation into transcendental arguments for the study of human nature. This investigation entails questioning “whether we are not only entitled but *required* to account for human reality in terms of the meanings made manifest in it.”⁵⁰ The second task, which concerns the historical analysis of explanations of humanity, explains the popularity of naturalist explanations in modernity.⁵¹ Smith writes:

[Having] shown *that* meaning is a constitutive component of human reality it remains to show *how* it is. But this question, Taylor maintains, can only be given a historical answer. Transcendental analysis must be refracted through historical understanding [...] These two principles provide the framework for Taylor’s investigations of the particular meanings that help shape the modern identity.⁵²

One of Taylor’s main goals for his *Philosophical Anthropology* is to prove that the naturalist perspective is embedded in the modern moral framework, such that naturalist explanations of human behaviour are accepted as foregone conclusions by the majority of modern society. Taylor’s *Philosophical Anthropology* is representative of “a positive or constructive project,”⁵³ which advances an explanation of modernity through a demonstration of particular epistemological gains in human history.⁵⁴

1.1.1 *The Explanation of Behaviour and Philosophic Papers (Vol. 1 and 2)*

Taylor begins his career in the late 1950’s with the aim of exploring a *Philosophical Anthropology* of the human agent. In his first published book, *The Explanation of*

⁴⁹ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 47.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 214.

Behaviour, Taylor provides a defence of teleological arguments for human behaviour. In this book, Taylor accomplishes the first transcendental task of Philosophical Anthropology: to demonstrate that human reality can only be explained by examining the significance and meaning that drives human behaviours and defines personhood. Taylor contests the behaviourist theory which proposes that human beings are motivated by instrumental and mechanistic concerns. He maintains that human agents are driven by purpose and are distinct from other agents because they use a language of significance and meaning to explain their motives. Human beings are “persons” precisely because things matter to them, not because they possess consciousness. Therefore, Taylor proposes that human behaviour is only comprehensible through an examination of the values that define our motives.⁵⁵

With the compilation of *Human Agency and Language* and *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*⁵⁶, Taylor embarks on the second transcendental task of Philosophical Anthropology: the historical analysis of explanations about humanity. In these books, Taylor explores the moral motivations behind naturalist and behaviourist explanations of humankind, and reveals their prevalence in the field of human sciences.⁵⁷ For Taylor, this process necessarily involves an historical analysis of the background of naturalist theories:

“Apart from the negative side of the argument, the case that naturalism makes a bad philosophy of science [...], the positive thesis can only be established in an historical account. [...] This would mean placing the history of our scientific and philosophical consciousness in relation to the whole development of modern culture, and particularly of the underlying interpretations of agency and the self.”⁵⁸

Taylor contends that the popularity of naturalist theories in modern western culture is revelatory of the contemporary understanding of the human agent. Comprehending the

⁵⁵ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 7.

⁵⁶ Smith notes that the project of Philosophical Anthropology is unclear. He writes, “perhaps a more apposite name for the investigation of historically specific features of subjectivity would be ‘philosophical history’ [...]. While there is no reason in principle why transcendental and historical analysis must be at odds with each other, there is clearly a danger of conflict here. In following through his project, Taylor runs the risk of ‘anthropologizing’ or ‘ontologizing’ historically contingent features of subjectivity. Taylor is fully aware of this risk; indeed he is an adept at diagnosing the ontologizing fallacies of his naturalist opponents. But it is questionable whether he takes sufficient steps to avoid it himself”. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 8.

⁵⁷ Taylor writes: “It is also that the very nature of the claim I am putting forward, that we all as human agents define ourselves against a background of distinctions of worth, requires that we explain in these terms what people are doing who espouse a naturalist outlook.” Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7

moral motivations of the human agent, Taylor maintains, is necessary to understand why these explanations are appealing and difficult to challenge. This polemic against naturalist explanations of human agency and selfhood remains *the* motivating factor throughout Taylor's philosophic career, appearing frequently and in various guises.

1.1.2 *Sources of the Self*

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor presents the analysis of naturalist theory in the form of a coherent, historical narrative. Taylor traces the development of the modern moral frameworks, or the idea of the good, which, he argues, define the understanding of human agency and selfhood. As Smith explains, *Sources of the Self* satisfies the task of demonstrating the historical genesis of naturalist thinking, but "it neglects the areas of modern culture that can be understood neither as part of naturalism nor as part of the Romantic reaction to it."⁵⁹ According to Smith, Taylor's quest to refute naturalism, by demonstrating that it too is a subjective construction, creates a problem for his account of the modern self. His diagnosis is limited to those elements of the self that either uphold or contradict naturalism; there is little else outside this spectrum that is taken into consideration.

Taylor explains that one of the weaknesses of naturalist theories is that they obscure the religious, or ideological, roots of modern society. Naturalist theories portray modernity as the result of scientific and technological innovations motivated by instrumental goals. Within this school of thought, secularization is understood as the decline in religion, and considered an inevitable consequence of scientific rationalism, technological innovation, industrialization, and education.⁶⁰ This perspective neither adequately address the religious roots of the purported factors of secularization, nor the continued growth of religious belief in countries such as the United States.

For Taylor, the eclipse of religion in historical explanations of modernity is symptomatic of the wider push to deny the moral sources of human behaviour. Taylor

⁵⁹ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*. 214

⁶⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 403.

contends that the consequences of such an eclipse are particularly striking as “it involves stifling the response to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived.”⁶¹ Taylor reveals in his conclusion to *Sources of Self* that much of his polemic against naturalist explanations of identity were actually motivated by a desire to renew the academic view of religion. He writes: “The intentions of this work was one of retrieval, an attempt to uncover buried goods through rearticulation – and thereby to make these sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit.”⁶² Many academics actually interpreted this statement as a positive argument for theism, seemingly forgetting Taylor’s polemic against all naturalist explanations of the human agent that do not take into consideration the importance of morality for our self-conception.⁶³ While Taylor defends theistic belief as a legitimate moral perspective in the modern age, he does not portray theism as the only legitimate moral framework.

Taylor cautions that though his description of the modern self takes the form of a linear historical narrative, it should not be read as a causal explanation of modernity, or an account of how, when, or where the elements of the modern self arise. He writes “what I’m doing has to be seen as distinct from historical explanation, and yet relevant to it. It’s distinct because I’m asking a different question. The question to which an explanation is the answer would be, e.g., what brought the modern identity about.”⁶⁴ Taylor maintains that his question is entirely different, though related to the latter question, and that this crucial difference is what prevents his work from falling into the many pitfalls of diachronic causal explanations of modernity. He writes:

“But there is a second, less ambitious question. It is an interpretive one. Answering it involves giving an account of the new identity which makes clear what its appeal was. What drew people to it? [...] What this question asks for is an interpretation of the identity [...] This can, up to a point, be explored independently of the question of diachronic causation. We can say: in this and this consists the power of the idea/identity/moral vision, however it was brought to be in history.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 520.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 520.

⁶³ Lane, Melissa, “God or Orienteering? A Critical Study of Taylor’s Sources of the Self”. (*Ratio (New Series)* 5:1 (1992): 46-56) ; O’Hagan, Timothy. “Charles Taylor’s hidden God”. (*Ratio (New Series)* 6:1 (1993): 72-81)

⁶⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 202.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

The historical changes to the concept of good have produced new and unprecedented understandings of the self and agency; understanding this change requires an historical account of the development of the modern, western moral background. Though this description is related to the story of the genesis of the modern self, Taylor maintains that it is quite different. The latter project would be too difficult within the scope of a single book to achieve as it would involve an analysis of every area of human life, society, and culture.⁶⁶

1.1.3 *Articles, Lectures and Books: 1990-2007*

Between 1990 and 2007, Taylor published a number of articles and short books about various topics related to modernity, many of which dealt specifically with the role of religion or transcendence in modern society.⁶⁷ These texts explore many aspects of modernity not directly covered in *Sources of the Self* including politics, the public sphere, the culture of individual expression, and religion. Many of these articles and books address the subject of identity and morality, and advance the polemic against naturalist theories of human agency and modernity.⁶⁸ During this period of publication, Taylor develops a more detailed perspective of modernity, addressing many political and social issues routinely taken for granted by proponents of naturalist theory. Taylor's research also demonstrates an increasing interest in secularity: a topic that touches upon many seemingly divergent features of modernity such as the self, the public sphere, the culture of expression, transcendence and religion.

In April and May of 1999, Taylor gave a series of 10 lectures entitled "Living in A Secular Age" at the University of Edinburgh as part of the Gifford lectures. Transcripts of these lectures were never published, though Ruth Abbey's 2001 work on Charles Taylor

⁶⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 207.

⁶⁷ See Taylor, "Religion in a Free Society" *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace*; "inwardness and the culture of modernity" *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment; The Malaise of Modernity*(Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1991) ; "Modes of Secularism" *Secularism and its Critics*; "A Catholic Modernity?". *A Catholic Modernity?*; "Une place pour la transcendance" *Mutations Culturelles et Transcendence*. Ed. Pierre Gaudette (Quebec: Université Laval, 2000); *Varieties of Religious experience today: William James revisited*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), *Modern social imaginaries* (London: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁶⁸ See discussion of acultural vs. cultural theories of modernity in Taylor, "Inwardness and the Culture of Modernity", 88-110.

summarizes much of the content of this lecture. Based on this summary, much of the content of these lectures evidently was incorporated into *Varieties of Religion Today*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and *A Secular Age*. In the Gifford lectures, Taylor explores the meaning of the term secularity, the marginalization of theism, and the rise of exclusive humanism.⁶⁹ Once again, Taylor adopts an historical approach that counters the naturalist views of modernity and, as Abbey remarks, “[promotes] cultural self-awareness in Westerners.”⁷⁰

1.1.4 *A Secular Age*

A Secular Age furthers Taylor’s polemic against naturalist explanations of humanity, specifically the “negative narratives of modernity”. These narratives explain modernity and secularity:

“[...] by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process – modernity or secularity- is to be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.”⁷¹

Taylor’s concern is that naturalist explanations of modernity ignore the moral and epistemological changes that have contributed to the modern identity. He argues that they focus on the ideas and practices that society has moved away from and ignore the new ideas and practices that we have adopted in their place. These theories portray modernity as a return to, or a re-discovery of, basic human nature, unencumbered by manipulative and illusory ideologies.

Taylor’s attack on naturalist theory, in *A Secular Age*, is precisely aimed at anti-religious negative narratives, which portray religion as declining in popularity and suggest that society can only progress in the absence of faith and religious belief. To counter the anti-religious negative narratives, Taylor attempts to construct his own positive narrative that demonstrates the continuing prevalence of religion in modern society. He writes:

⁶⁹ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 195-198.

⁷⁰ Abbey writes: “Taylor’s historical approach stems from his persistent concern with promoting cultural self-awareness in westerners. ... In tracing the history of secularity, Taylor is showing that what is seen as natural and taken for granted is actually historical and particular.” *Ibid.*, 199.

⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22

“[...] by ignoring or flattening out all these changes, a subtraction story makes it hard to conceive the changes in human experience. It is left only with an account in terms of altered beliefs. This is one kind of account of the rise of modern secularity, and my attempt in this book has been to offer another, I think more convincing one.”⁷²

I contend that *A Secular Age* represents a third and final task of Taylor’s Philosophical Anthropology: the positing of Taylor’s own theory of modernity. Taylor bases much of the content of *A Secular Age* on his earlier research, specifically the transcendental argument that human beings are motivated by morality and the historical analysis of the explanations of humanity. Furthermore, I propose that as an historical explanation of humanity, *A Secular Age* also reveals the moral orientation of its author. .

Taylor’s narrative account of the development of modernity involves three components: an analysis of the past, an analysis of the present, and a perspective on the future. Having a narrative identity, he argues, is constitutive of our selfhood. As he reveals in *Sources of the Self*:

“to state another basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a *narrative*. [...] our lives exist also in this space of questions, which only a coherent narrative can answer. In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of who we have become, and of where we are going.”⁷³

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor argues that narratives are not only a constitutive element of our personal identity; they also provide a greater understanding of what it means to be human. Personal and historical narratives influence our moral outlook; they analyse the past and present in light of our current moral frameworks and suggest the direction we ought to take in the future to better meet these standards. Thus in positing his own narrative, Taylor offers an historical analysis of the past and the present, as well as moral prescriptions for the future.

⁷² Taylor writes: “By ignoring or flattening out all these changes, a subtraction story makes it hard to conceive the changes in human experience. It is left only with an account in terms of altered beliefs.” Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 573.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 47.

1.2 *Negative Narratives*

Taylor identifies several negative narratives, or subtraction stories, at work in the collective social consciousness of modern persons; which explain the advent of modernity through a series of ‘losses’. In qualifying them as ‘negative’, Taylor reveals not only his opinion of these stories, he is highlighting their inclination to see the past as clouded by illusory ideas and concepts that have gradually fallen away to reveal reality⁷⁴. Many examples of negative narratives to which Taylor accords some degree of merit exist, including Max Weber’s infamous notion of “disenchantment”. In fact, Taylor notes that Weber’s thesis, which proposes that modern society has lost a sense of a meaningful order in the cosmos,⁷⁵ serves as the basis for multiple negative narratives. As Taylor explains:

“A common “subtraction” story attributes everything to disenchantment. First, science gave us ‘naturalistic’ explanations of the world. And then people began to look for alternatives to God. But things didn’t work that way. The new mechanistic science of the seventeenth century wasn’t even as necessarily threatening to God. It was to the enchanted universe and magic. It also began to pose a problem for particular providences. But there were important Christian motives for going to (the?) route of disenchantment. Darwin was not even on the horizon in the eighteenth century.”⁷⁶

Taylor’s main point is that people did not suddenly stop seeing the world as a magical and meaningful place c. 1500 A.D. A change in their general perception of the world, morality, and human agency occurred that drew them to a disenchanted view.

Taylor’s discussion of disenchantment is revelatory of his esteem for positive narratives. He suggests that an examination of the opposite of disenchantment, the “enchanted world”, is necessary to understand how modern society differs from societies of the past.⁷⁷ Taylor discusses this world at length and his insistence on reversing the colloquial concept of disenchantment is a demonstration of his efforts to provide a positive theory of modernity.

⁷⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

⁷⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 17

⁷⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 26.

⁷⁷ According to Taylor, the enchanted world corresponds to the “world of spirits, demons, and moral forces” *Ibid.*, 25 -26.

1.2.1 *Anti-Religious Negative Narratives*

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor's specifically targets "anti-religious narratives of modernity". These narratives explain modernity primarily through the process of secularization and the purported decline in religious belief and practice. According to Taylor, these narratives are the product of the "secularist spin": an attempt to present modernity as incompatible with religious belief.⁷⁸ The secularist spin presents a "closed" reading of modernity, or a "closed world structure," as normative. The closed world structure blocks off any notion of a reality beyond immanent reality, which we experience as impersonal, ordered by 'natural' laws, and devoid of supra-human powers or agencies.⁷⁹ Taylor's strong disdain for the secularist-spin can be felt in the following passage. He writes:

"What I am calling 'spin' is [...] a way of convincing oneself that one's reading is obvious, compelling, allowing of no cavil or demurral. I invoked in the previous paragraph the accusation of intellectual dishonesty often hurled at believers from Weber on down to today. My concept of spin here involves something of this kind, but much less dramatic and insulting; it implies that one's thinking is clouded or cramped by a powerful picture which prevents one seeing important aspects of reality. I want to argue that those who think the closed reading of immanence is 'natural' and obvious are suffering from this kind of disability."⁸⁰

According to Taylor, the closed world structure is defined by four facets: (1) the claim that science has disproven God, which is supported by (2) subtraction stories that announce the 'death of God', and the portrayal of (3 and 4) the current social and political order, and the conception of selfhood, autonomous selfhood, as the result of humanity's progression or maturation.⁸¹ All four of these facets underline the anti-religious negative narratives Taylor combats in *A Secular Age*.

Taylor argues that explanations of modernity that posit atheism as 'progressive' and suggest that religious individuals are scientifically "backwards" or less intelligent than non-believers are false. He argues that unbelief is not a more rational or intellectually accurate choice; "there are no more naïve theists, just as there are no naïve atheists".⁸² In other

⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 553.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 551.

⁸¹ Ibid., 589-590.

⁸² Ibid., 30.

words, everyone is aware, believer or non believer, that they can choose their position. In belittling this choice, the proponents of the “closed” anti-religious negative narratives label all theists as weak, less intelligent, or wilfully delusional.

For Taylor, a person’s orientation towards religion and the divine is revelatory of their self-understanding. Anti-religious negative narratives fail to consider this relationship. By ignoring the most frequent articulation of goods in human history, these narratives disregard how the concept of human agency and identity has changed over time. According to Taylor, the evolution of religion and spirituality must be contemplated in the analysis of morality and human identity. As Ruth Abbey notes, Taylor’s version of morality is actually a mixture of what some thinkers refer to as separate concepts: ethics and morality. His notion of the good comprises both “what is right to do and what is good to be”.⁸³ A person’s sense of morality and the good is culturally and historically specific; whereas the capacity for moral judgement, or “strong evaluation”,⁸⁴ is universal to all human beings.⁸⁵ Taylor also maintains that the shared understanding of the origins of this capacity influences the conception of human agency. Taylor argues that with any change in the perception of the source of qualitative discriminations the idea of the “good itself is, of course, reinterpreted.”⁸⁶

In the modern age, God is detached from the notion of the good. Taylor insists that negative narratives are unable to correctly explain the genesis of this detachment, because they can neither identify modern forms of the good, nor their sources. These stories are concerned with explaining the demise of religion and belief at the hands of secularization, and as such they ignore the effects of this shift on all other modes of life. Taylor writes: “Belief in a unilinear process called ‘secularization’ is the belief that the crisis only affects religious beliefs, and that the invariable beneficiaries are the secular ones. But this is not an

⁸³ Abbey, *Charles Taylor* 11.

⁸⁴ Strong evaluation refers to our ability to discern the inherent value in certain actions, behaviours, or notions. As Abbey remarks: “the term refers, therefore, to distinctions of worth that individuals make regarding their desires or the objects of their desires. One of the entailments of strong evaluation is that although there are always multiple goods clamouring for attention in a person’s life, they do not all appear in the same light.” Abbey, *Charles Taylor* 17.

⁸⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 85.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 319.

adequate view of our situation.”⁸⁷ For Taylor, an adequate view of secularization and the place of religion in society must examine how society functions, relates to religion, and envisions morality in the context of modernity. Modernity cannot be explained through subtraction stories that only focus on the loss of a sense of magic, the shaking off of sexual and social taboos, or the overcoming of ignorance about the natural world. Instead, Taylor argues that we must look at the past to construct a “positive” narrative of modernity, one which would be complementary to the negative narrative.⁸⁸ This narrative reconstructs the past, identifying the movements, ideas and events that have impinged on modernity.

1.3 *The Moral Sources of Identity and Agency*

Naturalists attribute instrumental, biological motivations to all human behaviour, suggesting that all acts can be shown to adhere to a circumscribed set of principles. Morality and the expression of meaning are not viewed as constitutive of human agency. This idea finds expression in anti-religious negative narratives through the concept of a perennial “human nature”, which transcends cultural contexts and social constructions. These narratives argue that, having shaken off or abandoned false understandings of the world and the transcendent, the modern self has returned to its natural state. Taylor argues that this understanding of human behaviour is based on a moral framework that developed only recently. Proponents of such theories are reticent to acknowledge this fact as it contradicts their claim that modernity has resulted from abandoning ideological and social constructions.

In *Explanations of Human Behaviour*, Taylor argues in favour of teleological explanations of human behaviour, which argue that human actions are purpose driven. The defence of teleological theories is the source of Taylor’s argument that the modern understanding of selfhood and human agency are based on moral frameworks of meaning.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 413.

⁸⁸ Taylor writes: “So much for the negative story as master narrative. But we could also add a complementary narrative which emphasizes the positive features of the present spirituality of search. By ‘positive’, I don’t mean features that we necessarily want to endorse; just that we focus not on what our Age has displaced, but on what characterizes it.” *Ibid.*, 532.

⁸⁹ Taylor articulates such an idea in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* with the concept of inter-subjective meanings, which “are the background of social action ... whether there is consensus or not, the condition of

Taylor's entire investigation into human identity, religion, secularity, and modernity rests on this argument. The following sections shall briefly explore Taylor's defence of teleological explanations and the proposition that personal identity and the conception of human agency are based on moral sources.

1.3.1 *The Teleological Argument*

In *Explanations of Human Behaviour*, Taylor proposes animal and human behaviour are distinct from acts of nature because they are purpose driven. To possess agency implies that an agent's actions are purpose driven, not that the agent is aware of its actions. He writes:

“for something to be an action in the strong sense, it is not only necessary that it end in the result or meet the criterion by which action of this kind are characterized, but it must also be the case that the agent's intention or purpose was to achieve this result or criterion. In other words, the agent must not only make the appropriate movements, it must also be his intention or purpose to do so.”⁹⁰

Natural forces –such as the weather- are not considered agents because their movements lack preconceived motives. The weather behaves spontaneously and erratically, without intent.

The acts of human beings are commonly understood to be directed towards meeting pre-conceived goals, or ends. Taylor maintains that this understanding is reflected in the “common understandings of concepts like action, desire, intention, and responsibility. All of these presuppose a belief in humans as purposeful beings.”⁹¹ Taylor is adamant that these generalized descriptions of human behaviour should not be overlooked in favour of behaviourist theories that aim for impersonal and instrumentalist explanations of agency.⁹²

there being either one or the other is a certain set of common terms of reference. A society in which this was lacking would not be a society in the normal sense of the term, but several.” Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*, 36.

⁹⁰ Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, 29.

⁹¹ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*. 64.

⁹² Taylor writes: “Our ordinary language account is teleological, then, because at the basis of much of our everyday explanation of action is the notion of desire. This notion is involved whenever we attribute a 'motive'. For attributing a motive is often stating the end which was wanted in undertaking the action.” Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, 38.

He contends that human beings are just as motivated by ideas and thoughts, as impersonal biological needs and impulses.

1.3.2 *Human Agency*

Moreover, human beings are distinguished from animals because their sense of self and agency are grounded in morality. Humans are by nature moral beings; they grasp their identity through articulating the ideas, ideals, and objects that are significant to them. As Taylor writes: “What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me, and the issue of my identity is worked out, only through a language of interpretation which I have come to accept as a valid articulation of these issues.”⁹³ Selfhood is defined by a person’s moral choices. How a person orients their life in relation to that which is deemed good, and their pursuit of goodness, is evident in the articulation of their identity. While all agents are purpose driven and are capable of ‘weakly evaluating’ the desired ends of their actions, Taylor contends that human beings possess the capacity for ‘strong evaluation’. Weak evaluation involves the weighing of multiple desires with regards to an agent’s particular situation. Taylor defines weak evaluation by the following two characteristics: “(1) in weak evaluation, for something to be judged good it is sufficient that it be desired [...]. It follows from this that (2) when in weak evaluation one desired alternative is set aside, it is only on grounds of its contingent incompatibility with a more desired alternative.”⁹⁴ Articulating the reasoning behind a weak desire is not necessary for the action to be comprehended by others. For instance, I want to see a movie, but the show time is quite late. So as not to be tired the next day I pick a different film. This decision constitutes a weak evaluation, and is not revelatory of my identity, morals or values. However, if I chose not to see a particular movie because it has a lot of violent content and I feel strongly that violent images are a negative influence on society, such a decision is revelatory of my identity and values; my actions were determined by strong evaluation of the moral implications of the movie’s content. Taylor explains that strong evaluation means that “[some] desired consummation may be eschewed not because it is

⁹³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 34.

⁹⁴ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 18.

incompatible with another [...] [b]ut rather because it is base.”⁹⁵ For others to understand this decision requires the articulation of my particular vision of morality. An action that involves strong evaluation for one individual may not necessitate the same level of consideration for another. Strong and weak evaluations are not limited to one type of action. Alternatively any action may involve either forms of evaluation. The circumstances that surround moral evaluation are influenced by personal, social, ideological and cultural norms.

Taylor argues that all human agents consider some goals to be qualitatively higher, worthier, nobler, or superior than others, which may be base, abhorrent, or polluting. As Taylor writes:

“To characterize one desire or inclination as worthier, or nobler, or more integrated, etc. than others is to speak of it in terms of the kind of quality of life which it expresses and sustains [...]. Motivations or desires do not only count in virtue of the attraction of the consummations but also in virtue of the kind of life and kind of subject that these desires properly belong to.”⁹⁶

The choices made on the basis of this evaluation determine human identity. Human beings are defined by this ability to distinguish between different goods and desires on the basis of their perceived value or worth, not just their convenience for fulfilling basic biological needs or goals. A person is therefore not only an agent for whom things matter in a general sense, but an agent who recognizes and follows moral standards.⁹⁷

Human beings are moral agents and “moral agency requires some kind of reflexive awareness of the standards one is living by (or failing to live by).”⁹⁸ Morality is constituted by a “kind of reality”, or a “constitutive good.”⁹⁹ This constitutive good may be “the order of things”, or “the will of God”, or the human capacity for “courageous disengagement.”¹⁰⁰ Despite these differences, the function of a constitutive good is always the same. As Taylor writes: “the constitutive good is a moral source [...] it is a something the love of which

⁹⁵ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 19.

⁹⁶Ibid., 25.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 102-103.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁹⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 92.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 94.

empowers us to do and be good.”¹⁰¹ Human beings value moral sources above all other goods; their respect and admiration for the source of goodness inspires them to maintain such standards. Taylor states: “loving [the constitutive good] is part of what it is to be a good human being.”¹⁰² Without a sense of respect or love for the constitutive good, their lives would have no moral orientation.

The understanding of what grounds morality will influence the conception of human agency. Questioning moral sources is particularly difficult, as they are so deeply embedded in background frameworks that human beings frequently forget that moral sources even exist. Individual agents come to think of their love for particular constitutive goods as natural, or innate. Therefore, when we think of what it means to be a human agent, we implicitly articulate a conception of these goods. Taylor writes:

“We have a sense of who we are through our sense of where we stand to the good. But his will also means [...] that radically different sense of what the good is go along with quite different conceptions of what a human agent is [...]. To trace the development of our modern visions of the good, which are in some respects unprecedented in human culture, is also to follow the evolution of unprecedented new understandings of agency and selfhood.”¹⁰³

Therefore, whether or not we acknowledge non-human moral sources will influence our understanding of what it means to be a human. For instance, we may form a conception of our agency as entirely self-sufficient: the inspiration for our own moral order or we might find that in order to be ‘good human beings’ we must recognize something beyond human agency as the greatest good. We may even conclude that there is nothing which grounds morality but our natural instincts for survival and reproduction.¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, Taylor’s argument suggests, we cannot question the source of our moral intuitions without articulating what it means to be a human being.

1.3.3 *Personal Identity and Moral Frameworks of Meaning*

According to Taylor, human beings are defined by their possession of a moral orientation: to have an identity is to be able to articulate what is meaningful and worthwhile

¹⁰¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰⁴ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers Vol. 1*, 105-114.

– i.e. moral goods. In order to live in orientation to a sense of the good, human beings must be capable of evaluating their behaviours, thoughts, and feelings. Taylor writes: “To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.”¹⁰⁵ Individuals thus rely on their capacity for strong evaluation, which “prevents us from experiencing all our choices equally”¹⁰⁶ in order to determine their identity.¹⁰⁷

Taylor presents the capacity to discriminate between goods as intrinsic to humanity. Human beings use this ability not only to evaluate their actions, but to discern between different goods. Abbey writes:

“[Taylor] believes that in any person’s life there is always a multiplicity of goods to be recognized, acted upon and pursued. [...] they are of qualitatively different types from one another and because of this, cannot always be harmoniously combined, rank-ordered or reduced to some more ultimate or foundational good.”¹⁰⁸

To live with an irreducible pluralism of goods poses difficulties that all human beings must face. Persons recognize that some goods must be sacrificed in order for others to be satisfied.¹⁰⁹ In order for their lives to have significance and worth, all human beings must make such moral choices. While all individuals are capable of ranking which goods have more meaning for them, they do not determine what constitutes a good on their own.

Human beings discern their notion of the good from common frameworks of meaning. These frameworks are equally essential to their sense of self, though they are not explicitly personal. Taylor writes:

“Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions or reactions [...]. To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 28.

¹⁰⁶ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*. 25.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here 'frameworks.'"¹¹⁰

Frameworks may be theistic or non-theistic, particular or general. Regardless of their content, frameworks are the bases for all qualitative discriminations. Frameworks serve as a common pool of goods, out of which individuals discern by strong evaluation those which are more valuable or integral to their lives.

Taylor distinguishes between two types of frameworks in the modern world: immanent frameworks and transcendent frameworks. They are each defined by their representation of the constitutive good, or the type of goods they value. Taylor writes that an immanent frame "constitutes a 'natural' order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over and against a possible 'transcendent' one."¹¹¹ In an immanent framework, the constitutive good is immanent: such a good exists within the limitations and boundaries of existing reality. An example would be the human ability for rational control. In contrast, transcendent frameworks are grounded by the idea of a good that is higher or greater than existing reality from which our capacity for strong evaluation originates.¹¹² An example would be God or Dharma.

According to Taylor, the conception of the constitutive good does not necessarily limit the type of goods represented by moral frameworks. An immanent framework may contain a transcendent good and vice versa. For example, though we might believe that the source of morality comes from rational control, we might still aspire to achieve a transcendent love for all beings. This example corresponds to what Taylor calls an 'open' immanent framework¹¹³. These should be seen in opposition to 'closed' immanent frameworks, which refute any notion of a transcendent good¹¹⁴. The choice between closed and open immanent frameworks has important consequences for religion in modernity. Taylor writes: "What emerges from all this is that we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can

¹¹⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 26.

¹¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.

¹¹² Ibid., 544.

¹¹³ Ibid., 545.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 546.

read it as answering to our deepest craving, need, and fulfilment of the good.”¹¹⁵ The presence of open and closed frameworks, in addition to transcendent frameworks, represents one of the greatest dilemmas, or opportunity, for achieving harmony in modern society.

Where do these multiple frameworks come from? Individuals do not invent moral frameworks; they are culturally inherited. As D.P. Barker explains, we gather frameworks from dialogue with others: this “web of interlocation is the delivery system for the goods that make up the moral framework, but it is not itself the moral framework.”¹¹⁶ Taylor argues that what is unique about the modern era is that the web of interlocation is so vast that there is no framework which can be said to function as “*the* framework tout court.”¹¹⁷ Immigration and the spread of globalization have only increased exposure in the modern West to multiple frameworks.

Regardless of the multiple frameworks which populate the horizon, Taylor insists that frameworks are necessary to all human beings. He writes: “doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us [...] [Living] within such strongly qualified horizons is constitutive of human agency, [...] stepping outside these limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.”¹¹⁸ In other words, the unity of a self requires that we be able to determine which experiences are significant to us and which are not, without constantly questioning the legitimacy of their meaning. Choosing between multiple goods and frameworks demonstrates that certain ideals have greater meaning for me than others. While we may hold in common the same goods as a society, the way I discern between them and navigate my life around the goods I find to be more significant defines my sense of self as an individual.

¹¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 548.

¹¹⁶ Baker, D.P. “Morality, Structure, Transcendence and Theism: A response to Melissa Lane’s Reading of Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*” (*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 54 (1993), 39-40.

¹¹⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 17.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

1.3.4 *The Importance of Narrative for Identity*

Additionally, Taylor maintains that a human being's sense of self necessarily incorporates a narrative dimension. This dimension serves to contextualize a person's moral choices and personalize their sense of the good. Taylor explains that situating ourselves in moral space involves not only the identification of the good, but "this sense of the good has to be woven into my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. [...] [We] grasp our lives in narrative. [...] In order to have a sense of who we are we have to have a notion of who we have become, and of where we are going."¹¹⁹ He argues that this narrative identity is not optional; a person's sense of self must carry some thread of continuity over time.

As Nicholas Smith explains, human beings must locate themselves in unfolding time, just as they locate themselves in moral space.¹²⁰ Identity is a reflection of an individual's past, as well as their present and future; it changes and evolves during an individual's life span. Narrative identity personalizes common moral frameworks by relating a person's experiences to the concept of good. As Taylor notes, "we cannot but strive to give our lives meaning or substance, and that this means that we understand ourselves inescapably in narrative."¹²¹ Narrative identities may be linear, or fractured, or even multiple. Regardless of their form and content, Taylor maintains that all human identity requires contextualization in temporal space

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor suggests that narrative is not only necessary for a person's sense of self, but for their collective identity as a human being. In tracing the roots of a modern human identity, Taylor demonstrates how this sense of self is intimately linked with subtraction narratives, particularly the one which supposes that science and reason has overcome the "enchanted"¹²² worldview of the past. He writes:

"The buffered self feels invulnerable before the world of spirits and magic forces, which still can haunt us in our dreams, particularly those of childhood [...] [a]nd then the colossal success of modern

¹¹⁹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47.

¹²⁰ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 97.

¹²¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 51.

¹²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

natural science and the associated technology can lead us to feel that it unlocks all mysteries, that it will ultimately explain everything [...].”¹²³

This passage reveals that not all narratives that orient our sense of self in unfolding time are personal. In the case of narratives of modernity, which includes the one discussed above, Taylor argues that they are “essential to our thinking. We all wield them, including those who claim to repudiate them.”¹²⁴ To describe ourselves as modern is to give temporal significance to our identity as human beings. The term modern draws implicit comparisons to the past, while suggesting that we are constantly looking towards the future.

1.4 Taylor’s Hermeneutical Approach

Taylor suggests that refuting a misleading narrative of modernity –such as an anti-religious negative narrative- is not sufficient; a person must always possess a narrative identity. Consequently, the construction of a positive narrative of modernity is an essential component of Taylor’s polemic against naturalist theories and his Philosophical Anthropology. Taylor must provide an alternative account of modernity should he accomplish the goal of terminating the perpetuation of anti-religious negative narratives in modern Western Culture. The narrative of modernity Taylor presents in *A Secular Age* thus represents the culmination of the third task of Taylor’s Philosophical Anthropology.

This narrative is constructed to satisfy two distinct, though related goals: the first is to explain how the belief in God became an option in the modern age; and the second is to demonstrate that religion is still relevant in modernity. Both goals serve to disprove the fundamental claims of anti-religious negative narratives. In constructing this narrative, Taylor adheres to a hermeneutical approach outlined in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*. In this text, Taylor contends that human practices and culture is only comprehensible through the analysis of categories of human self-understanding.

Taylor proposes that the human sciences are better served by a hermeneutical reading of human practices, which involves the interpretation of human conceptions of selfhood and moral frameworks of meaning. He argues that the natural sciences are

¹²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 548.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 573.

incapable of adequately comprehending humanity, because human beings are self-interpreting animals.

Modernity is a human construction: an amalgam of human practices that have significance and meaning to the human beings who engage in them. Taylor explains that a practice refers to “any stable configuration of shared activity, whose shape is defined by a certain pattern of dos and don’ts.”¹²⁵ He explains that our understanding of agency, selfhood, and morality are embedded in these practices; they are a reflection of everything which constitutes a human being. Taylor writes:

“What we see in human history is ranges of human practices that are both at once, that is, material practices carried out by human beings in space and time, and very often coercively maintained, and at the same time, self-conceptions, modes of understanding. These are often inseparable [...] just because the self-understandings are the essential condition of the practice making the sense that it does to the participants. Because human practices are the kind of thing that makes sense, certain ideas are internal to them; one cannot distinguish the two in order to ask the question Which causes which?”¹²⁶

Taylor argues that modern human practices are incomprehensible as abstractions. He explains that “implicit in these [modern] practices is a certain vision of the agent and his relation to others and to society;” moreover, “these practices require that one’s actions and relations be seen in the light of this picture and the accompanying norms”¹²⁷, which are conveyed through moral frameworks.¹²⁸ Without a clear view of the moral frameworks that motivate people to engage in the specific practices which constitute modernity, the significance and purpose of these practices is incomprehensible. Comprehending modernity thus requires the understanding of modern moral frameworks and the modern conception of human agency and selfhood.

¹²⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 204.

¹²⁶ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 31-32.

¹²⁷ Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*, 35.

¹²⁸ Taylor writes: “The meanings and norms implicit in these practices are not just in the minds of the actors but are out there in the practices themselves, practices which cannot be conceived as a set of individual actions, but which are essentially modes of social relation, of mutual action [...] These must be the common property of the society before there can be any question of anyone entering into negotiation or not. Hence they are not subjective meanings, the property of one or some individuals, but rather inter-subjective meanings, which are constitutive of the social matrix in which individuals find themselves and act” Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers Vol. 2*, 36.

For Taylor, the human identity is a product of its environment in all dimensions: moral, physical, social, imaginary, and structural. Taylor warns that explaining how the modern self originated is a challenging task, which involves an analysis of each of these dimensions.¹²⁹ However, Taylor contends that the modern self can be comprehended through the moral frameworks that motivate human agency. A person's sense of self, or identity, is a reflection of the moral dimension of their environment. This dimension, Taylor proposes, may be subjected to historical analysis. Taylor writes: "One has to understand people's self-interpretations and their visions of the good, if one is to explain how they arise; but the second task can't be collapsed into the first, even as the first can't be elided in favour of the second."¹³⁰ As Michael L. Morgan remarks, explaining the moral motivations of the self requires situating the modern identity and the understanding of human agency within the historical and religious development of moral frameworks.¹³¹ To understand modernity the historical evolution of both moral frameworks and the concept of a human agent must be explored.

Taylor's hermeneutical approach means that the reasons for the continued prevalence of religion in modernity must be located within the modern conception of human agency and modern moral frameworks. Taylor's historical narrative of modernity thus takes the form of an analysis of the changing conception of human agency. By demonstrating that the modern identity, though constituted by an immanent frame is not innately closed to the transcendent, Taylor establishes religion as a legitimate modern practice.

1.5 Conclusion: Personal Frameworks and the Third Task of Philosophical Anthropology

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes his narrative as motivated by the polemic against anti-religious negative narratives. This polemic is a continuation of Taylor's polemic

¹²⁹ Taylor writes: "The modern identity arose because changes in the self-understandings connected with a wide range of practices –religious, political, economic, familial, intellectual, artistic - converged and reinforced each other to produce it". Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 206

¹³⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 204.

¹³¹ Morgan, "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*.49.

against naturalist theory, which originates in his earliest work. Taylor thereby draws on the totality of his fifty year career in producing *A Secular Age*, even reprinting large sections of previously published works as whole chapters.

A Secular Age differs from Taylor's other works in that his personal agenda –the defence of religious belief in modernity – is clearly elucidated. Taylor's entire narrative is structured so as to defend the relevance of religion and spirituality. He presents closed moral frameworks as the cause of social instability and religious conflict in the modern world, generally ignoring the role of ardent theists and proponents of orthodox religion in the conflict.

A Secular Age contributes to Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology project by offering a causal, diachronic explanation of modernity. As such, *A Secular Age* bares the traces of Taylor's own personal moral framework. In the following chapters, I shall therefore conduct a hermeneutical interpretation of this narrative - beginning with his terminology - to reveal Taylor's personal moral vision.

CHAPTER 2

Taylor's Polemic and the Definition of Secularity and Religion

In this chapter, I will examine Taylor's definitions of the terms "secularization", "secular", "secularity", and "religion" in *Source of the Self, Modern Social Imaginaries, Varieties of Religion Today*, and *A Secular Age*. I will demonstrate that Taylor's choice of vocabulary and his definitions are motivated by the polemics against naturalist theories and anti-religious negative narratives.¹³² Moreover, I will argue that Taylor constructs both substantive and functional definitions of each term to thoroughly disprove the anti-religious negative narratives on an etymological level.¹³³

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor relies on a specific terminology to convince the reader of his narrative of modernity. He challenges the implicit understandings of "secularization", "secular", and "secularity" often used by anti-religious negative narratives to present the decline of religion as inevitable and normal. Taylor maintains that both substantive and functional definitions are necessary to understand these four terms; however, mainstream negative narratives of modernity frequently ignore substantive definitions all together. Taylor argues that the substantive definitions of these four terms indicate that the meaning of belief and the conditions of belief have changed over time. The significance of religious belief is not static as functional definitions of these terms would suggest. The plurality of religious behaviour and practice in modernity is a direct consequence of such historical changes.

Taylor claims that a single definition of religion is insufficient to explain the variety of religious behaviour. He therefore presents eight distinct forms of religion, which reflect the changing social and epistemic condition of human beings. The plurality of the

¹³² I will not use the concepts of "anti-religious narratives" and "naturalist theories" interchangeably. Naturalist explanations of modernity are almost all anti-religious in Taylor's view because they obscure the significance of religion and they ignore the impact of any expression of meaning on human behaviour and society. Taylor's concern is the proposition that the ability to live without religion has always been a possibility for humanity. According to Taylor this assertion is false – the ability to live a full and functional life without religion is a modern phenomenon and must be understood within the scope and limits of western modern moral frameworks.

¹³³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 22-23; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 549.

modern religious context is reflected in the multiple definitions of religion Taylor presents in *A Secular Age*.

2.1 *Theories of Secularization*

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor expresses discomfort with the definition and usage of the term “secularization” in the human sciences. According to Taylor, secularization should explain how modern society has “moved from a horizon in which belief in God in some form was virtually unchallengeable to our present predicament in which theism is one option among others.”¹³⁴ However, the common definition of secularization as the decline or regression of religious faith overlooks this shift. According to Taylor, while this understanding of secularization is commonly considered an explanation of modernity, “to invoke secularization here is just to re-describe the problem, not to offer an answer.”¹³⁵ Taylor maintains that secularization is a feature of modernity; however, theories of secularization only account for the shift in the condition of belief, and thus should not be considered causal explanations of the modern age.

Taylor contests the validity of the theories of secularization, which attribute a decline in religious faith to the industrial revolution, the rise of scientific rationalism, and technological advancements of the late 17th century.¹³⁶ Taylor maintains that the proposed causal connection between these factors and the regression of religion in modernity is unsubstantiated.¹³⁷ Rather than offer his own explanation of secularization, Taylor addresses the social and moral changes to which these theories allude: the shift in the condition of belief.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor furthers the analysis of secularization. He again contests the association between secularization theory and explanations of modernity. Taylor also discredits the propositions of “mainstream secularization theory,” which posits the decline,

¹³⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 401.

¹³⁵ Taylor is also referring to the shift in the condition of belief in modernity. *Ibid.*, 309-310.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 432.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 310.

or disappearance of religion, as the end result of the process of secularization.¹³⁸ The proposition of mainstream secularization theory is widely accepted as fact in modern Western society. Taylor demonstrates that these theories are a form of negative narrative; they disregard the actual effects of secularization of society, prematurely declaring the end of religion. Taylor argues that mainstream secularization theory neglects to validate their claims with evidence, focusing solely on identifying the historical causes of the proposed decline of religion.¹³⁹ Taylor writes: “a difficulty in this whole discussion is that there is some unclarity as to what exactly the ‘secularization’ thesis amounts to.”¹⁴⁰ According to Taylor, mainstream secularization theory lacks substantive understanding of the process of secularization. Mainstream secularization theory concentrates on the function of secularization in modernity, disregarding what secularization actually is. Mainstream secularization theory proposes that religious faith and practice has declined in the modern age as a result of secularization, or described differently, that religious faith is undergoing a regression in modernity because there has been a decline in religion. Evidently such a proposition is unintelligible; Taylor therefore maintains that proponents of mainstream secularization theory presuppose that modernity is incompatible with religious faith. He writes: “The accusation thrown at orthodox theorists is that they must somehow believe that these modern developments of themselves undermine belief, or make it harder; rather than seeing that the new structures indeed, undermine old forms, but leave open the possibility of new forms which can flourish.”¹⁴¹ Taylor argues that many examples of religious, industrialized, and scientifically advanced countries can be found in existence today. Moreover, the factors credited with generating secularization were historically motivated by religion: the expansion of capitalism and the industrialization of European society were encouraged by Protestant ethics, and the development of the natural sciences was inspired by the religious desire to know and understand God’s creation.

¹³⁸ Taylor writes: “The basic insight underlying the ‘orthodox’ modes of theory in this domain is that ‘modernity’ (in some sense) tends to repress or reduce ‘religion’ (in some sense).” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 429.

¹³⁹ See: Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 431-433

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 432.

According to Taylor, disregarding the possible ways religion can prosper in modernity requires the adoption of a narrow and limited understanding of religion, which is incongruent with history and the present context. Taylor insists that before speculating about the causes of religion's decline, one must first demonstrate that such an event has occurred. Academic consensus that religion will likely be rejected by modern western society in the future, Taylor maintains, does not justify the claims of mainstream secularization theory¹⁴². He notes that if the definition of religion is broadened to "include a wide range of spiritual and semi-spiritual beliefs; or if you cast your net even wider and think of someone's religion as the shape of their ultimate concern, then indeed, one can make a case that religion is as present as ever."¹⁴³ Taylor maintains that the primary step in developing a theory of secularization is to identify the contemporary changes in the condition of belief; once the substantive understanding of secularization is determined, it is possible to suggest the sources of these changes. Mainstream secularization theory incorrectly assumes certain changes in the religious environment have occurred without verifying their presumptions.

Taylor attempts to identify the changes in religious belief that are evident in modernity. He isolates the two major components of traditional Christian belief, which he identifies as: (1) the belief in a supra-human power, and (2) the belief in personal and societal calls to transformation, which involves moving beyond purely immanent concerns such as human flourishing. The latter belief is also known as the transformation perspective.¹⁴⁴ Taylor reveals that both components were strongly emphasized in pre-Reformation Christian culture. In these cultures, the spiritual and mundane needs of the society were met by two separate vocational classes that were hierarchically related.¹⁴⁵ Lay members of society were expected to maintain a belief in God, whereas the clergy were additionally responsible for responding to God's call to transformation.

¹⁴²Taylor does not identify the so-called 'experts' and 'academics' that support Mainstream Secularization Theory. Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 437.

¹⁴³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 427.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹⁴⁵ To ensure the spiritual wellbeing of all members of society, some individuals would devote their entire lives, as ascetics, to the call to transform, and eschew the common pleasures of life. The physical, reproductive, and economic needs of the community were met by the laity, who could not afford to devote their lives exclusively to religious practice.

The Reformation equalized the social hierarchy by affirming ordinary life as the sole locus of Christian worship and fulfilment.¹⁴⁶ This new affirmation meant that those occupied solely with the call to transform were no longer needed; one could experience the pleasures of ordinary life, in moderation, while devoting oneself fully to God and God's purposes.¹⁴⁷ Taylor notes that though the Reformation intended to "fight back the demands of the 'world', and then make it over [...] [the] irony is that it somehow turned into something quite different; in another, rather different sense, the 'world' won after all."¹⁴⁸ In sanctifying ordinary life, reformed Christianity posited human flourishing as the highest good.¹⁴⁹ Any pursuit of a goal beyond that of human flourishing was negated.

The development of atheistic and agnostic interpretations of the Reformation perspective during the 18th and 19th centuries, which separated the call to transformation from the notion of human flourishing, initiated a rift in society. On one side of the divide were persons who continued to adhere to the transformation perspective, while on the other were individuals who affirmed an exclusively humanist interpretation of human flourishing.¹⁵⁰ According to Taylor, the latter group is much stronger in the modern age. He therefore suggests "zero[ing] in on the following proposition as the heart of 'secularization': modernity has led to a decline in the transformation perspective."¹⁵¹ Taylor proposes that the belief in God has remained prevalent in the modern age, while the transformative component of Christian faith has diminished in significance. He thus contends that though the focus of Christian faith has shifted towards human flourishing, this is not representative of a decline in religion.

Taylor's definition is clearly substantive: it focuses on what secularization is, as opposed to the function of secularization. According to Taylor, secularization is a product of a shift in moral frameworks initiated by the Christian Reformation, not the result of scientific development or intellectual maturation. Instead of correcting the mainstream

¹⁴⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 144.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴⁹ Taylor writes: "[...] a new relation to God, as designer [...] will in fact turn out to be dispensable, because the Design underlying the moral order can be seen as directed to ordinary human flourishing" *Ibid.*, 157.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 430-431.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

secularization theory, Taylor constructs a new narrative that begins with the protestant Reformation. He calls this narrative “the Reform Master Narrative (RMN)”, noting that, in conjunction with changes in theoretical understandings of the world, “RMN is clearly important, and obviously provided the framework for eighteenth-century break-out”¹⁵² that made belief in God no longer absolute. The Reform Master Narrative demonstrates how the focus of religion may change without causing a loss of faith or a regression of belief. To best describe Taylor’s point, I propose the following analogy. If we wanted to understand how religion had changed in the Reformation, and we only examined the traditional loci of religious life – the monastery and church – then we would fail to notice all the religious activity now taking place in the home. Consequently, we would argue for a decline in faith or practice. The mainstream secularization theory demonstrates a similar approach to the study of religion – employing antiquated information in the search for modern religious behaviour. The mainstream secularization theory’s definition of secularization will not reveal the new modes of religious life in modernity; it will only reveal empty monasteries.

Taylor avoids using the word secularization to describe modernity or society in *A Secular Age*; favouring instead the term ‘secularity’. The general understanding of secularization is functional, and detracts from the substantive definition Taylor provides. Without a commonly shared substantive understanding of secularization, explanations of modernity through secularization risk incomprehension. As Taylor’s own substantive definition reveals, secularization is too specific a phenomenon to properly account for all aspects of modernity, or even the role of religion in society. For these reasons, I contend that Taylor avoids mentioning secularization in his description of modernity in *A Secular Age* and instead uses the term ‘secularity’, which does not have the same functional connotations as secularization. Before turning to his understanding of “secularity”, it is necessary to first examine his definitions of “secular.”

2.2 *Definitions of Secular*

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor reveals that he has struggled between using the terms “secular” and “secularity” to describe modernity. He writes: “It seems obvious before

¹⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 774.

you start thinking about it, but as soon as you do, all sorts of problems arise.”¹⁵³ The term “secular” is often used as a synonym for irreligious. The historical origins of the term, however, illustrate the irony of such definitions. The term “secular” did not originate from a perspective opposed to religion; rather, the word was coined by early Christians to describe a dimension of time. As Taylor explains, the word secular derives from the Latin word *saeculum*, which means age or century. In early Christianity, *saeculum* was used to refer to ordinary, profane time, as opposed to, sacred, or eternal, time.¹⁵⁴ These two temporal dimensions were seen as distinct, yet intimately connected and complementary. The laity of Christian society was occupied with the concerns of secular time: birth, death, marriage, maturity, etc. At certain times of the year, however, contact with higher time was critical for the renewal of social harmony and cohesion: Saint’s Days, feasts, Carnival, Christmas.¹⁵⁵ The term “secular” was also used to classify religious vocations ultimately concerned with matters of profane time; the secular clergy, for instance, were religious individuals who served the quotidian needs of villages and peasants. Other clergy, such as monks, nuns and the ecclesiastical clergy, were concerned with higher time.¹⁵⁶

Taylor explains that he uses the term “secular” in his positive narrative, despite the anti-religious connotations of the term, “because it marks in its very etymology what is at stake in this context, which has something to do with the way human society inhabits time.”¹⁵⁷ For Taylor, the term “secular” refers to a change in the time-consciousness of modern society.¹⁵⁸ Modern persons do not understand society as needing to be renewed through some common action or ritual connected to an event marked by sacred time. This change is visible in the modern celebration of Christmas, Mardi-Gras, and Easter; they are no longer holy days, marked by acts of collective ritual, but commercial holidays, observed by families, individuals, or communities, but not society as a whole.

¹⁵³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 14-15.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 45-54; 58.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 61-62.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹⁵⁸ Taylor’s reasoning sustains our previous argument that he abandoned the term “secularization” because it can only be made to stand for an epistemic loss.

According to Taylor, this change in the common understanding of society and time can be attributed to the development of the public sphere in the eighteenth century. The public sphere is a communal space, grounding in common action and agency, existing purely in secular time, wholly independent from transcendent powers.¹⁵⁹ This notion of the public sphere has permanently altered the conception of time for modern persons. The foundation of modern society is attributed to the public sphere; communal rituals and festivals connected to higher time have been rendered irrelevant to the continuation of society.

Taylor's proposition that the term secular signifies a shift in the time-consciousness of Western society represents a substantive definition. However, he also provides a functional definition in his discussion of the public sphere. Evidently, the development of the public sphere has displaced the religious connotations of time, replacing eternal time exclusively with secular time in the collective social imaginary. Taylor suggests that the connection between higher time and modern society has been irrevocably severed. Future societies will always be grounded in the public sphere and thus in secular time. For Taylor, this shift marks an epistemic gain, rather than a loss. He writes: "Foundations are now seen to be common actions in profane time, ontically on the same footing with all other such actions, even though they may be given a special authoritative status in our national narrative or our legal system."¹⁶⁰ According to Taylor, being secular signifies the possibility of participating in all aspects of society, and sustaining a complete moral framework of meaning, without reference to God or the transcendent; this possibility was not available to human beings before the hegemony of secular time, and the recognition of immanent moral goods.¹⁶¹ Taylor's assessment of the practical implications of the shift to secular time represents a functional definition of the term "secular."

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 194-195.

¹⁶⁰ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 187.

¹⁶¹ Taylor writes: "A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

2.3 *Three Forms of Secularity*

For Taylor, the description of modernity as secular is insufficient, as this term does not address the contemporary spiritual and moral condition of Western society. To address this condition, Taylor employs the term “secularity”. Taylor identifies three distinct meanings associated with secularity. To differentiate between the multiple understandings of secularities, he identifies each of them with a number: “secularity 1,” “secularity 2,” and “secularity 3.”¹⁶² The definitions of secularity 1” and “secularity 2” are often used by the anti-religious negative narratives. Indeed, they reflect these narratives’ basic proposals about the role of religion in the modern age. Taylor’s definition of secularity, “secularity 3,” refutes both secularities 1 and 2 by offering, in Taylor’s estimation, a more accurate account of the current condition of belief. From this point onwards, “secularity 3” will simply be referred to as secularity.

2.3.1 *Secularity 1*

According to Taylor, “secularity 1” refers to the removal of, or absence of references to God, or transcendence, from the public sphere.¹⁶³ He notes that this definition is the most prevalent in the human sciences. As a description of the modern age, Taylor concedes that this definition is relevant in specific contexts, such as France or Turkey, though it is altogether inaccurate in the United States and the United Kingdom. During the past century, many western countries have attempted to increase the separation between religion and the state. Modern society, he writes, is experiencing “the end of an era when political authority, as well as other metatopical common agencies are inconceivable without reference to God or higher time.”¹⁶⁴ Religion, however, remains active in the public sphere, influencing politics and social causes.¹⁶⁵ Taylor suggests that “secularity 1” is unable to

¹⁶² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1-4.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 186.

consider the continued presence of God in public life,¹⁶⁶ as it ignores the new forms of spirituality and religious behaviour which take place outside of Churches.¹⁶⁷

2.3.2 *Secularity 2*

Like “secularity 1,” “secularity 2” proposes a description of the modern religious condition, without considering the contemporary context of religion. According to Taylor, “secularity 2” “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church.”¹⁶⁸ Taylor maintains that the applicability of this definition in the modern western world is quite limited; in some countries of Western Europe, where references to God still occur in the public realm, a decline in religious faith and practice is demonstrable.¹⁶⁹ However, Taylor warns that equating a waning belief in supernatural agencies, or a drop in church attendance, with a general decline in the belief in God or the transcendent is somewhat of an exaggeration.¹⁷⁰

2.3.3 *Secularity 3*

Taylor contends that an appropriate definition of secularity must consider the place of religion in modernity, as well as the moral orientation of society and the modern sense of identity. He notes that the significance of belief has drastically changed in the modern era, such that new forms of belief no longer resemble their predecessors. According to Taylor, secularity describes “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹⁷¹ “Secularity 3” can best be understood as the conditions of the possibility of belief in the modern era, which in turn affects the ways in which modern persons experience and engage in religion. Understanding the changes which

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 186.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 193

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁷⁰ Taylor provides the example of a doctor who is motivated by her faith, yet does not advise her patients to touch a relic. He writes: the “mistake in this latter case [...] is to identify secularization with disenchantment.” *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

have contributed to the modern condition of belief, Taylor suggests, will lead to a comprehension of the role of religion in modernity.¹⁷²

Modern society no longer considers belief in God as necessary to their sense of self or morality. Individuals can choose between unbelieving, closed frameworks, or open, even theistic frameworks of morality. The availability and accessibility of a plurality of frameworks is one of the causal factors of modern secularity.¹⁷³ Taylor contends, however, that secularity is not the product of a linear path, rather, the conditions which brought about secularity are diverse and numerous. Taylor's contention contradicts the story proposed by anti-religious negative narratives, which suggest that "secularity 1" is an inevitable condition, resulting from scientific and technological progress.

Taylor suggests that one factor which contributed to secularity was the exponential increase in moral frameworks that began in the 18th century and continues to this day. He calls this increase "the nova-effect."¹⁷⁴ According to Taylor, "we are now living in a spiritual super-nova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane."¹⁷⁵ Exposure to these multiple frameworks has abolished naive belief. Modern persons are all aware that moral/spiritual options exist, and therefore cannot use ignorance to protect their beliefs from outside influence.¹⁷⁶ As Taylor explains:

"The fact is that this kind of multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. [...] [This] changes when through increased contact, interchange, even perhaps intermarriage, the other becomes more and more like me, in everything else but faith: same activities, professions, opinions, tastes, etc. Then the issue posed by difference becomes more insistent: why my way, and not hers?"¹⁷⁷

The nova-effect is self-sustaining in the modern age. Secularity preserves the frameworks and moral orders that effectively prevent the nova from collapsing; the notion that belief and unbelief are equally valid positions prevents a single framework from gaining

¹⁷² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.

¹⁷³ The ability to choose between a variety of moral/spiritual positions, was once a luxury possible only for the elite class, who were exposed through travel and education to a vast web of interlocutors. In the latter half of the twentieth century, immigration and education extended this possibility to the masses. See: *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 300.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 304.

hegemony. Secularity thus represents a meta-framework of meaning: a framework that makes sense of the human agent's relationship to other frameworks. Seen from this angle, Taylor's definition of secularity is both substantive and functional. It describes what secularity is - the condition of belief in society - and how it functions in society - determines the parameters for all modern moral frameworks -.

In identifying secularity as the condition of belief in modernity and positing it as a meta-framework, Taylor establishes epistemic circumstances necessary for articulating a positive narrative of modernity. Frameworks are affirmations of what human beings hold as valuable, meaningful, or good, and as such they do not articulate epistemic absences or losses. In defining secularity as meta-framework, Taylor avoids employing the negative dialogue of the anti-religious negative narratives. Secularity may never be absent of meaning, nor of significance. The shift to a secular age must therefore be explained through epistemic gains. Without substantive and functional explanations of secularity, Taylor demonstrates that the anti-religious negative narratives are incapable of explaining secularity and the religious condition of modernity. Accepting Taylor's definition of secularity thus engages the reader in Taylor's project of constructing a positive narrative.

2.4 Taylor's Varieties of Religion

All three forms of secularity, Taylor notes, describe the perceived place of religion in modern society. Contrary to the secularist, anti-religious assertion that religion has no meaning in modernity, this commonality demonstrates that what it means to be secular is incomprehensible without reference to religion. But what is religion? Its meaning is at once familiar and difficult to articulate. As Taylor demonstrates, the substantive definition of religion is uncertain. Does religion refer only to historic traditions or the belief in supernatural beings; could unorganized spiritual beliefs and practices not also be under the heading of religion?¹⁷⁸

Taylor addresses this problem of multiplicity in *A Secular Age* by not reducing the definition of religion to a single understanding. Rather, Taylor presents two distinct models

¹⁷⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 427.

of religion, the Durkheimian model and the Axial model, in addition to a third definition of religion that satisfies his purpose of constructing a positive narrative of modernity. Note that these models were first introduced in *Varieties of Religion Today* and *Modern Social Imaginaries*, and that Taylor chose to include both in *A Secular Age* without combining them into a single model.

2.4.1 “Durkheimian” Model of Religion

In *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Taylor introduces four social forms based on Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion,¹⁷⁹ which are characterized by their orientation to religion. He labels these forms: “paleo-Durkheimian”; “Durkheimian”; “neo-Durkheimian” and “post-Durkheimian”. In each of these social forms,¹⁸⁰ the function of religion is distinct, and a different understanding of religion may be inferred.

The paleo-Durkheimian social form was most prevalent in Catholic states during the enchanted era of the middle ages. This form is characterized by “a sense of ontic dependence of the state on God and higher times.”¹⁸¹ The religion of the paleo-Durkheimian societies is not centred on the church so much as on society as a whole. Religion is seen as preceding organized authority; thus, collective action and religious engagement of society affects the flow of divine power on which all life is dependent.¹⁸²

In contrast, with the Durkheimian social form everyone must belong to a singular Church, which wields all authority in matters of state, religion, and society.¹⁸³ In Durkheimian religion the Church mediates divine power, restricting the flow such that “the Church alone retains the role of guide in a society otherwise based on complementary equality.”¹⁸⁴ As with the paleo-Durkheimian social form, the Durkheimian social form is

¹⁷⁹ Durkheim: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things - i.e. things set apart & forbidden -, beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” See: Durkheim, Emile. *Readings from Emile Durkheim*. Ed. Kenneth Thompson. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 300.

¹⁸⁰ Taylor also refers to social forms as “dispensations”. Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*. 75.

¹⁸¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 76.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 438.

¹⁸³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 442; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*. 75.

¹⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 442

most prevalent in Catholic, or Orthodox states, that only recognize the authority of a single church.

The principle of denominationalism presents a direct challenge to the Durkheimian social form and forms the basis of the neo-Durkheimian social form in which “God is present because it is his Design around which society is organized.”¹⁸⁵ In this social form, religious sentiment is central to political identity; however, state authority remains independent from religious authority. Neither a social sacred, nor a singular church that must be followed exists. Rather, society works unaided by divine power to bring about God’s design. In these societies, the legal and ethical systems are often inspired or based on religious mores; however, they are given independent justification.¹⁸⁶ The best example of this society would be the United States of America, where personal faith is an integral aspect of the American identity.

The post-Durkheimian social form exaggerates the notion of individualism encouraged by the principle of denominationalism.¹⁸⁷ In this social form, religion is viewed as a personal choice that has little to do with the social cohesion of the state. Taylor hypothesizes that the post-Durkheimian social form represents a dramatic departure in terms of the relationship between religion and society. Religion is no longer seen as something significant to the maintenance, structure, or identity of society.¹⁸⁸ He argues that in certain cases this social form can have a destabilizing effect on the other Durkheimian dispensations.¹⁸⁹

2.4.2 *Functions of the Durkheimian Model*

Taylor discusses the various Durkheimian social forms at length in *Varieties of Religion Today*, as well as *A Secular Age*, and yet, he clearly resists associating modernity with one of the four, as he insists that they are all still existent. What then is the purpose of the Durkheimian model? I contend that the Durkheimian model serves to reinforce the

¹⁸⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 455; 75-77.

¹⁸⁶ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 79.

¹⁸⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486-487.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 490.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 492.

plurality of religion and social reality in modernity. The geographical and cultural area identified as the modern world by Taylor does not apply to a single homogeneous society. Rather, modern society consists of numerous countries, nationalities, religious heritages, etc. Taylor insists that all four Durkheimian social forms are present in this broad North Atlantic society.

In positing four such social forms, Taylor once again attacks the foundations of unilinear, secularist narratives of modernity which only seem to recognize the post-Durkheimian social form as compatible with modernity. These narratives suggest that given enough time, everyone would abandon religious attachments, identities, and morals to form a secular humanist nation, and thus, humanity will be forever liberated from “claustrophobic relations, involving excessive control and invidious distinctions.”¹⁹⁰ According to Taylor, these narratives interpret the post-Durkheimian destabilizing effect as a natural progression. He writes:

“So the story of the rise of modern social spaces doesn’t need to be given an anti-religious spin. But there are motivations to go this way; and like any spin, we can easily see how the wide acceptance of one such, and the relegation of religion which this involves, could harden into a ‘picture’, which appears obvious and unchallengeable. The point of tracing this fact of the narrative of modernity is that [...] [it] shows how once a secularist spin has been taken, this anti-religious story has all the force and moral power which attach to the inauguration of these spaces of citizen sociability.”¹⁹¹

In spinning the rise of the post-Durkheimian social form, the authors of this narrative portray religion as corrupting to society. Any connection between the religion and society is considered potentially damaging. Taylor argues, however, that the connection between religion and society will not spontaneously disappear. Until the 1960’s, the Durkheimian social form was prevalent in Quebec and continues to arouse sentiment. Furthermore, United States may be considered a neo-Durkheimian social form, as the idea of electing an atheist president remains inconceivable for many. Taylor’s contents that for many people religion is still a fundamental part of modern society even in secular environments.¹⁹² The spun, secularist narratives fail to consider the experiences of communities that exhibit

¹⁹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 575

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 579

¹⁹² Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 112.

Durkheimian or neo-Durkheimian social forms; denying these communities a legitimate place within modernity.

2.4.3 *Axial Religions*

In *Modern Social Imaginaries*,¹⁹³ and again in *A Secular Age*, Taylor introduces a second method of classifying religion loosely based on Karl Jaspers' notion of the "Axial Age."¹⁹³ The Axial Age refers to the last millennium B.C.E., a period when many founders of the current world religions and notable ancient philosophers lived; including Siddhartha, Socrates, the Hebrew prophets, and Confucius.¹⁹⁴ According to Taylor, the innovation attributed to Axial religions is the conception of a good "higher" than human flourishing, namely salvation, as the ultimate goal of humankind.¹⁹⁵ Taylor refers to the Axial period as a revolution: the beginning of the "Great Disembedding" for pre-Axial religions. He argues that this disembedding reaches a conclusion with the development of post-Axial religions.¹⁹⁶

In this section, I shall examine the three religions of the axial model, beginning with a brief explanation of the concepts of embeddedness and disembeddedness. I shall then summarize Taylor's description of these religions and compare the Axial and Durkheimian models. Finally, I will explore how this model may be used to understand Taylor's third definition of religion.

2.4.4 *Embedding versus Disembedding*

Taylor introduces the concept of embeddedness in *Modern Social Imaginaries* and reprises the subject in *A Secular Age*. Taylor refers to these dimensions of embeddedness as society, cosmos, and existing reality. I have equated these dimensions with social, physical, and moral spaces to better explain Taylor's categories of embedding.

¹⁹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 762.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

The notion of embedding refers to the way in which human beings imagine themselves as existing and acting within social, physical, and moral spaces. An embedded agent is one whose entire agency is ontically dependent on their imagined reality. Taylor explains: “what I’m calling [...] embeddedness is thus partly an identity thing. From the standpoint of the individual’s sense of self, it means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain matrix.”¹⁹⁷ A socially embedded agent understands their every action as having an effect on the whole of society, and the actions of society to have a direct effect on them. In other words, they only have meaning as a self within a society. In contrast, a disembedded agent is one whose agency is not ontically dependent on society; they understand themselves to be an individual, distinct from the society to which they belong.

Similarly, to be embedded in physical space implies that the meaning of human agency is connected to the definition of this space. Taylor refers to the physical space inhabited by an embedded agent uniquely as the “cosmos”. For him, “cosmos” is a generalized term that refers to the idea of a physical reality imbued with an ontically independent meaning; the “cosmos” does not signify a specific conception of the world.¹⁹⁸ To be disembedded from this dimension would be to understand the human agent as occupying an empty universe, which does not define or limit their actions in any meaningful way.

The final dimension of embeddedness is a little more difficult to grasp. Taylor labels this dimension “embedding in existing reality,” by which he means that these individuals find the fullness of life in the pursuit of human flourishing, or ordinary life. Taylor notes that this form of embedding does not preclude the idea that God has other goals for humanity. Indeed, the embedded agent may have a sense that God does not have their best interests at heart. Persons embedded in existing reality have no ability to attain these other goals through their own means; their highest achievable good is an immanent good, and their agency is restricted to existing reality. Persons disembedded from existing reality consider a transcendent good as the highest achievable good; their agency is not

¹⁹⁷ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 55; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 149-150.

¹⁹⁸ Taylor writes: “We can even say that some features of the world, an animal or plant species, for instance, is central to the identity of a group. It may even be that a particular geographical terrain is essential to our religious life” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 150.

restricted to existing reality as they possess the capacity to achieve transcendent goals. In the following sections I will explore how Taylor uses these dimensions of embeddedness to form his Axial model of religion, and I will demonstrate that this model is necessary to understand Taylor's definition of religion that he advances in *A Secular Age*.

2.4.5 *Pre-Axial Religion*

Pre-Axial religions are characterized by their embedding of the human agent in each of the three dimensions of society, the cosmos, and existing reality.¹⁹⁹ Taylor explains that the pre-Axial person is incapable of seeing himself as a self that is separate from the society to which they belong. God relates to humankind through society, making collective ritual an important part of religious life. Another aspect of this religious life is the significance of the physical landscape. In pre-Axial religions the entire cosmos is seen as imbued with meaning, capable of affecting people physically and emotionally. Therefore, the pre-Axial agent sees themselves as embedded in the cosmos, constantly connected to the seen and unseen world that surrounds them. As part of the meaningful cosmos, ordinary human existence has a sense of purpose and value. The pre-Axial agent has no other goal than the betterment of this condition. They are thus embedded in reality as it exists for human beings. Divine purposes beyond that of human flourishing are not present in pre-Axial religion.

2.4.6 *Axial Religion*

Taylor contends that the three dimensional embedding of the agent found in pre-Axial religions, which posits that "Human agents are embedded in society, society in the cosmos, and the cosmos incorporates the divine", are present in Axial religions;²⁰⁰ however, these religions break the chain of embeddedness at several points. In terms of Western religion, this break hinges on the conception of the divine as part of the cosmos. For example, with the Jewish idea of a creation *ex nihilo* God is projected outside the cosmos; the relationship to God is independent of the cosmos. Consequently, "God can

¹⁹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 147-150.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 152.

become the source of demands that we break with ‘the way of the world’.”²⁰¹ It is possible to entertain goals other than that of human flourishing. For the pre-axial agent, who was embedded in existing reality and concerned with their ordinary life, the axial revolution initiates a disembedding from this dimension.

2.4.7 *Post-Axial Religions*

In contrast to Axial and pre-Axial religions, post-Axial religions disembed the agent from the social dimension. According to Taylor, the impetus for this form of disembedding was “the drive to reform” experienced in Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries.²⁰² The Reform movement brought a new individuality to religion, thus disembedding the agent from society. In addition, the Reform encouraged the conception of a meaningless universe, devoid of sacred locations, further disembedding the agent from the cosmos.²⁰³

Taylor notes that while firmly disembedded from both society and the cosmos, these religions partially re-embed the agent in existing reality. In affirming ordinary life as the locus of spiritual fulfilment, the Reformation re-imbued this dimension with meaning and significance. Moreover, later theological movements that posited God as design and human beings interpreters of this design allowed for the positing of human flourishing as an ultimate good. Taylor writes:

“This new relation is eclipsable, because the design underlying the moral order can be seen as directed to ordinary human flourishing. This transcendent aspect of the axial revolution is partly rolled back [...] only partly, because our notions of flourishing remain under surveillance in our modern moral view: they have to fit with the demands of the moral order itself: of justice, equality, non-domination, if they are to escape condemnation. Our notions of flourishing can thus always be revised. This belongs to our post-Axial condition.”²⁰⁴

To summarize post-Axial religions, they are frameworks which posit the agent as firmly disembedded from society and the cosmos, and partially re-embedded in existing reality. Post-Axial moral space stands open to both the immanent and the transcendent.

²⁰¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 156.

²⁰³ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 65.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 65

The language Taylor uses to describe the Axial model of religion seems to support of negative explanation of modernity. Human beings are disembedded – freed – from imaginary – illusory – social constructions that constrain or restrict their agency. Taylor thus seemingly contradicts himself; however, the categories of embedding and disembedding represent epistemic shifts, rather than losses or gains. The social imaginary is involved in both states of being. Disembedding does not imply the discovery of ultimate reality, only a change in the way persons imagine themselves to inhabit social, physical and moral space.

2.4.8 *Axial and Durkheimian Religions: Some Comparisons*

In total, Taylor defines seven different classifications of religion based on the ideas of Karl Jasper and Emile Durkheim. As illustrated above, these classifications are separated into two different models. Significant overlap between the models is evident, most strikingly between the paleo-Durkheimian social form and the pre-Axial varieties of religion. However, it can also be argued that the paleo-Durkheimian and Durkheimian religions are both forms of Axial religion, and that the neo-Durkheimian and post-Durkheimian religions represent variants of post-Axial religion. The perception of similarities between the two models may be attributed to the fact that both models classify religion based on its representation or interactions with society. I contend, however, that these models are quite dissimilar: the Durkheimian model focuses on the social functioning of religion; whereas, the Axial model identifies religion based on its implications for human identity.

The models represent two distinct of definitions of religion: a functional definition and a substantive definition. The Durkheimian model is functional: religion is explained in terms of its role, or lack thereof, in maintaining, structuring, or defining society. In contrast, the Axial model is substantive: religion is presented as a reflection of the human identity, which involves an understanding not only of social space, but also of physical and moral space.

By describing seven distinct classifications of religion, Taylor equates religion with plurality and proposes that both the functional and substantive understandings of religion

are malleable. Taylor's models demonstrate that a single substantive or functional definition of religion cannot account for the sheer variety of religious phenomenon, both past and present. Instead, he suggests that as the understandings of human society, agency, and selfhood evolve the function, and meaning, of religion changes. As I shall clarify below, perennial features of religion are virtually non-existent. Taylor thus employs multiple definitions of religion in *A Secular Age*, and utilizes both models of religion in his historical narrative, as no single definition would suffice.²⁰⁵

2.5 *Religion as a Distinction*

The third definition of religion is briefly mentioned in the introduction of *A Secular Age*. Taylor employs this definition throughout the text in reference to modern religion. He writes:

“[If] we are prudent (or perhaps cowardly), and reflect that we are trying to understand a set of forms and changes which have arisen in one particular civilization, that of the modern West ... we see to our relief that we don't need to forge a definition which covers everything 'religious' in all human societies in all ages. [...] [A] reading of 'religion' in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent is going to serve our purposes here [...] It is far from being the case that religion in general can be defined in terms of this distinction.”²⁰⁶

I propose that Taylor's definition of religion as the “distinction transcendence/immanence” is another formulation of the post-Axial religious form, which relies on a particular understanding of the term ‘transcendence’.

2.5.1 *The Significance of Transcendence*

According to Taylor, transcendence has three dimensions: (1) the “notion of a higher good”; (2) “belief in a higher power”; (3) the recognition of life “as going beyond the bounds of its ‘natural’ scope between birth and death,” such as the idea of the afterlife or reincarnation.²⁰⁷ The idea of transcendence, in any of these forms, is the only shared

²⁰⁵ Both models serve discrete purposes in Taylor's works, which is why he never considers combining them into a single system. In *Varieties of Religious Experience Today*, Taylor uses the Durkheimian model to critique and modernize William James' view of personal religion, and in *A Secular Age*, as we shall argue below, he relies on the existing Axial model to advance an third definition of religion that serves his specific purposes of exploring the new modes of religious life in modernity.

²⁰⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

feature Taylor identifies in all forms of religion.²⁰⁸ Taylor contends that all religions recognize both an immanent and transcendent dimension, in some form or another, as part of human reality.

Taylor uses “transcendence” interchangeably with “God” in both *A Secular Age* and *A Catholic Modernity?*; however, he recognizes that not all religions are centred on a deity. God and transcendence are interchangeable terms – in at least one direction – because the belief in God necessarily implies belief in at least one dimension of transcendence. In his conclusion to *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor explains that his decision to use the term transcendence stems from a desire to reach a greater audience. He writes:

“[How] could I ever have used such an abstract and evasive term, one so redolent of the flat and content-free modes of spirituality we can get manoeuvred into in the attempt to accommodate both modern reason and the promptings of the heart? I remember erasing it with particular gusto. Why ever did I reinstate it? What pressures led in the end to its grudging rehabilitation? Well, one was that I wanted to say something general, something not just about Christians. ... I needed a term to talk about all those different ways in which religious discourse and practice went beyond the exclusively human, and in exhaustion I fell back on ‘transcendent’ (But I haven’t given up hope of finding a better term).”²⁰⁹

As a blanket term, transcendence may refer to anything, and everything, non-immanent or eternal, including God. However, a belief in the transcendent is not equal to a belief in God. For instance, you may believe in an afterlife or in some continuation of consciousness after death without believing in God. Alternately, you may believe in a higher power that runs through all beings and connects us to the fabric of the universe without labelling this power God. You may even feel that there is a far greater good than the fullness of ordinary life and yet not identify God as the source of an internal call to pursue this goal. To believe in God, Taylor suggests, is to believe in at least one of the three dimensions of transcendence of which God is absolute source.

2.5.2 *Post-Axial Religion and the Transcendence/Immanence Distinction*

The implications of Taylor’s definition of transcendence and his definition of religion as a distinction between transcendent and immanent are relevant for the

²⁰⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, n781.

²⁰⁹ Taylor, Charles. “Concluding Reflections and Comments”. *A Catholic Modernity?*. Ed. James L. Heft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 105-106.

understanding of morality in modernity. According to Taylor, a person need not adhere to a transcendent framework, in which the constitutive good is transcendent, to be ‘open’ to transcendence. This person may approach transcendent goals, or the belief in a transcendent power, or a higher life, from an immanent framework. This idea is reflected in post-Axial religion, in which the agent is partially re-embedded in existing reality due to the decline in the transformation perspective. Post-Axial agents approach the world from an immanent frame, though they may recognize transcendent goods. As a reflection of this condition, post-Axial religions teeter on the edge of open and closed attitudes towards transcendence; while these religions may discredit the transformation perspective, they nevertheless articulate an open stance towards the transcendent in other areas, such as the belief in God or in an afterlife.

I propose that the definition of religion as the distinction between transcendent and immanent represents an articulation of the post-Axial religious form. In identifying modern religion as a distinction, Taylor is highlighting the duality between open and closed perspectives as *the* defining feature of religion in the modern age. This definition allows consideration of any movement or perspective that recognizes any form of transcendence as a type of religion in modernity. Such a definition once more reinforces his argument that religion has not declined in modernity, though its function and meaning have considerably changed.

2.6 *Conclusions: Universality and Plurality*

Taylor’s multiple definitions of secularization, secular, secularity, and religion reveal a fascination with etymology and terminology. As his deconstruction of the mainstream definition of secularization demonstrates, the meaning associated with specific terms is revelatory of an individual’s presumptive views. This observation is equally applicable to Taylor’s own definitions. For example, his polemical attitude towards anti-religious negative narratives of modernity and his positive estimation of religion is evident in his definition of secularization, and his definitions of secularity and religion display an attempt to render his narrative universally applicable.

Taylor's explanation of secularization ultimately amounts to a rigorous defence of his proposition that religious faith is relevant to modernity, though little else. He avoids insinuating a qualitative difference between modern and traditional faith, by maintaining an equal-yet-different analysis of the conditions of belief. I argue that Taylor's equal-yet-different approach is an attempt to generalize his narrative of modernity to the modern West.

I propose that Taylor characterizes the modern West with the term "secularity" in order to make his narrative explanation universally applicable. The suffix "ity" signifies that secularity may refer to the state, quality, or degree of being secular. Secularity suggests that the shift in time-consciousness has affected Western society in multiple, divergent ways. Taylor is thus able to refer to secularity in the singular, while proposing the recognition of multiple modernities throughout the world. Taylor suggests that the North Atlantic, Western world of Christian Heritage is by and large undergoing one form of modernity, which itself is the site multiple interpretations of the immanent frame that connects all inhabitants of the modern West to each other. The multiplicity of definitions of "secularization," "secular," "secularity," and "religion," in *A Secular Age* parallels the multiplicity of interpretations of the immanent frame in the modern West.

By equating his definitions with plurality, Taylor pre-emptively defends his narrative from accusations of homogeneity and avoids the pattern of unilinear theories of modernity perpetuated by the anti-religious negative narratives. Indeed, the case could be made that Taylor's definitions are more self-serving than informative. They are constructed so as to undermine the anti-religious negative narratives and support Taylor's narrative account of the development of the modern self and modern moral frameworks, which I will explore in the following chapter. Irrespective of the subjectivity of Taylor's writings his discussion of terminology reveals the dearth of adequate substantive definitions of religion, secularization, secular and secularity in the human sciences, and the necessity of establishing both substantive and functional definitions of these phenomenons.

CHAPTER 3

Past and Present Conceptions of God

Taylor's narrative of modernity maintains that religion is a relevant human practice in a context defined by secularity. According to Taylor, secularity signifies a condition of belief, in which the belief in God, or transcendence, is optional. He also defines religion as the belief, or acceptance, of transcendence in any of three manifestations: higher power, higher reality, or higher good. Taylor's hermeneutical approach dictates that his proposition, that religion is a relevant and meaningful modern human practice, must be demonstrated through an analysis of human self-interpretations.

To defend his thesis, Taylor must demonstrate that the practice of religion is relevant in modernity because the conception of transcendence, or God, is implicit in the modern understanding of human agency and selfhood. This argument is never explicitly articulated in Taylor's philosophy of identity, or narrative of modernity. I contend that the connection between transcendence and human identity is embedded in Taylor's moral theory, his concept of Axial religions, and his narrative account of modernity.

Taylor's narrative of modernity reveals that changes to the conception of human agency accompany changes to the conception of the divine, and vice versa. In this chapter, I will articulate the connection between the concept of transcendence, or God, and human identity in Taylor's moral theory and Axial model. I will also examine the changing conception of God and human agency in Taylor's narrative of modernity. My investigation will focus on the four philosophical/theological movements which Taylor identifies as the main contributors to the modern identity: (1) The Protestant Reformation, (2) Deism, (3) Naturalism, and (4) Exclusive Humanism. Finally, I will explore the implications of the modern identity, the "buffered self", for contemporary conception of God.

3.1 *Human identity and the Conception of Transcendence in Taylor's moral theory*

Taylor's philosophy of identity suggests that conceiving of the transcendent is innate to Western culture because the conception of selfhood and agency is connected to the conception of both God/transcendence and nature. This connection means that any articulation of human agency or selfhood conveys, either implicitly or explicitly, conceptions of both God and nature. Through this connection, Taylor suggests that the belief in God/transcendence –i.e. religion- is prevalent in modernity, because God-references are implicit in the conception of human agency.

According to Morgan, Taylor presents the belief in God as a perennial feature of western culture. He writes that Taylor's philosophy: "calls for the moral ontology that *in principle* incorporates diverse constitutive and life goods which make sense of our moral selfhood, and it describes the moral ontology that *in fact* includes God, reason, nature and much else."²¹⁰ In other words, Taylor's moral ontology presents God, reason, and nature as perennial features of human morality, though he denies such features exist.

Morgan suggests that Taylor's moral theory is designed to legitimize the moral authority of religion.²¹¹ His observation is validated by Taylor's weak explanation of the continued relevance of the transcendent to modern persons. Taylor presents the following justifications for this relationship: a nostalgic view of religion and belief that is prevalent in modernity,²¹² the threat of meaninglessness which accompanies closed frameworks,²¹³ and the possibility that faith can facilitate the achievement of moral goals.²¹⁴ However, these reasons are only further proof of the significance of transcendence for modern persons; they do not explain why individuals who live in societies that are constituted independently of the transcendent continue to find meaning in this dimension.

²¹⁰ Morgan, "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 52.

²¹¹ Morgan writes: "[Taylor's] understanding of our moral life, its development and its structure, provides religion with a kind of legitimacy that opens up once again an old avenue, the moral avenue, to the authenticity of the religious life and to religious belief." *Ibid.*, 50.

²¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 563-564.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 303.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 673.

Morgan provides one possible answer for the prevalence of God in the modern identity. He explains that God is a part of the Western moral ontology and is thus considered a ‘reality’. He writes: “Whatever the best account of our moral experience invokes is real, and since that account calls for self-independent goods or moral sources – nature, reason, God – then these are objectively real.”²¹⁵ God, nature and reason are depicted in Taylor’s narrative of modernity as existing; they are not merely abstract ideas which can be easily refuted or replaced by other ideas. As Morgan writes:

“God is one of those entities that has figured in our moral ontology, has provided a standard or ground of value, and has given our beliefs and actions meaning and significance. Indeed, God and the believer’s relation to God are conceived in ways that facilitate this configuration of moral selfhood.”²¹⁶

Taylor’s moral theory contends that human agents necessarily project the source of their morality – be it God, reason, or nature – as ‘objectively real’, and thus possessing characteristics which can be described and articulated. Taylor suggests that Western culture has inherited an understanding of human moral ontology from Christian culture, in which the God-human relationship is recognized as a reality. As a result of this heritage, God is projected as a reality by modern believers and non-believers alike. The conception of God is thus implicit in modern moral frameworks and, by extension, the modern identity.

3.2 *Products of the Axial Revolution: an undeniable God-reference*

In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor presents a theory of morality which suggests that the creation of new moral frameworks leads to new understandings of human agency and selfhood, as well as, new understandings of God and nature. Taylor also alludes to this relationship in *Modern Social Imaginaries* through the Axial model of religion, which implies that human self-understanding is determined by the conception of transcendence/immanence, cosmos/nature, and society/individual. Taylor explains in *Sources of the Self* that the notion of the constitutive good has shifted dramatically over the past 500 years from the understanding that moral goods are determined by God’s will to the idea that human beings determine meaning for and by themselves. He writes that “to trace

²¹⁵ Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse”. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 53.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

the developments of our modern visions of the good, which are in some respects unprecedented in human culture, is also to follow the evolution of unprecedented new understandings of agency and selfhood.”²¹⁷ New understandings of the good, however, do not occur on their own. The displacement of God as the source of morality required the development of new understandings of God and human agency.

The genesis of Axial religions is one such example of a pre-modern shift in the conception of God and human agency. These religions, Taylor writes, “call into question the received, seemingly unquestionable understandings of human flourishing, and hence inevitably also the structures of society and the features of the cosmos through which this flourishing was supposedly achieved. [...] Both the transcendent and the human good are reconceived in the process.”²¹⁸ Taylor explains the creation of a transcendent good in theological terms. He argues that by placing God above the cosmos, the early Judeo-Christian worldview radically altered the relationship between human beings, God, and nature for all future generations.

Redefining the relationship between God and nature ultimately changes our conception of the good and the parameters by which human beings define themselves. The shift from transcendent to immanent goods during the Axial revolution prompted a new understanding of the human agent as directed towards fulfilling divine goals. The axial person’s sense of meaning and significance is dependent on the understanding of these divine goals; their identity and human agency is contingent on the interpretation of God’s purposes.

The link between human identity and the conception of God and nature is a feature of the modern western world, not a universal attribute of the human condition. The modern, Western human identity is a social construct specific to a geo-cultural context that is highly influenced by a Judeo-Christian religious heritage.²¹⁹ The significance of the concepts of

²¹⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 105

²¹⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 152.

²¹⁹ Taylor writes: “I will steadily be arguing that Western modernity, including its secularity, is the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can’t be explained in terms of perennial features of human life.” *Ibid.*, 22.

God and nature are embedded in the modern western frameworks; the meaning of these terms finds expression in common language. Even for those who identify themselves as atheists, the concept of God must have significance for the repudiation of belief to have meaning. As Taylor notes, “there is an inescapable (though often negative) God-reference in the very nature of our secular age.”²²⁰ Taylor suggests that God-references are an undeniable feature of the modern human identity. To posit a conception of human agency independent of the conception of God would require a complete break with the Judeo-Christian worldview and all contemporary modern frameworks.

The Axial model of religion further suggests that human identity is always defined in relation to moral, social, and physical space. Embedded and disembedded agents possess different conceptions of human agency, God, nature, and constitutive goods. The notion of embeddedness affects an agent’s identity, as “it means the inability to imagine oneself outside a certain matrix.”²²¹ An agent’s selfhood is defined by the limits of the dimensions in which they are embedded; whereas to be disembedded from a given dimension means that an agent’s sense of self is defined independently of those dimensions. The religions created by these agents are a reflection of their self-understanding and moral frameworks. Taylor’s definition suggests that religious theology is always defined by the description of moral, physical, and social space, and that these ontological categories are innate to human self-understanding.

Taylor’s Axial model definition further implies that the theological conception of God and God’s purposes is influenced by the human understanding of morality, identity and human agency. For agents embedded in existing reality – pre-Axial and post-Axial agents – changes to the definition of a human being imply changes to the definition of God. For agents disembedded from existing reality – Axial and some post-Axial agents – the reverse relationship is also valid: changes to the conception of God and God’s purposes affects these agents’ self-understanding as they are capable of defining their agency in terms of transcendent moral goods, in addition to immanent goods.

²²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

²²¹ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 55; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 149-150.

Reinterpreting God's goals not only alters the notion of human selfhood, it also changes the conception of God and nature. Taylor writes in *Sources of the Self* that "any theology includes some notion of how we can come in contact with God or his purposes;²²² a radical change in this latter doctrine means an alteration in our understanding of God and creation as well."²²³ Taylor contends that to describe or interpret God's purposes is to articulate a conception of the divine. His moral theory proposes that, as a moral source, God is a reality. Taylor suggests that God's agency can be explained or described similarly to human agency: to explain either agent's moral motivation is to articulate something of their identity.

3.3 *A God Narrative*

Taylor's narrative of modernity demonstrates the connection between understandings of human agency and the conception of God. His master narrative of the modern identity focuses on four areas: the Protestant Reformation, the Deist Movement, the inception of Naturalism, and the rise of Exclusive Humanism. Each of these epistemic developments, Taylor explains, introduced new understandings of the good that radically changed the understanding of human agency and selfhood and the conception of God.

Taylor's narrative begins with the Protestant Reformation, in the late 15th and early 16th century, and extends to the early twenty-first century. The period referred to as "modernity" begins at the beginning of the 19th century. As Taylor refers to Victorians as contemporaries, I will use the Victorian era as a marker for the start of contemporary modernity.

3.3.1 *The Protestant Reformation*

According to Taylor, the modern age is the product of various changes in consciousness and human understanding that occurred around the time of the Protestant Reformation, in the early 16th century. At this time, the Catholic Church was the centre of

²²² In this passage Taylor is discussing the shift from deism to expressivism and romanticism – where the good is still conceived as God's purpose for humanity.

²²³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 370.

all religious life in Western Europe, though pre-modern beliefs in spirits, magic, and malignant forces lingered.²²⁴ Taylor writes:

“[...]cette presence de Dieu passait par la texture sociale. Car qui créait d’une autre façon l’impossibilité de la non-croyance: la défense contre le mal supposait la solidarité nécessaire au maniement de cette force positive. Faire intervenir la force de Dieu contre la foudre, c’était un acte de paroisse, et tout le monde devait y concourir. L’abstention était trahison.”²²⁵

Traditional society was divided into religious and lay vocations, each with its own understanding of the demands of Christian faith. While some practiced an ascetic or monastic way of life, the majority of the population worked to sustain the economic and reproductive needs of their communities. Such a dichotomy eventually created two forms within Western Christianity that were both distinct and complementary to one another.²²⁶

The Reformation profoundly altered these ways of life across much of Western and Central Europe, not only in countries which converted to Protestantism, but also in Catholic countries, where more rigorous religious demands were placed on lay society.²²⁷ As Taylor writes:

“Briefly summed up, Reform demanded that everyone be *real*, 100 percent Christian. Reform not only disenchant, but disciplines and re-orders life and society. Along with civility, this makes for a notion of moral order which gives a new sense to Christianity, and the demands of the faith. This collapses the distance of faith from Christendom. It induces an anthropocentric shift, and hence a break-out of the monopoly of Christian faith.”²²⁸

Taylor explains that for Reform to occur, new and unprecedented frameworks of meaning had to become available to a wide range of people.²²⁹ Taylor notes that itinerant friars, who

²²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 34-37.

²²⁵ Taylor, “Une place pour la transcendance” *Mutations Culturelles et Transcendence*. Ed. Pierre Gaudette. (Quebec: Université Laval, 2000), 7

²²⁶ For the ordinary lay person, life as a Christian meant partaking in Church activities at specific sacred times of the year and praying for the flourishing of his/her community. For the monk or nun, being a Christian meant renouncing profane goods and mundane pleasures for their eternal salvation and the salvation of their entire community. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 62-63.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 774.

²²⁹ Indeed, there had been several attempts to make over society before the 16th century; these included a growing emphasis since the first millennium on devotion and the Passion, and greater requirements for the confession of the laity imposed by the Church.

warned of the illusory pleasures of the flesh and the everlasting judgement of God after death, were largely responsible for changing the consciousness of the laity.²³⁰

Changing the religious behaviour of the elites and the laity involved not only the preaching of brimstone and hellfire, but the introduction of a new conception of the divine and of the human relationship to God. In enforcing a more rigorous Christianity, the Church made efforts to disenchant society of spirits and magic, which could be understood as a challenge to the hegemony of God's power.²³¹ The polemic against black magic eventually included any attempts to control the power of God in an object, including sacraments or relics.²³² In emphasizing the sovereignty of God and the hegemony of God's power, the Reformation sought to eliminate all pagan or pre-Christian spiritual elements from society. Furthermore, the Reformation initiated a new understanding of our primary mode of interaction with God: not through the manipulation of sacraments and relics, but through individual prayer.²³³

The Reformation emphasized salvation solely through God's grace, which meant that one should be confident in God's saving power alone, yet not "flatly complacent" that such salvation is certain.²³⁴ Inward prayer and piety were encouraged as the authentic means of connection to God, while public prayer and communal rituals were regarded by some as "mindless diversions from real piety."²³⁵ This reinterpretation of religious behaviour accompanied a new emphasis on behavioural and emotional discipline. Civilizing society became the focus of many religious reforms. Taylor explains that this shift in focus was influenced by a new vision of nature as created by God to function according to instrumental laws.²³⁶ He writes: "The world is God's creature. Moreover, it is an ordered whole [...] a vast field of mutually affecting parts. This has been designed to

²³⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 64-66.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 73.

²³² Taylor writes: "God could be understood to respond to the prayers of a holy person, but the notion that any old priest, however debauched, can control God's movements was utterly unacceptable. But then the same goes a fortiori for the manipulation of any charged objects, or for prayer to the Virgin or saints. God is free of his actions. This belongs to his sovereignty." Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 191-192; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 72-73.

²³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 70.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

work in certain ways, that is, to produce certain results,” such as the flourishing of all forms of life.²³⁷ Ultimately, the Reformation posited God’s purposes as unknowable: what little human beings could learn of them, they argued, must come from studying God’s creation, rather than looking for miraculous signs. Interpreting nature’s implicit design and living in reciprocity with it as “agents of instrumental reason” becomes the goal of human existence.²³⁸ To live in harmony with God’s design means imposing new ethical standards of civility and moral order on society.

Locating the human-divine relationship in the interpretation of design initiated a shift in the understanding of ethics away from the notion of divine law and towards the notion of a natural law, or moral order. Taylor cites Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and John Locke (1632-1704) as the originators of this idea in Europe. All living things, they argue, are designed for self-preservation; this was God’s intention in creating nature and human beings.²³⁹ Human beings are naturally inclined towards lawlessness and disorder, which distances them from God’s goal. To correct this flaw, human beings must strive to civilize society and act according to the principle of mutual benefit.²⁴⁰ This understanding of moral order considers all actions intended towards meeting God’s purposes for humanity – living an ordinary life – as having significance and meaning. As Taylor explains, “God wants us to be productive, and this means that we should give ourselves energetically and intelligently to some useful task.”²⁴¹ The Grotian-Lockian view proposes that human beings are moral agents, not because things matter to them, as Taylor argues, but because they are blessed with reason and therefore are capable of recognizing God’s intentions for humankind.

Taylor explains that unlike pre-modern idea of an immutable, eternal law, or the Indian concept of an inscribed social hierarchy, the Grotian-Lockian understanding of moral order is “a feature about us humans, rather than one touching God or the cosmos.”²⁴² The new view of the human agent was atomist: “the human agent was no longer to be

²³⁷ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 98

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

²³⁹ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 14-17.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 238.

²⁴² Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 11.

understood as an element in a larger, meaningful order. His paradigm purposes are to be discovered within. He is on his own.”²⁴³ In abstracting morality from the divine and relocating it in human nature, the notion of moral order prompts what Taylor calls the “anthropocentric shift”. He argues that this shift towards thinking of morality in purely human terms eclipses certain fundamental Christian ideas and eventually allows for secularity²⁴⁴ to arise.²⁴⁵

3.3.2 *The Deist Movement*

Taylor labels the Locke-inspired conception of God “Lockean Deism,” which understands God as sovereign and God’s purposes as knowable only through reason, this movement made the human subject its central focus and “sidelined”²⁴⁶ the notion of grace. Locke himself acknowledges God as significant for having graced humankind with reason, though his philosophy was concerned less with theology than human nature. Lockean Deism further proposes that only through applying reason and living according to natural laws of preservation and mutual benefit could humanity hope to be saved.

The Deist Movement, founded during the 17th century by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftsbury (1671-1713)²⁴⁷ and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746),²⁴⁸ diverges from the earlier “Lockean Deism” with Shaftsbury’s rejection of the notion of God as wholly sovereign to nature and humanity. Taylor describes Shaftsbury’s argument as follows: “The highest good doesn’t repose in any arbitrary will, but in the nature of the cosmos itself; and our love for it isn’t commanded under threat of punishment, but comes spontaneously from our being.”²⁴⁹ Shaftsbury contends that to be a moral agent, human beings do not need to understand God’s law; “right and wrong are just as fixed to standards in nature as are harmony and dissonance.”²⁵⁰ Human beings are moral agents because their

²⁴³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 193.

²⁴⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 295.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁴⁷ Taylor simply refers to him as “Shaftsbury” or “the third earl of Shaftsbury” throughout *Sources of the Self*.

²⁴⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 248.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 253.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

sense of morality is innate; they respond to good when they perceive it.²⁵¹ For Shaftesbury, “the key to goodness”²⁵² is human benevolence, which human beings pursue regardless of Divine edict. Morality is determined by love, not justice or discipline.

Taylor credits Hutcheson with elevating human benevolence to the highest moral good. Hutcheson states that God designed the universe “for the mutual good and happiness of its inhabitants,”²⁵³ and intended human beings to be predisposed to benevolence.²⁵⁴ Human beings are the very embodiment of the good. They need only rely on their natural moral inclination to be good; God’s grace is irrelevant to human morality.

During the eighteenth century developed what Taylor calls “Providential Deism,”²⁵⁵ a religious and theological movement that reflected the influence of Shaftesbury’s and Hutcheson’s moral theory on the conception of God. Their moral theory projects the source of morality within the human agent, thus rendering God “subordinate to a conception of happiness which is defined purely in creaturely terms.”²⁵⁶ Providential Deism proposes that human beings need not strive to understand the purposes of God, who is wholly unknowable, to be saved. God does not demand any more of humanity than “the proper fulfilment of our own nature;”²⁵⁷ therefore, human beings need only examine themselves to understand how to fulfil God’s plan.

Providential Deism further proposes that God does not intervene miraculously in nature or human history. God designed the universe to function as an autonomous whole. To claim that God intervenes in the universe is to question the perfection of God’s creation, and to question God’s own perfection. Taylor explains: “the design of an order for the good of instrumentally rational creatures leaves God no choice, as it were, but to establish laws

²⁵¹ Taylor writes: “It is the nature of rational beings to love rational order when they see it. The problem is their inability to see it. They are blinded by their focus on sensible things; or they have false opinions (*dogmata*) which take the form of passions. [...] As we were made by God, we love the good; but as we have become, we are drawn to evil.” Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 256.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁵⁴ Taylor writes: “He allows the supposition that God could have hooked us up differently [...] so as not to feel benevolently towards others or even to take delight in their torments.” *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁵⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 19.

²⁵⁶ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 267.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

which he will leave to operate without interference. He shows his goodness in refraining from miracles.”²⁵⁸ Providential Deism maintains that the relationship between God and humanity ought to be one of gratitude and love, rather than awe or devotion. Worshiping God requires only the demonstration of proper appreciation for God’s perfect design.

The Deist movement partially “eclipses”²⁵⁹ the significance of God by recognizing human nature as the source of morality, however, the movement is not exclusively humanist. Deists still maintain that God is greater than humanity because God is capable of “disinterested love”²⁶⁰ – a goodness that human beings may only aspire to realize. Taylor explains that human beings love God because “he’s good to us,”²⁶¹ whereas God loves humanity for no distinguishable reason: “God’s greatness exists precisely in his not needing us, but being disposed nevertheless to think exclusively for our good.”²⁶² Providential Deism proposes that God designed human beings with the capacity for instrumental reason, which God intends them to use to order their environment and manipulate the world. Though God is no longer conceived as the “guarantor that good will triumph ... in a world of spirits and meaningful forces,”²⁶³ God is still credited with saving humanity. The disenchantment, which, according to Deism, liberated Western civilization from misguided, oppressive and illusory moral theories, and led human beings to repossess instrumental reason, is energized by God’s providential design. In having foreseen the necessity of instrumental reason, God is responsible for human salvation through enlightenment.

3.3.3 *Naturalism*

Not all 18th century philosophers and theologians supported the Deist perspective of the world as perfect and harmonious. Radical utilitarians, such as Paul-Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723-1789),²⁶⁴ contend that Deism ignores the irrefutable presence of suffering. These philosophers argue that adhering to the idea of a transcendent good – such

²⁵⁸ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 273.

²⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 222-224

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁶³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 233

²⁶⁴ Taylor refers to Baron d'Holbach as simply “Hobach” throughout *Sources of the Self*.

as God's instrumental design – strips human beings of any real responsibility²⁶⁵.

Utilitarians propose that the only goods worthy of recognition are the pursuit of human pleasure and the avoidance of suffering²⁶⁶. Human life, they maintain, has meaning in the fulfilment of ordinary, physical pleasure and the experience of pain,²⁶⁷ which Deists dismiss as a consequence of deviating from God's plan.

Ordinary life eventually becomes coterminous with nature, and the Utilitarian notion of the pursuit of meaning in physical pleasure is transmuted into the quest for significance in the natural world. Rational disengagement, as proposed by Locke, is supplanted by expressivist forms of naturalism, which attempt to articulate the reflection of human experience in nature. The Naturalist movement emphasizes the central theme of an essential unity between nature and humankind. Naturalists, such as Rousseau, propose that “nature is fundamentally good, and the estrangement which depraves us is one which separates us from it.”²⁶⁸ Instrumentalism and objectification of the natural world alienate human beings from goodness. Nature supplants God as the source of moral order.

The Naturalist view of morality is similar to that of Locke, although Naturalism denies that human moral instincts were designed by God. Taylor explains that Naturalism proposes that “We must open ourselves up to the élan of nature within, as we had to open ourselves to God's grace on the orthodox theory.”²⁶⁹ According to the Naturalist conception of God, however, God's goodness is not sovereign to nature.²⁷⁰ Nature's goodness is fundamental and supersedes that of the divine. Naturalism proposes that alienation from nature is the cause of human malaise; suffering has meaning as an indication of the transgression of the essential unity between humanity and nature. Many Naturalists, such as Holbach, rejected religion as the instigator of humankind's alienation from the natural world, and were drawn instead to atheism.

²⁶⁵ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self*, 322-323

²⁶⁶ Utilitarians reject any notion of a higher, transcendent good.

²⁶⁷ Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self*, 341

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 357.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 370

²⁷⁰ “God, then, is to be interpreted in terms of what we see striving in nature and finding voice within ourselves. A slide to a kind of pantheism is all too easy, and this we see in the Romantic generation with the early Schelling, for instance, and later in another form with Hegel”. *Ibid.*, 371

Taylor warns that it would be a mistake to assume that naturalism contributed directly to modern secularization. The naturalist assertion that human beings must find the élan of nature within themselves is also the source of theistic re-interpretations of the concept of God. Taylor sees in Hegel (1770-1831) an attempt to reconcile a traditional theistic conception of God with a naturalist perspective. He writes:

“Like the theist, he wants to see the world as designed, as existing in order to fulfil a certain prospectus, the requirements of embodiment for *Geist*. But like the naturalists, he cannot allow a God who could design this world from the outside, who could exist before and independently of the world. His idea is therefore that of a God who eternally makes the conditions of his own existence.”²⁷¹

Hegel proposes that God and God’s creation are mutually contingent on one another, though in different ways.²⁷² His conception of God is a critique of the idea of disengaged reason. Similarly to proponents of Naturalism, Hegel contends that the human spirit is not distinct from nature. Human salvation lies in re-discovering the essential unity between God, humanity, and the physical world, not in the interpretation of an external design.

The notion of an essential unity between all of creation and God inspired other romantic philosophers, including Spinoza (1632-1677) and Goethe (1749-1832). These philosophers conceive of God as an impersonal cosmic force, ever-present in the universe. Naturalism was supplanted as a popular spiritual movement by the end of the 19th century due primarily to the spread of the Theory of Evolution. However, the conception of God as an impersonal cosmic force remains prevalent in many contemporary forms of popular spirituality.²⁷³ Taylor presents two reasons for the decline of Naturalism. First, Darwin’s proposal that a species’ survival is determined by competitive fitness undermined the idea of nature as a benevolent force.²⁷⁴ Secondly, the debate over evolution, which mostly involved fervent Exclusive Humanists and ardent, orthodox Theists, overshadowed the ideas of Deists and Naturalists, whose moral visions represented a compromise between the recognition of immanent and transcendent goods.

²⁷¹ Taylor, Charles. *Hegel and Modern society*.39

²⁷² See: Taylor, Charles. “Self-Positing Spirit” in *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge university press, 1977) 76-127.

²⁷³ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*, 391.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 388.

3.3.4 *Exclusive Humanism*

According to Taylor, Exclusive Humanism developed in 19th century Britain, where the ethic of individual freedom and mutual benefit were prevalent features of contemporary, moral frameworks.²⁷⁵ Exclusive Humanism emerged from a move to further “immanentize” these goods by dissociating them from nature and God,²⁷⁶ and attributing all morality to disengaged reason.²⁷⁷ Humanist thought does not represent an innovation in moral theory, so much as a re-interpretation of Naturalist and Deist conceptions of moral order and natural law in uniquely human terms.²⁷⁸

Humanist thinkers, such as Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873), claim that human beings recognize and desire to aspire to altruism because “they see it to be a higher, more evolved way of being.”²⁷⁹ To attribute the capacity for benevolence to God’s grace is to misplace the true source of our goodness.²⁸⁰ Taylor contends that:

“Exclusive humanism closes the transcendent window, as though there were nothing beyond. More, as though it weren’t an irrepressible need of the human heart to open that window, and first look, then go beyond. As though feeling this need were the result of a mistake, an erroneous world-view, bad conditioning, or worse, some pathology.”²⁸¹

According to Exclusive Humanism, religious belief has the capacity to render human benevolence base. Humanists maintain that acts motivated by faith are selfish: they stem from a desire to please or satisfy God, and cannot be qualified as altruistic. Belief corrupts humanity by preventing individuals from fully achieving an ethic of human benevolence.

For Taylor, the development of Exclusive Humanism in the late 19th century marks the beginning of the secular age. The rise in popularity of this ideology in mainstream society is indicative of the acceptance of a closed, immanent moral framework. Taylor contends that earlier humanist philosophies were only held by small portions of the elite classes. Moreover, the moral frameworks of these philosophies were not exclusively

²⁷⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 394.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 247.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 395.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 396.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 397.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 638.

immanent – ancient, humanist philosophers maintained transcendent moral ideals.²⁸² Exclusive Humanism, however, does not admit the possibility of a transcendent good, power, or reality. It posits strictly immanent moral goods, and views the world through a scientific, instrumental, and empirical lens.

Taylor reveals that, though Exclusive Humanism began with the intent of dissociating morality from religion and transcendence, it nevertheless articulates a conception of God. He explains that Exclusive Humanism fails to escape God-references for two reasons: “on one hand, unbelief and exclusive humanism defined itself in relation to earlier modes of belief [...] On the other hand, later-arising forms of unbelief, as well as all attempts to redefine and recover belief, define themselves in relation to this first path-breaking humanism of freedom, discipline, and order.”²⁸³ Exclusive Humanism defines itself as a rejection of the belief in God. To demonstrate the impossibility of belief, it must posit an understanding of the content of belief, thus producing a negative God-reference. Moreover, modern forms of religious belief have developed, which are highly influenced by Exclusive Humanism’s ideals. This association connects Exclusive Humanism, albeit unintentionally, to further, positive God-references. Consequently, Exclusive Humanism avoids neither positive, nor negative God-references and is thus, paradoxically, ontically dependent on that which it claims to be both impossible and corrupting of human morality.

According to Exclusive Humanism, God is a being who defies all instrumental, scientific, and empirical understandings of the physical universe, and, therefore, does not exist. The Exclusive Humanist portrayal of God is largely a caricature of the Old Testament God. God is not only the creator of the universe, but a constant manipulator of human history and the natural world. God’s power renders human freewill inconsequential; God’s guidance is necessary for human beings to behave morally. Exclusive Humanism relies on this description of an all-good, all-knowing, and all-powerful God to accentuate the ethical problem of theodicy. Taylor writes:

“The idea of blaming God gets a clearer sense and becomes much more salient in the modern era where people begin to think they know just what God was purposing in creating the world,

²⁸² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 245-246.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 269.

and can check the results against the intention. The issue as proposed in an atheist context inherits this clarity; only now it is we who are setting the standards, while assuming that what we know and can discern about human fate is all there is to know ... God is set up to flunk the atheist exam, as surely, as He was set up to pass that of Providential Deism with flying colours.”²⁸⁴

The Exclusive Humanist representation of God is negative because it only seeks to define God in terms of impossibilities. Exclusive Humanism thus delegitimizes the belief in God in three ways: (1) utilizing theodicy to construct a moral case against God; (2) drawing on science to discredit the plausibility of a Supreme Being or a creator; (3) defending the dignity of human freewill to present the very idea of God as an insult to the tradition of secular ethic and moral reasoning.²⁸⁵

3.4 *The Modern Buffered Self*

Taylor contends that the changes to the concept of God and nature initiated by the Protestant Reformation, the Deist Movement, Naturalism, and Exclusive Humanism have contributed to the creation of “the buffered self”.²⁸⁶ This term refers to the way in which modern persons inhabit social, temporal, and moral space as though there were some kind of buffer between them and everything else. Taylor writes: “As a bounded self I can see the boundary as a buffer, such that the things beyond don’t need to ‘get to me’, to use the contemporary expression. That’s the sense to my use of the term ‘buffered’ here. This self can see itself as invulnerable, as master of the meanings of things for it.”²⁸⁷ The buffered self is a uniquely modern form of identity, which is entirely contingent on the condition of secularity; however, this identity is frequently represented in Naturalist theory and anti-religious negative narratives as *the* natural, or basic, human condition.

Taylor explains that the buffered self is characterized by a sense of being disengaged from the external environment. Disengagement refers to the buffered self’s capacity to distance itself from its surroundings. Taylor writes: “For the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside

²⁸⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 388-389.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 387.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 38.

the mind.”²⁸⁸ Disengagement allows the self to ignore, or isolate itself from, the meaning, or significance, of other objects or persons. The disengaged self is capable of “objectifying” its surroundings and other agents. For the buffered self, Taylor writes, “objectification brackets the meanings and sets them aside. They no longer animate our enquiry. We as agents-living-meaning withdraw, as it were from this enquiry.”²⁸⁹ Taylor explains that the modern preoccupation with the first-person stance, “our use of the ‘I’ and the ‘ego’”, is a function of our disengaged perspective which attributes the most value to individual experiences, sentiments, and thoughts.²⁹⁰ Disengagement presupposes a division between the mind and body. This division allows for the buffered self to consider his own experience subjectively, as interior and unique, and objectively, by adopting a third-person perspective.²⁹¹ Disengagement thus transforms the self into an object that is not only worthy of scientific study, but one which needs rational contemplation and reflection to be adequately understood. According to Taylor, this idea has contributed to a negative impression of meaning and subjectivity within the human sciences.

3.4.1 *Disengagement and the Buffered Self*

The notion of disengagement presupposes a division between the body and the mind, in which resides the mysterious inner depths of individuals.²⁹² This idea is frequently accompanied by the presumption that reason and logic are superior attributes of the human agent.²⁹³ In modernity, agents are expected to demonstrate possession and mastery of these attributes through self-control and discipline.

According to Taylor, the valorisation of reason and freedom has resulted in modernity with the view that dignity, “our sense of ourselves as commanding (attitudinal)

²⁸⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 37.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 284.

²⁹⁰ Taylor, “Inwardness and the Culture of Modernity” *Philosophical Interventions in the Unfinished Project of Enlightenment*, 94

²⁹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 285

²⁹² Taylor writes: “with our reason, we determine what of our sensible experience is really trustworthy. what judges must be higher, so reason is king. Nothing is superior to reason in human nature.” Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 133.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 117-155.

respect,”²⁹⁴ resides in the capacity for rational self-control. Taylor explains that modern persons interact with others through a persona. They protect their personal feelings and emotions, which are considered weakness, by projecting an air of rational discipline. Taylor writes: “in this mutual projection we help each other to see ourselves as having attained this rational distance, and hence help each other to live up to this exalted ideal.”²⁹⁵ Modern social interaction requires the mutual projection of rational self-control; those who do not adhere to this convention elicit a sense of embarrassment and shock in others.

The concept of disengagement presupposes that human agents possess absolute freedom, or freewill, over their actions. This freedom is what enables the buffered self to exercise rational control over their behaviour, emotions, and, supposedly, their sense of morality. As Taylor explains, freedom accompanies “a sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves.”²⁹⁶ The concept of absolute freedom is an integral aspect of the modern identity.

In modern society, the freedom of the human agent is taken for granted in our conception of society, as founded by the collective agency of a sovereign people.²⁹⁷ In this sense, Taylor states, “freedom as a central good is overdetermined in the modern moral order: it is both one of the central properties of the humans who consent to and thus constitute society, and it is inscribed in their condition as the artificers who build their own social world.”²⁹⁸ The modern human identity presupposes that human beings construct their social reality, and can therefore exercise complete control over the moral order. However, Taylor maintains the modern interpretations of free will are incorrect: human beings do not determine morality for and by themselves. Morality is transmitted through moral frameworks of meaning. The buffered self accesses both open and closed interpretations of the immanent frame and therefore this self is capable of rendering both positive and negative conceptions of God.

²⁹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 16.

²⁹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 141.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 300.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁹⁸ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 80.

3.4.2 *God and the Buffered Self*

Taylor's description of the buffered self's conception of God lacks articulation. He does, however, imply the plurality of conceptions of God in modernity through his use of the term 'transcendence'. Taylor suggests that, in modernity, conceptions of God may involve any or all of the dimensions of transcendence: higher good, higher power, or higher reality. This multiplicity is evident in the plethora of new spiritual and religious traditions that developed after the Victorian era. Taylor writes:

"the gamut of intermediate position greatly widens: many people drop out of active practice while still declaring themselves as belonging to some confession, or believing in God. On another dimension, the gamut of belief in something beyond widens, fewer declaring belief in a personal God, while more hold to something like an impersonal force; in other words a wider range of people express religious beliefs which move outside Christian orthodoxy. Following in this line is the growth of non-Christian religions, particularly those originating in the Orient, and the proliferation of New Age modes of practice, of view which bridge the humanist/spiritual boundary, of practices which link spirituality and therapy. On top of this more and more people adopt what would earlier have been seen as untenable positions, e.g., they consider themselves Catholic while not accepting crucial dogmas, or they combine Christianity with Buddhism, or they pray while not being certain they believe."²⁹⁹

Due to the plurality of moral frameworks, the influx of non-Christian religions, and the atomism of the buffered self, the possibilities of the conception of God in modernity are multiple, as Taylor's example illustrates.

The conceptions of God in modernity are limited only by the conception of the human agent. For this reason, Taylor contends that traditional religious practices and attitudes are waning, though belief in the transcendent remains relatively undiminished.³⁰⁰ The idea that human beings naturally possess the features of disengaged freedom and instrumental reason has implications for a positive conception of God. Modern persons have difficulty conceiving of a God who contradicts the laws of nature or physics, or who imposes his absolute will upon human kind. A positive conception of God must therefore correspond to a modern comprehension of human agency and selfhood.

The features of the buffered self have consequences for the conception of God in modernity. The buffered self approaches the world from a distance, confident in their

²⁹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 513.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 535.

ability to disengage from his surroundings and impose order on the world while possessing a sense of invulnerability rooted in their sense of absolute freedom.³⁰¹ As Taylor writes, “the buffered self can form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.”³⁰² The notion of the mind as the primary location of the human-divine relationship,³⁰³ which has been prevalent since Augustine (354-430), also affects the conception of transcendence in modernity.

The mind-centric focus of the buffered self is combined with a tendency to rationalize and objectify human experience. The combination of these features results in a “‘rationalized’ conception of God, similar to that of Exclusive Humanism, as the manifestation of the childish need for comfort.”³⁰⁴ Locating religious life within psychological behaviour, Taylor contends, is a common trend within the human sciences. For instance, Martha Nussbaum portrays the aspiration to transcend the immanent frame as a psychological phenomenon, which presents some problems for the modern persons. Taylor writes: “she sees the roots of our desire to transcend our ordinary condition in the unease and fear we experience in our finitude, our limitations, our neediness, our vulnerability.”³⁰⁵ Nussbaum argues that the goal of transcendence detracts for the actual human condition, rendering persons incapable of enjoying ordinary life.³⁰⁶ Evidently, Nussbaum locates the aspiration for transcendence within the self. She presents this aspiration as a psychological phenomenon, which should be reoriented towards overcoming the fears and concerns that are the source of this desire: “what we need is ‘transcendence ... of an internal and human sort.’”³⁰⁷ Nussbaum’s argument resembles that of Exclusive Humanism, with the exception that she recognizes transcendence as a goal compatible with

³⁰¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 37-38.

³⁰³ Taylor writes: “With our reason, we determine what of our sensible experience is really trustworthy. what judges must be higher, so reason is king. Nothing is superior to reason in human nature.” Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 133

³⁰⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 563-564.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 625.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 626.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 627.

modernity and the buffered self. Nussbaum's argument is an example of the multiple conceptions and interpretations of transcendence available to modern persons.

3.5 *Conclusion: The Perpetuation of Reform*

For Taylor, modernity begins with the radical alterations to the common moral framework brought on by the Protestant Reformation. The new understandings of society, nature, and God introduced during this period resonate today. It is necessary to study the Reform to understand the conditions that initiated re-interpretation of the constitutive good. The Reform also initiated the conditions for the re-interpretation of morality. Morgan writes:

“To understand ourselves fully and properly, we need to uncover what these sources are for us, how they arose, and how they function. In the modern world, after the eighteenth century, they are three: nature; reason and God, and the three occur in various modes and shapes and in various interrelationships. God, conceived in different ways and in a variety of relationships with the self, has been and continues to be an influential moral source for modern agents.”³⁰⁸

The eclipse of God as a moral source cannot be considered accidental. At several points in history, there have been conscious attempts to replace God with nature or reason. The significance of the concept of God, however, has not abated. Modern persons continue to conceive of God as a reality because the idea of God as a constitutive good remains comprehensible, despite the displacement of God from mainstream moral frameworks.

Taylor's narrative represents an attempt to correct the historical account of anti-religious negative narratives; however, his description of the past is equally limited. Taylor's narrative focuses on the historical continuation of three goods introduced during the Reformation: the ethic of mutual benefit, the affirmation of ordinary life, and human benevolence. This emphasis often results in the portrayal of two distinct goods as equivalent or in the conflation of multiple goods. Taylor equates the ethic of mutual benefit with the ethic of freedom and the principle of equity and represents sexual liberation as a form of the affirmation of ordinary life.³⁰⁹ Furthermore, Taylor ignores or insufficiently

³⁰⁸ Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse”. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 55.

³⁰⁹ Taylor writes: “Summing up, we can say that the order of mutual benefit holds (1) between individuals [...] The benefits (2) crucially include life and the means to life [...]; it is meant (3) to secure freedom, and easily

addresses many significant ethical debates and moral movements that do not directly involve these four goods, including women's suffrage, abortion, and racial and gender equality. His focus suggests that the only significant moral goods to affect modernity and secularity are the three highlighted above. Consequently, Taylor's narrative may be as ethically limited as the anti-religious negative narratives. Unlike the anti-religious negative narratives, however, Taylor does not presume to have addressed the whole picture, only to have more accurately represented the historical genesis of the modernity's immanent frame.

More significantly, Taylor's narrative suggests that the Reformation's greatest influence on modernity was the introduction of the idea of society as an imperfect project. Awareness of this idea is absent in many negative narratives, as at the very basis of negative narrative is the assumption that societies are continuously focused on refinement and in the process slough off whatever ideas or constructs that prevent them from this goal. Each philosophical movement that followed reform – Deism, Naturalism, and Exclusive Humanism – expounds upon the notion that society needs reform. The anti-religious negative narratives suggestions for reform are potentially dangerous, in Taylor's estimation, because they deny the significance of the transcendent for the understanding of human agency. The following section will explore Taylor's objections to the secular humanist plans for reform, and reveal the details of Taylor's solution for modernity.

finds expression in terms of rights [...] (4) these rights, this freedom, this mutual benefit is to be secured to all participants equally." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171.

CHAPTER 4

Dilemmas and Solutions for Modernity

Taylor's definition of secularity refers to the unavoidable presence of plurality in the lives of modern persons. In modernity, belief in the transcendent is optional, and no longer obvious or unquestionable. This change in the condition of belief has equalized unbelieving and believing frameworks of meaning. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor explains that the reality of plurality interacts with our view of modern society as homogeneous, ordered by universal and impersonal ideals, to produce a "fragilizing effect."³¹⁰ Fragilization refers to the weakening of all moral and spiritual positions in modernity, such that modern persons have difficulty articulating their position on any issue of moral significance.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor proposes a solution to the problem of fragilization, which also resolves the ethical dilemmas of violence and suffering. Secular humanist, anti-religious, negative narratives attribute these ills to religion; they argue that religion prevents the realization of human goods, and causes violence and suffering. Taylor argues that their interpretation of religion is incorrect. He suggests a re-interpretation of Christianity that resolves all three modern problems.

This chapter will explore and analyze Taylor's solution for modernity. I will examine the axes of rebellion within the buffered self, which perpetuate tension between open and closed interpretations of the modern moral order, and I will explore the affect of fragilization on the modern condition of belief. I will then describe the forms of critique employed in the conflict between open and closed interpretations, and the parties involved, situating Taylor's perspective within this landscape. Finally, I will explain how Taylor's solution for modernity constitutes a re-interpretation of Christian faith, which is reflective of Taylor's lived experiences.

³¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 304.

4.1 *Rebellions of the Buffered Self*

According to Taylor, the buffered self is caught between open and closed interpretations of the modern moral order and is attracted to both positions. Taylor writes: “The whole culture experiences cross pressures, between the draw of the narratives of closed immanence on one side, and the sense of their inadequacy on the other, strengthened by encounter with existing milieu of religious practice, or just by some intimations of the transcendent.”³¹¹ Furthermore, the common moral framework of modernity is polarized by goods that emphasize the internality of moral sources, and goods that require locating meaning beyond the self. Modern persons feel compelled to choose between adopting a closed world structure perspective, and confirm their spiritual intuition, which demands some recognition of the transcendent. The tension between open and closed interpretations of the modern moral order thus heightens the fragilizing effect of plurality, such that the presence of multiple moral frameworks reduces the ability of modern persons to conduct strong evaluation, as opposed to simply offering a greater array of choices.

4.1.1 *Closed Immanent frameworks and the Buffered Self*

The modern buffered self holds disengagement and rational self-control as goods, which are inherent capacities of human agency. The inward projection of the constitutive good has resulted in the immanentization of modern moral frameworks. This immanentization is evidenced in a number of modern practices, specifically the economy and the justice system. According to Taylor, these practices reflect the embedding of the ethic of mutual benefit and human benevolence in an exclusively immanent frame.³¹² Taylor identifies the immanentization of these goods as contributing to the appeal of anti-religious negative narratives in modernity.

Taylor proposes that the economy is driven by the notion that individuals need access to the means to sustain life, and a system of production, exchange, and consumption is the best way to guarantee such access. As Taylor writes:

³¹¹ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 595; see Morgan’s discussion of epiphany: Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse”. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 56-61.

³¹² Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 72-76.

“[...] the economic now defines a way we are linked together, a sphere of coexistence that in principle could suffice to itself, if only disorder and conflict didn't threaten. Conceiving of the economy as a system is an achievement of eighteenth century theory, [...] but coming to see the most important purpose and agenda of society as economic collaboration and exchange is a drift in our social imaginary that [...] continues to this day.”³¹³

The economy is representative of the idea that mutual benefit is an ideal that society should uphold. Moreover, the economy reinforces the notion that achieving the ideal of mutual benefit requires the participation of free, disengaged individuals. The existence of mutual benefit is presented as contingent on human social interactions; and thus conceived as an exclusively human good. The recognition of this good as one of the highest aspirations of modern human society is evidence of the immanentization of moral frameworks.

The broad acceptance of human benevolence as a good is evident in the widespread insistence on the necessity of social justice and human rights. Taylor states that this ethic is virtually undeniable in modernity: “we agree surprisingly well, across great differences of theological and metaphysical belief, about the demands of justice and benevolence, and their importance.”³¹⁴ In modernity, human benevolence is considered a necessary good that cannot be entrusted to voluntary action; the ethic of human benevolence is therefore enshrined in various civil constitutions, charters of rights, and institutions, such as the Red Cross and the United Nations. Taylor explains that the modern interpretation of human benevolence suggests that this good is contingent on disengagement and the rational control of human agency. He writes: “disengagement itself, by freeing us from the confused, perturbed mass of personal desires, cravings, envy, liberates a universal benevolence in us.”³¹⁵ Human benevolence flourishes through the exercise of rational control over sentiment and the bracketing off of personal prejudices.

Unlike the 18th century Naturalist perspective, which posited human benevolence as a constitutive good that originates in nature, the modern perspective maintains reason and disengagement as constitutive goods, which allow for the good of human benevolence to exist. Both the source and the means of achieving human benevolence are thus projected as within the agent. The immanentization of human benevolence is further reinforced in the

³¹³ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 76.

³¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 514.

³¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 251.

modern era by its association with purely human ends. The popularization of human benevolence by secular organizations suggests that terminating suffering, curing disease and eliminating poverty are the only authentic goals of human benevolence.

Taylor contends that the immanentization of the buffered self's moral framework and eclipse of transcendent goals has contributed to the appeal of anti-religious negative narratives. Modern persons are compelled to accept the anti-religious negative narratives' representation of modernity because it coincides with their understanding of human agency and morality as contingent on the exercise of disengaged freedom and rational control.³¹⁶ For those same reasons, many individuals agree with the anti-religious negative narratives suggestion that religion and transcendence are damaging to human society. Taylor writes:

“From the eighteenth century, [...] we see the reaction which identifies in a strongly transcendent vision of Christianity a danger for the goods of the modern moral order. Strong Christianity will demand allegiance to certain theological beliefs or ecclesiastical structures, and this will split a society which should be intent simply on securing mutual benefit.”³¹⁷

The belief in the transcendent is an issue of contention because there is concern that it will detract from the modern moral vision; or worse, result in a regression of society and social norms, eclipsing freedom and beneficence.³¹⁸ Taylor contends that unbelief represents a more justifiable option for many modern persons, as it provides an affirmation of human agency, self-determining freedom and the ethic of mutual benefit.

4.1.2 Moral axes of rebellion against closed frameworks

Taylor maintains that although the modern understanding of human agency and selfhood are compatible with a closed world structure perspective, there are some aspects of the modern identity and moral order that serve as axes of rebellion against a closed interpretation of the immanent frame. Taylor writes:

“what we share is what I have been calling the ‘immanent frame’; the different structures we live in: scientific, social, technical, and so on, constitute such a frame in that they are part of a ‘natural’, or ‘this-worldly’ order which can be understood in its own terms, without reference to the supernatural or transcendent. But this order itself leaves open whether, for purposes of

³¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 560.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 546.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 560-563.

ultimate explanation, or spiritual transformation, or final sense-making, we might have to invoke something transcendent. It is only when the order is “spun” in a certain way that it seems to dictate a “closed” interpretation.”³¹⁹

The modern buffered identity, on its own, does not determine this interpretation; a closed interpretation of the immanent frame requires the influence of a secularist spin. According to Taylor, the ethic of authenticity and the ethic of human benevolence, when considered independently of the ethic of mutual benefit, represent two axes of rebellion against the closed interpretation of the immanent frame.

4.1.3 *The Ethic of Authenticity*

Taylor identifies the ethic of authenticity as a moral vision that originates from the same philosophical background as the buffered self, and is the most recent addition to the modern moral order, having become normative in society only after the Second World War. The ethic of authenticity refers to the idea that to be “true and full human beings”, individuals must listen to their inner voice and follow their own path in life;³²⁰ meaning and fulfilment can only be found through discovering the true, authentic self. The ethic proposes that a person’s inner depths are meaningful, and their significance is revealed through emotions, desires and feelings³²¹. In this sense, the ethic of authenticity is contingent on the notion of disengagement; it presupposes that selfhood is bounded, unporous, and unique to each individual agent. The ethic’s valorisation of the expression of human emotion, however, conflicts with the buffered self’s understanding of dignity as merited through self-control and rational discipline.³²²

Taylor credits Herder, who “put forward the idea that each of us has an original way of being human,” with the origination of the ethic of authenticity.³²³ According to Herder, the originality of human ontology means that “I am called upon to live my life in [my] way, and not in imitation of anyone else’s. But this gives a new importance to being true to

³¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 594.

³²⁰ Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 26.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

³²² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 476.

³²³ Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 28.

myself. If I am not, I miss the point of my life, I miss what is being human for *me*.”³²⁴

The modern ethic of authenticity requires that individuals view life as a quest for deeper meaning, which may be discovered through self-discovery and the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Taylor identifies within the ethic of authenticity a strong axis of rebellion against the closed interpretation of the immanent frame. The ethic maintains that meaning and significance are attainable through immanent means –i.e. self-discovery. The content of this search, however, is not forcibly self-referential.³²⁵ Following a unique and authentic path may direct individuals to sources of meaning that reside outside of the self, and even outside of the immanent frame. For instance: individuals may pursue self-investigation in the hopes of a more direct, personal and passionate relationship with God.³²⁶ Taylor explains that when the ethic of authenticity is merely self-referential, meaning is located exclusively within the individual self, and the ideal of authenticity is trivialized. For an idea or object to have meaning, its significance must be intelligible to others. Meaning is a shared phenomenon. A purely self-referential ethic ignores the necessity of the external sources of recognition, and affirms the singular power of the individual to determine what matters to them. Taylor writes:

“In a flattened world, where the horizons of meaning become fainter, the ideal of self-determining freedom comes to exercise a more powerful attraction. It seems that significance can be conferred by *choice*, by making my life an exercise in freedom, even when all other sources fail. Self-determining freedom is in part of the default solution of the culture of authenticity, while at the same time it is its bane, [...] this sets up a vicious circle that heads us towards a point where our major remaining value is choice itself. But this [...] deeply subverts both the ideal of authenticity and the associated ethic of recognizing difference.”³²⁷

A self-referential ethic of authenticity threatens the modern self with the abyss of meaninglessness. Taylor maintains that the act of determining goods is not significant without the mutual recognition that those chosen goods possess meaning. The ethic requires that human beings locate meaning outside of the self, in shared objects or concepts. The ethic of authenticity is thus a site of rebellion against closed immanent moral frameworks,

³²⁴ Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 29.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81-82.

³²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 489.

³²⁷ Taylor, *Malaise of Modernity*, 69.

because it requires that human beings look beyond themselves to find meaning. Moreover, this ethic demands that modern individuals ignore the claims of external authorities and follow their intuition. This demand encourages modern persons to avoid secularist spin; thus preventing a closed interpretation of the immanent frame from becoming mandatory in modernity.³²⁸

4.1.4 *Human Benevolence*

The second site of rebellion can be found in the Romantic understanding of human benevolence as the natural inclination to love and sympathize with others. Taylor explains that the buffered self's disengaged stance to suffering, stands as an anathema to the Romantic conception of benevolence. He writes:

“[...] a too benign picture of the human condition leaves something crucial out, something that matters to us. There is a dark side to creation [...] even where a voice of faith wants to deny that this is the last word, as with Christianity, we cannot set aside the fact that this is what we live, that we regularly experience this as ultimate. All great religions recognize this, and place their hopes in a beyond which doesn't simply deny this, which takes its reality seriously”³²⁹. The Romantic view of human benevolence chafes against the buffered self's disengaged persona, it demands the recognition of suffering as meaningful and significant. To simply bracket off the experience of pain is in some way to cheapen life, to render it shallow.”³³⁰

Taylor argues this understanding of the ethic of human benevolence requires the recognition of suffering as a meaningful experience, which need not be eliminated, but transcended. Human benevolence, therefore, is a site of rebellion against the closed interpretation of the immanent frame because it recognizes the significance of a transcendent reality, which goes beyond suffering and pleasure.

4.1.5 *Tensions in the interpretation of the immanent frame*

Taylor's portrayal of the buffered self demonstrates the tension between closed and open interpretations of the immanent frame in modernity, and the appeal of anti-religious negative narratives, which present the former interpretation as normative. Taylor writes:

³²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 509

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 319.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 318.

“So deeply has the narrative of human progress become embedded in our world that it would indeed be a frightening day in which all faith in it was lost. Its embedding is attested in much everyday vocabulary, in which some ideas are described as ‘progressive’, others as ‘backwards’; some views are those of today, others are positively ‘mediaeval’; some thinkers are ‘ahead of their time’, others are still in a previous century, etc.”³³¹

While much of the narrative content of the anti-religious negative narratives is already embedded in modern culture, Taylor explains that the anti-religious sentiment of this perspective is not. He argues that a purely immanent frame can result in a sense of malaise; modern persons may feel a “sense of fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance”, or they might perceive the “flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives, and [...] the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.”³³² Taylor maintains that remaining open to the transcendent is advantageous to modern society, as finding sources of significance and meaning within a closed immanent frame is too difficult for many persons. Forcing such an interpretation on modern society, he warns, will have negative consequences for future generations.

4.1.6 *Fragilization and belief*

Taylor explains that the tension between closed and open interpretations of the immanent frame has resulted in the fragilization of belief. The diversity and religious plurality of modern western societies is an aggravator, and not the catalyst, of the fragilization effect. Taylor writes: “The fact is that this kind of multiplicity of faiths has little effect as long as it is neutralized by the sense that being like them is not really an option for me. As long as the alternative is strange and other, perhaps despised, but perhaps just too different [...] becoming *that* isn’t really conceivable for me.”³³³ Religious and spiritual traditions normally resist dissolution into one another.

Modern society, however, encourages “maximum homogeneity” through the demand for rational discipline and the insistence on universalized values, such as the ethic of mutual benefit.³³⁴ Taylor writes: “what is the new framework? [...] Human beings, forming societies under the normative provisions of the Modern Moral Order, and fulfilling

³³¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 717.

³³² *Ibid.*, 309.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 304.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

their purposes by using what Nature provides, through the aid of accurate knowledge of this Nature, and [...] Technology.”³³⁵ In combination with the notion that society can be ordered and structured to fit instrumental purposes this new framework fosters a sense that there is only one way to achieve moral goals. In this context, radical plurality becomes a source of fragilization. Faced with the pressure of universal goals that demand a certain degree of conformity and the alternate pressure of the ethic of authenticity to avoid anything that hints at convention, including the inherited traditions of previous generations, the multiplicity of moral frameworks intensifies. Modern society thus becomes “prone to change.”³³⁶ Taylor writes:

“It is a pluralist world, in which many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other. It is a world in which belief has lost many of the social matrices which made it seem ‘obvious’ and unchallengeable. [...] We could say that this is a world in which the fate of belief depends much more than before on powerful intuitions of individuals, radiating out to others.”³³⁷

When belief is no longer obvious, the decision to believe or not to believe is subjected to the same discriminatory process used in determining all other meaningful life choices: that of strong evaluation.

According to Taylor, William Clifford first articulated the idea that belief is an ethical choice in 1877. He proposed that persons should not believe in God without sufficient evidence.³³⁸ Taylor contends that Clifford’s thesis is evidence of a change in the interpretation of belief; this change “is being passed off as a simple discovery, which in fact is much more like a new construction.”³³⁹ The anti-religious negative narrative account of this shift attributes the change in the understanding of belief, and the subsequent development of atheism, to science; but according to Taylor this attribution is a false and “ill-grounded view”³⁴⁰. The change in the interpretation of belief, Taylor argues, is the

³³⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 294.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 304.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 531.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 563.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 565.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 565.

result of the shift to an immanent moral framework and the introduction of the buffered self³⁴¹.

Taylor explains that in the context of secularity, a person's sense of morality and identity influences their decision to believe. The theory expounded by the anti-religious negative narratives - that science has disproven the existence of God and has led to a decline and regression of faith - is evidence of the immanent moral framework underlying the buffered self. This framework, in combination with an understanding of religion as authoritative, supernatural and superstitious, Taylor expects that:

“some people see no place in this kind of world for belief in God. A faith of this kind would have to make one an outsider, an enemy of this world, in unrelenting combat with it. Thus, one is either thoroughly in this world, living by its premises, and then one cannot really believe in God; or one believes, and one is in some sense living like a resident alien in modernity.”³⁴²

The restricted interpretation of religion and morality in modernity produces the appearance that religion and modernity are incompatible. Religion is portrayed as incongruent with exclusively human goals and this view influences the modern person's decision to believe.

According to Taylor, those who argue that their choice is determined by science are in actuality expressing a belief that science and instrumental reason are higher goods than faith, and it is therefore better to be an atheist.³⁴³ Similarly, the sentiment that belief is childish is an expression of the valorisation of disengaged freedom and autonomy to which the belief in a supernatural power is an affront.³⁴⁴ Taylor maintains that studies of modern theists reveal that scientific arguments do not diminish their faith. He writes: “what emerges from all this is that we can either see the transcendent as a threat, a dangerous temptation, a distraction, or an obstacle to our greatest good. Or we can read it as answering to our deepest craving, need, fulfilment of the good.”³⁴⁵ The challenge for many individuals lies in striking a balance between the recognition of transcendent goods and immanent

³⁴¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 566.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 569.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 571.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 561.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 548.

goods, leading them to perhaps deny the existence of God while affirming a sense of a higher power, or basing their lives around a vision of a higher good.³⁴⁶

The belief in God, or the transcendent, Taylor suggests, is an affirmation of our moral values and results from the process of strong evaluation.³⁴⁷ He maintains that few people consider their opinion on belief meaningless or insignificant.³⁴⁸ Taylor writes:

“The debate between metaphysico-religious positions is driven mainly by people’s sense of their ethical predicament in this sense. It is this which largely determines the positions they adopt, those they turn away from, the conversions they undergo from one to another; the cross-pressure they feel between two which are both unacceptable, which pushes them to devise a new position, and which drives the Nova. Even when it seems to be driven by something else, and perhaps partly is, an important role is being played by this debate.”³⁴⁹

Taylor reveals morality as the motivation and foundation for belief in modernity, though he recognizes that other “alien motivations are always intervening as we struggle with these issues, but not in a massive and organized way as they do where identities are at stake.”³⁵⁰

Taylor contends that religious belief is almost uniquely a moral issue, and that most modern persons are not swayed by other factors. The belief in God, therefore, involves much greater issues than the question of God’s existence. As Morgan writes: “This is not, as Taylor warns, a matter of proving God’s existence from facts about the world; rather God is ‘accepted’ as a constitutive good or moral source only when we see what is gained by doing so and when we are thereby ‘moved by our relation to God.’”³⁵¹ In this light, belief can be understood as a good that is evaluated in the same way as any other moral goal.³⁵²

4.2 Critiques of Belief

Taylor identifies two forms of critique which are common in the debate between closed and open interpretations of the immanent frame. These critiques are moral

³⁴⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 550-566.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 544.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 600.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 603.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 604.

³⁵¹ Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse”. *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 64.

³⁵² For some belief is a hypergood, it is incomparably higher than other goods. Secular, modern moral frameworks, however, do not portray belief as a good. In modernity, belief sits firmly within the scope and breadth of strong evaluation, is frequently ranked below other goods.

evaluations; however, they are often presented by their proponents as logical and rational arguments. The first critique states: “I see a genuine fullness here, that is, something which is deeper, solidier than the run of ordinary life, but I want to point out that there are things which yield a still higher, deeper, more powerful fullness; you shouldn’t be making your present fullness the whole goal of your life.”³⁵³ This sort of critique recognizes the legitimacy and value of the other’s point of view.

In contrast, the second critique views the other points of view as inherently flawed. The second critique states: “I see the kind of fullness you’re supposing, and I also see that you are getting some kick out of this, but the two are not the same. You think you’re getting fulfilment, but you’re fooling yourself, passing yourself off with a simulacrum.”³⁵⁴ The latter critique supposes that there is only one correct moral vision, whereas the former recognizes the merits of other frameworks.

Taylor’s discussion of the aesthetics and epiphanic art in *Sources of the Self* is representative of both critiques. Taylor suggests that some modern ideals – such as the aesthetic sensibility – are contingent on the recognition of transcendence. He contends that the aesthetic sensibility is only partly satisfied by a purely immanent frame, as there remains the question of whether or not a richer experience of beauty may be found in a religious register. Furthermore, Taylor proposes that there is something epiphanic in art that requires the recognition of transcendent or external moral sources to be grasped.³⁵⁵ Taylor thus contends that human beings will always be dissatisfied with a purely immanent frame, as it limits human experience to existing reality, and ignores the historical influence of spirituality and religion in Western art.

Taylor’s suggestion that a more profound experience of art and beauty may lie in a transcendent frame is an example of the first critique. His suggestion does not devalue the immanent experience of aesthetics; however, he presupposes that a transcendent experience of art is qualitatively higher than the immanent experience of art. In contrast, his assertion

³⁵³ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 601

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 601.

³⁵⁵ Taylor writes: “The something which the epiphanic art brings to presence is a source of meaning – it is a constitutive good –and it is brought to presence in a unique and non-reducible way”. *Ibid.*, 607.

that artistic epiphanies are inaccessible in a purely immanent frame³⁵⁶ presupposes is an example of the second form of critique. Taylor's critique suggests that the immanent observer is incapable of finding epiphanic meaning in art, and that their experience of art is qualitatively lower than that of a transcendent observer.

4.2.1 *Parties involved in the debate over belief*

Taylor is not the only party engaged in the debate between transcendence and immanence in modernity. He explains that the greater debate in intellectual circles generally involves three –or four – parties: secular humanist, anti-humanist, and a third party that supports transcendence.³⁵⁷ Taylor further divides the latter party in two; differentiating advocates of transcendence that recognize the merits of the immanent frame, from those who are dismissive of the immanent frame. For the purposes of this paper I shall refer to the former position as an “open transcendent perspective,” and the latter as a “closed transcendent perspective.”

Secular humanists claim that religion, particularly Christianity, is an instigator of social violence and aggression, and causes human suffering. Moreover, they contend that Christianity forces human beings to sacrifice pleasure and human goods for salvation. This rejection, they argue, is contrary to human nature.

In contrast, anti-humanists maintain that violence and aggression are rooted in human nature and that death is as much a part of life as birth: “the belief in untroubled happiness is not only a childish illusion, but also involves a truncation of human nature, turning our backs on much of what we are.”³⁵⁸ Anti-humanists claim that secular humanists demean the experience of human suffering by considering malaise and depression psychological pathologies, which require treatment and elimination.³⁵⁹ Religion, they

³⁵⁶ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 218.

³⁵⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 637.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 635.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 636.

argue, portrays suffering inaccurately, as an element of the human condition which only has meaning in being overcome or transcended.³⁶⁰

Proponents of the closed transcendent perspective contend that “the whole move to secular humanism was just a mistake, which needs to be undone.”³⁶¹ The emphasis of ordinary pleasures and human goods, they maintain, has only detracted from morality. They argue that “the denial of transcendence is bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual breakdown of all moral standards.”³⁶² The proponents of transcendence thus recommend a return to traditional theistic religion as the solution to all modern ethical dilemmas.

4.2.2 *Taylor’s critique of belief*

Taylor’s position is representative of an “open transcendent” perspective: he believes in transcendence, sees value in the immanent frame, and accepts part of the Enlightenment narrative. He writes:

“Others, in which I place myself, think that the primacy of life has been a great gain for human kind, and that there is some truth in the self-narrative of the Enlightenment: this gain was in fact unlikely to come about without some breach with established religion. [...] But we nevertheless think that the metaphysical primacy of life espoused by exclusive humanism is wrong, and stifling, and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy.”³⁶³

In clarifying his position, Taylor uses the first form of critique against the other three perspectives. He agrees with both secular humanists and anti-humanists that the shift to an immanent perspective represents a moral, epistemic gain for human society; however he contests the anti-religious negative narratives account, claiming that the initial rupture between society and traditional religion was instigated by the Reformation. Religion broke away from its own traditions. Taylor also recognizes the value inherent in the concept of the primacy of human life espoused by secular humanists.³⁶⁴ He insists however – as other advocates of transcendence – that there are greater goals than the flourishing of humankind.

³⁶⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 663.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 637.

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 638.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, 637.

³⁶⁴ By “the primacy of life” Taylor is referring to the valorization of ordinary human life and good, and to the ethic of mutual benefit, which sees harmony as the natural inclination of an uncorrupted society. The metaphysical interpretation of the primacy of life sees no point to life beyond the fulfillment of these goals.

Moreover, Taylor contends that violence and suffering are unavoidable features of human life that have meaning, although he contends that such experiences should not be valorised, but transformed.

Taylor maintains that the ethical dilemmas of modernity cannot be resolved by adopting one of these perspectives. Modern western culture is a pluralist society; multiple moral frameworks must be recognized as legitimate and valid for this society to remain defined by its diversity. Taylor proposes that the solution is to articulate a moral framework which balances the respective demands of immanence and transcendence, thereby liberating the modern self from a continuous sense of dissatisfaction.³⁶⁵ He questions: “how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?”³⁶⁶ Taylor’s solution blends some elements of all three perspectives - secular humanism, anti-humanism, and transcendence - within a Christian, predominantly Catholic perspective.

4.3 *A Catholic Solution*

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor proposes that violence and aggression are part of the religious behaviour of human beings, and therefore, require a religious solution. He writes: “[...] we might be tempted to speculate further, and to suggest that the perennial human susceptibility to be fascinated by death and violence, is at base a manifestation of our nature as homo religiosus.”³⁶⁷ Overcoming this behaviour cannot be accomplished through negation or valorisation, as neither satisfies the perennial fascination human beings demonstrate towards suffering. He writes: “what it might mean, however, is that the only way fully to escape the draw towards violence lies somewhere in the turn to transcendence, that is, through the full-hearted love of some good beyond life.”³⁶⁸ Taylor proposes that violence and suffering must be recognized by moral frameworks as meaningful experiences that can be transcended. The secular humanist portrayal of violence and aggression as

³⁶⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 624.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 640.

³⁶⁷ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 28; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 639

³⁶⁸ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 28; Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 639

deviant behaviour negates the moral implications behind these acts. Furthermore, the anti-humanist suggestion that human beings are incapable of avoiding such actions negates the hope for a peaceful future. Taylor proposes a reconciliation of both viewpoints within a Christian perspective.

In *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*, Taylor contends that a mediated path between proponents of transcendence, secular humanism, and anti-humanism, can be developed within a Christian perspective, though he does not insist that Christianity contains solutions for every modern problem.³⁶⁹ He maintains that recognizing transcendence as a moral source liberates human beings from the perennial problem of rationalizing violence and suffering. According to Morgan, Taylor “does not argue directly that God and religion *should* play a central role in our moral lives; he does show how, subject to detailed clarification, they *could* do so.”³⁷⁰ Taylor does not advocate for a homogeneous, Christian solution to the ethical dilemmas of modernity. He states at numerous instances that there is a variety of paths to God³⁷¹ and solutions to the problems of modernity.³⁷²

In *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor describes his solution for modernity as a Catholic; however, he maintains that his solution is applicable for all members of modern western culture, regardless of their religious heritage. (His understanding of Catholicism is independent of the institution of the Catholic Church. Taylor rejects the project of Christendom as advocated by the Catholic Church. He explains that the fusion of faith with culture and society is a project highly susceptible to coercion, which, history has proven, nearly always involves attempts to homogenize society.³⁷³ According to Taylor, the

³⁶⁹ Taylor writes: “Christianity looks to a much fuller transformation of human life, such that it becomes possible to conceive of transfiguring even the most purblind, self-absorbed and violent. But this is a transformation which cannot be completed in history. In the nature of things, Christianity offers no global solution, no general organization of things here and now which will fully resolve the dilemma, and meet the maximal demand. It can only show ways in which we can, as individuals, and as churches, hold open the path to the fullness of the kingdom.” Taylor *A Secular Age*, 643.

³⁷⁰ Morgan, “Religion, history, moral discourse” *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 51.

³⁷¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 765 -766.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 708-709.

³⁷³ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 17.

imposition of homogeneity has mutilated the Christian message.³⁷⁴ Taylor contends that he is not advocating for a modification of Catholicism nor for “a new, better higher Catholicism, meant to replace all those outmoded varieties that clutter up our past” as “to search for this would be to chase a chimera, a monster that cannot exist in the nature of things.”³⁷⁵ Instead, in *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor presents a reinterpretation of existing Catholic theology with regards to the ethical dilemmas of modernity.

George Marsden summarizes Taylor’s suggestion as the following: that Catholics and other Christians approach modernity “on its own terms, as much as it is possible without violating the essentials of our traditions.”³⁷⁶ This approach entails finding a balance between the demands of tradition and the reality of modernity, establishing grounds of commonality among diverse members of society, as well as assisting in the realization of the secular humanist moral vision. For William H. Shea, Taylor’s suggestion is a reflection of his “mediating path: neither surrender, nor rejection, neither ‘booster’ nor ‘knocker,’ but participant, voice, critical engager.”³⁷⁷ I contend that Taylor’s “mediating path” represents more than an assessment of modernity, or a “diagnostic goal,”³⁷⁸ as Smith and Shea propose; rather, Taylor’s mediating path represents a practical solution to current and future ethical problems of modernity.

4.3.1 *Violence and Transformation*

The problem of the existence of suffering in modernity is greater than the issue of how to prevent, or end suffering in the world. The problem involves the interpretation of the meaning of suffering, and the consequences of this interpretation for the modern moral order. Taylor explains that biology cannot account for the violent impulses inherent in human society. Biological explanations do not consider the direction in which violence is

³⁷⁴ Taylor writes, “[...] our Christian life itself has suffered a mutilation to the extent that it imposes this kind of homogenization. The Church was rather meant to be the place in which human beings, in all their difference and disparate itineraries, come together; and in this regard, we are obviously falling far short.” Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 772.

³⁷⁵ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 14.

³⁷⁶ Marsden, “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture”. *A Catholic Modernity?*, 83.

³⁷⁷ Shea, “A Vote of Thanks to Voltaire” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 54.

³⁷⁸ Smith, Nicholas H. *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 224.

oriented, nor do they consider the cultural justifications of violence.³⁷⁹ According to Taylor, human beings need a meta-biological explanation of violence. Taylor writes:

“That humans inflict pain and suffering on others is part of the very way of things, the way of the dark and inhuman in the universe resonates in us. To see this is to intuit the tragedy at the basis of human life. There is a certain beauty in this way, and a joy of seeing and assenting to it. The superior being can say ‘yea’ to this way, and this is his joy, in Nietzsche’s view.”³⁸⁰

The anti-humanist understanding of violence thus appeals to modern persons because it recognizes the meaning of these acts. The anti-humanist perspective, however, is hopeless; violence cannot be avoided, mitigated, or ended. In contrast, the secular humanists consider violence meaningless in abstraction, and in contradiction with the goal of human flourishing.

Taylor maintains that the solution to the ethical problems of suffering and violence requires revisiting the Christian concept of salvation through transformation and *agape*. Secular humanism has adopted an incomplete interpretation of Christian salvation and transformation as associated with the renunciation of the human body and ordinary desires.³⁸¹ Taylor’s interpretation of Christianity posits that salvation occurs through transformation of the spirit.³⁸² This interpretation denies the legitimacy of acts of violence perpetrated in the name of God, as well as the project of Christendom. According to Taylor, “suffering can have transformative meaning.”³⁸³ Associating personal suffering with the suffering of Christ transforms the experience into an opportunity for renewed contact with God.³⁸⁴ Contact with God offers humanity “full participation in divine life.”³⁸⁵ Taylor contends that God loves humanity unconditionally and desires the same of human beings; participation in divine life thus involves accepting the call to love other human beings, regardless of difference or diversity. This call to *agape* is the meaning of the expression unity-across difference. Accepting *agape* does not negate the experience of suffering, or the impulse of violence; rather, *agape* forces the human agent to confront their violent

³⁷⁹ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 659

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 664.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 644.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 669.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 654.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 654.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 654.

reactions towards difference and the other, and to actively transform this emotion into love. Through transformation of violence, the human agent transcends the human condition. The practical implication of the transformation of violence is the protection of the innocent bystanders in situations of war and aggression.³⁸⁶

The cycle of violence is perpetuated by secular humanism and anti-humanism alike. Locating the source of morality within the human agent, Taylor suggests, has led to the veneration of human nature. This veneration prevents secular humanism from recognising the meaning of violence, and has contributed to the appeal of anti-humanism. Taylor contends that modern society requires a transcendent ideal, if not a transcendent moral source, in order to resolve the ethical dilemma of violence. This suggests that Taylor considers the acknowledgement of *agape* as the highest goal of the modern moral order.

4.3.2 *Suffering and Sacrifice*

Secular humanists deny the recognition of suffering as a meaningful experience; they contend that suffering results from failing to respect the practical primacy of life. According to Taylor, the secular humanist notion of the primacy of life originates from the Christian idea of salvation by design; or, the idea that God's only purpose is human flourishing. The Christian notion of salvation by design is problematic in modernity because it negates the meaning of non-causal suffering. Taylor writes:

“Suffering imposed by humans, particularly in the name of transcendent ideals, has a meaning: a negative one, as something we strive to get rid of. But extraneous suffering must be meaningless. We can't admit it has meaning without falling back into one of those views of suffering as right and necessary, as sent to try or punish or improve us. And that is one of the reasons why the modern age is so concerned about this issue of meaning.”³⁸⁷

Taylor explains that this Christian interpretation of suffering has been subsumed by modern secular humanism, and cannot be eliminated nor reversed.³⁸⁸ Moreover, for any person that acknowledges the primacy of life as a good, the anti-humanist response to suffering does not resolve the surrounding ethical issues.

³⁸⁶ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 673.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 650.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 651.

In the Christian tradition, suffering and sacrifice are intimately connected concepts. The secular humanist interpretation of Christianity associates the concept of sacrifice with the renunciation of human goods.³⁸⁹ Taylor maintains, however, that suffering is not caused by the sacrifice of human goods; rather, “our sin is in resisting God’s initiative to make suffering reparative.”³⁹⁰ Without understanding how suffering can benefit the human agent, proponents of secular humanism necessarily experience suffering and sacrifice as negative.

According to Taylor, sacrifice also refers to the destruction of vices,³⁹¹ which prevent the realization of *agape*. Through transformation, violence may be channelled into sacrifice and used to generate *agape*.³⁹² Taylor maintains that the contemporary moral order is incompatible with an understanding of sacrifice as the rejection of human flourishing, or of sacrifice as the vehicle for achieving human flourishing. Christianity provides an interpretation of sacrifice as sharing the suffering of others and transforming their experience with love. Christ’s sacrifice is to embrace the reparative aspect of suffering “to offer no counter-resistance, but to continue loving and offering. [...] On the basis of this initiative, the incomprehensible healing power of this suffering, it becomes possible for human suffering, even of the most meaningless type, to become associated with Christ’s act, and to become a locus for renewed contact with God, an act which heals the world.”³⁹³ Taylor’s understanding of sacrifice is thus a form of *tikkum olam*, the Hebrew expression for “healing the world.”³⁹⁴ Modern persons can transform sacrifice into *tikkun olam* by confronting suffering without the comfort of disengagement.³⁹⁵ Taylor writes: “one part of the solution is being there and praying, being there and affirming the good which is never absent. You see the good through the eyes of God.”³⁹⁶ Following Christ’s example, according to Taylor, means entering into a relationship of solidarity with the poor, sick, marginalized and disenfranchised members of society.

³⁸⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 645.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 655.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 647.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 668.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 654.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 681.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 682-683.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 685.

4.3.3 *Plurality and Fragilization*

Taylor locates the meaning of the term Catholic in the Greek word *katholou*. The term *katholou* refers to both “universality and wholeness”, and is the true essence of the Catholic religion. He writes: “This is the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone, that their complementarity is essential, rather than of beings who come to accept that they are ultimately identical.”³⁹⁷ Taylor maintains that plurality and multiplicity can be a source of unity - rather than fragilization - if interpreted correctly.

According to Taylor, plurality is an essential feature of humanity that is expressed in the multiplicity of existing identities, cultures, and societies. He proposes that plurality is a reflection of human beings having been made in the image of God. The Catholic conception of God understands God as a trinity:³⁹⁸ three parts that are distinct, yet whole. Plurality is therefore an inherent feature of God. According to Taylor, the Catholic message of universality and wholeness should be interpreted as “unity-across-difference,”³⁹⁹ which signifies the recognition of otherness as a human/divine constant. Taylor surmises that the common interpretation of universality and wholeness is “unity-through-identity,”⁴⁰⁰ which supposes that wholeness is attained through homogeneity.

Taylor maintains that recognizing the goodness of difference is one solution for preventing the fragilizing effect of plurality, and the resulting discrediting of religious identity. Moreover, he suggests that the recognition of plurality as a good has the potential to deepen *agape* because it encourages solidarity. Taylor writes:

“[...] the love is not conditional on the worth realized in you just as an individual or even in what is realizable in you alone. That’s because being made in the image of God, as a feature of each human being, is not something that can be characterized just by reference to this being alone. Our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, very inadequately, in speaking of the Trinity.”⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁷ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 14.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

For Taylor, the source of plurality in human beings is God. God is the constitutive good of plurality and the recognition of the wholeness of difference in other human beings is tantamount to recognizing the divinity in others.⁴⁰² As love for the constitutive good is the motivation for goodness, Taylor suggests that the recognition of divine difference deepens the love and solidarity between human beings. This interpretation of plurality, as a source of goodness and meaning, prevents plurality from becoming a catalyst of the fragilizing effect.

4.4 *Living the solution*

Taylor announces his Catholic solution for modernity late in his career, and though his solution is partly explained in *Sources of the Self*, few scholars noted its significance. In regards to Taylor's work prior to 1994, Morgan comments: "Perhaps Taylor's achievement on behalf of religion and its moral role, guarded and yet provocative, succeeds at too steep a cost, for ultimately there may be too little substance in the divine-human relation to support any serious practical moral reasoning about the religious option. Taylor may have carved out a route of access to the religious life, only to eliminate any good reasons for taking it."⁴⁰³ Taylor's conclusion of *Sources of the Self* alludes to the reparative potential of Christianity and the necessity of re-interpreting Christian faith for the modern age.⁴⁰⁴ As Marsden remarks: "the substance [of *Sources of the Self*], however, is clearly controlled by questions shaped by a Christian agenda, and few clues are provided to allow the reader to surmise that is what is going on. At least one can tell that the agenda is Judeo-Christian and theistic. Only the most acute readers might surmise that the author is Catholic, if they did not know that already."⁴⁰⁵ Marsden suggests that with his Marianist award lecture, *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor adopts the guise of a Christian apologetic⁴⁰⁶;

⁴⁰² Morgan notes the similarity between Taylor's project in *Sources of the Self* and Martin Buber. Morgan, "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 62.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁰⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 520-521.

⁴⁰⁵ Morgan, "Religion, history, moral discourse". *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 87.

⁴⁰⁶ Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture". *A Catholic Modernity?*, 84.

Taylor, however, distances himself from this guise in *A Secular Age*, by representing the solution laid out in *A Catholic Modernity* without reference to Catholicism.

Marsden applauds Taylor for his modern interpretation of Christianity, encouraging other scholars to follow in his example.⁴⁰⁷ In addition, I contend that Taylor's interpretation represents more than a theoretical solution; he lives this solution. Taylor has applied his understanding of plurality, sacrifice, and transformation in his personal life.

Smith describes Taylor as a twelfth-generation Quebecker, who was raised in a bilingual family. He notes that Taylor's early experiences lead him to recognize the significance of language and identity, which influenced his later philosophy and inspired "the notion of plural identity, of identity constituted or expressed in multiple ways."⁴⁰⁸ Taylor's appraisal of plurality as a significant – even sacred - aspect of the human identity is reflected in his strong opposition of homogeneity in Quebec society: Smith notes that Taylor opposed extraneous French Language laws, designed to encourage a more homogenous culture,⁴⁰⁹ and critiqued the leader of the Parti Québécois Jacque Parizeau's anti-minority comments made after the 1995 referendum. Taylor's notion of unity-across-difference is arguably drawn from his many personal experiences with diversity. Smith further reveals that in 1956, during his studies at Oxford University, Taylor spent six months in Vienna visiting Hungarian student refugees.⁴¹⁰ Little is mentioned of Taylor's experiences in Vienna, however, one might surmise that Taylor's proposition of living in solidarity with the suffering of others is based on more than theory. Furthermore, throughout Taylor's studies in Britain, he was an outspoken opponent of nuclear arms research and proliferation. He protested the bomb on the basis that "the bomb was 'morally wrong' and 'banning it would reduce tension between east and west and could be a practical first step towards total disarmament.'"⁴¹¹ Taylor's collaboration with multiple organizations against nuclear arms⁴¹² is reflective of his assertion, in *A Secular Age*, that violence can be transformed through sacrifice – solidarity – into human benevolence. Smith

⁴⁰⁷ Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture" *A Catholic Modernity?*, 87-88.

⁴⁰⁸ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 12.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 12-13.

remarks, however, that when Taylor left Britain “few of the movement’s goals had been achieved.”⁴¹³ Upon returning to Canada in 1961, Taylor joined the New Democrat Party in Quebec, which shared his leftist leanings and collaborated with the Quebec government on projects addressing issues of plurality and multiplicity. Most recently, Taylor co-chaired the Bouchard Taylor “Consular Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences” from 2007 to 2008.⁴¹⁴

Taylor explains in *A Catholic Modernity?* that his solution for modernity cannot be realized through belief alone. He writes:

“[...] just having appropriate beliefs is no solution to these dilemmas, and the transformation of high ideals into brutal practice was demonstrated lavishly in Christendom, well before modern humanism came on the scene. [...] This cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith. But it is clear that Christian spirituality points to one. It can be described in two ways: either as a love or compassion that is unconditional – that is, not based on what you the recipient have made of yourself – or as one based on what you are most profoundly, a being in the image of God.”⁴¹⁵

The brief biography of Taylor’s life – which highlights his defence of the significance of the plurality of human identity, his performance of reparative sacrifice by sharing the suffering of others, and his efforts to transform violence through benevolence - suggests that Taylor not only believes in his solution as an abstract concept; he adheres to this path as an article of faith.

4.5 *The Future of Religion in Western Culture*

Taylor’s solution for modernity proposes the interpretation of violence, sacrifice, and suffering as reparative opportunities to develop and sustain *agape*. His solution constitutes a modern re-interpretation of Christianity in continuity with many foundational precepts. Taylor proposes that for religious traditions to remain relevant, they must be subject to continual innovation and reinvention. This idea is in continuity with the definition of religion, as capable of changing in significance, and the demonstration of the evolving concept of God.

⁴¹³ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 14

⁴¹⁴ *Commission de consultation sur les pratiques d’accommodement reliées aux différences culturelles*. Ed. Gouvernement du Québec. 18 June 2008, 15 June 2009 <<http://www.accommodements.qc.ca/index-en.html>>

⁴¹⁵ Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” *A Catholic Modernity*, 35.

Taylor maintains that the stagnation of religious innovation damages faith, as “something is lost when we take the way of living together that the Gospel points us to and make of it a code of rules enforced by organizations erected for this purpose.”⁴¹⁶ Taylor considers re-interpretation a form of maintaining the Christian and Catholic faith. He recognizes that sustaining religion frequently requires significant changes to tradition; however the purpose of such changes “is not to return to an earlier formula, inspiring as many of these will undoubtedly be; [...] inevitably and rightly Christian life today will look for and discover new ways of moving beyond the present orders to God.”⁴¹⁷ Discovering new ways of being Christian in the modern world requires uncovering the ways in which Christian faith is already in harmony with modern goals; abandoning the tenets of Christian faith is unnecessary as the path is already contained within the tradition. Taylor’s solution for modernity is an example of how a new path may be created in continuity with religious tradition.⁴¹⁸

As a reflection of the relationship between God and humanity, Taylor argues that the Catholic Church provides multiple paths towards the divine. Taylor argues for the recognition of Christianity and religion as human constants, and perennial features of the cultural, moral and social landscape of Western culture.⁴¹⁹ He writes:

“what really matters is the continuity, and not the new paths broken. [...] the rich variety of paths to God [...] can only come to light if we adopt the other framework, and see the unity of the church as stretching into eternity across all time, such that the paradigm itineraries that it gathers can’t be identified with those of any one age.”⁴²⁰

According to Taylor the ultimate promise of the Christian church – salvation through faith – is continuous through history, though the delivery of this message adapts to the changing understanding of human agency and selfhood.

According to Taylor, the positive evaluation of transcendence has never waned in Western culture. Exclusive Humanists and proponents of mainstream secularization theory

⁴¹⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 737.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 755.

⁴¹⁸ Marsden, “Matteo Ricci and the Prodigal Culture” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 87; Shea, “A Vote of Thanks to Voltaire” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 44-46; Elshtain “Augustine and Diversity” *A Catholic Modernity?*, 85;

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 766.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 765 -766.

have mistakenly interpreted transcendence as contrary to human flourishing; however, Taylor maintains that this meaning is erroneous. Taylor firmly states that transcendence is a reality inherent to the moral life of all human beings. He writes:

“In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to a transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it.”⁴²¹

The embedding of transcendence in the human moral ontology has rendered the conception of God innate in the articulation of vision of the human agent. Taylor therefore argues that, contrary to the claims of anti-religious negative narratives, the transcendent perspective is unlikely to diminish in the future.

Taylor theorizes that in societies in which the struggle between open and closed interpretations of immanence favours the former, religion is likely to experience a positive revival. He writes:

“[...] the dominant secularization narrative, which tends to blame our religious past for many of the woes of our world, will become less plausible over time. This will happen in part because it will be clear that other societies are not following suit, and thus that this master narrative isn't about universal humanity; and also because many of the ills for which 'religion' was supposedly responsible aren't going away.”⁴²²

Taylor proposes that religion will remain a constant feature in the future of Western culture, because the anti-religious, secularist spun story is a false prophet. Moreover, he contends that secular humanism cannot survive without religion, as it is inspired by Christian moral ideals.⁴²³ For Taylor, the negation of Christianity threatens the negation of all modern moral frameworks, which will lead to an abyss of meaninglessness.⁴²⁴ Christianity and secular humanism can thus be seen as interdependent in the modern West.

⁴²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 770.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 517.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 719.

4.6 *Conclusion: Tradition and Innovation*

The secular humanist critique of religion proposes that religion is an instigator of violence and suffering in the world. This critique recommends the elimination of transcendent goals and religious behaviour as a means of resolving modern dilemmas. According to Taylor, this perspective “scapegoats violence,” and blames religion for society’s ills and ignoring the meaning and significance of such acts in human life, in addition to their continued presence in the secular age.⁴²⁵

Taylor contends that none of the three parties typically involved in the debate about belief – secular humanists, anti-humanists, and orthodox theists - provide a solution to the problem of fragilization, suffering, or violence. Taylor offers a fourth perspective, intended to bridge the divide between the three parties. He advocates for a transcendent solution to the problem of suffering, fragilization, and violence, which begins with the recognition of plurality as a transcendent, constitutive good. Taylor states that “sanctified violence goes along more easily with non-universalism;”⁴²⁶ restoring universalism – unity-across-difference – thereby removes justifications for religious violence intended to eliminate otherness.⁴²⁷ Suffering, like violence, is an inescapable feature of the human experience. Taylor proposes, however, that suffering can be transcended through participation in God’s plan for humanity – the fostering of *agape*. In sum, Taylor’s solution demands conversion from a closed interpretation of the immanent frame to an open interpretation of immanence, in addition to the partial adoption of a transcendent moral framework, in which transcendent love is portrayed as a moral ideal.

Taylor’s solution is both a critique of the current secular, moral orientation of modern western society, and a defence of all religious moral frameworks. Throughout his explanation of the modern ethical dilemmas, Taylor employs the first form of critique mentioned above: he defends the legitimacy of secular humanism and anti-humanism’s perspectives, though maintaining that they have each failed to adequately address the problems of the contemporary condition of belief. Taylor’s prediction of the future

⁴²⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 772.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*, 670.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 673-674.

condition of faith and religion in Western culture, however, verges on the second form of critique, which Taylor firmly disavows. He maintains that the fullness of life is located in a transcendent reality that is misunderstood by those in the immanent frame; implying that only individuals disembedded from existing reality are able to accede to fullness and assent to goodness. Taylor, however, resists the second form of critique, which is characterized by the affirmation of a singular legitimate moral framework, by prefacing his solution with the acknowledgement that irreligious solutions might be equally as effective as his own. Taylor's narrative of modernity represents a carefully mediated solution for the ethical dilemmas of modernity. His plan incorporates circumspectly the perspectives of secular humanism, anti-humanism, and transcendence. This path also avoids an overly generous portrayal of religion. Taylor navigates between the two religious extremes in modernity – new age spirituality and revivalist orthodoxy – without swaying in either direction. Taylor's specific solution for modernity, however, is determinably Christian. Despite his attempts to use Judeo-Christian-centric language, the concepts of salvation and transformation are not as universal as the notion of transcendence. Though a wide and diverse audience may assent to his narrative explanation of modernity, it is probable that the religious themes of Taylor's solution will limit his solution's appeal.

CONCLUSION

5.1 General Conclusion

A Secular Age represents the product of Taylor's near fifty-year advancement of Philosophical Anthropology. This project, which began with the demonstration of the inherent meaning of human actions and identification of moral biases in the explanation of human practices, has since evolved into a complex narrative explanation of the modern condition of belief. As Smith writes: "It is not always clear where Taylor's Philosophical Anthropology ends and where his philosophical history begins."⁴²⁸ The contention of this paper is that both exercises must be considered in relation to one another.

The definitions of secularization, secular, secularity, and religion presented in *A Secular Age* demonstrate the continuation of Taylor's hermeneutical analysis of the human sciences. Taylor's discussion reveals the biases and suppositions inherent in the common, academic understandings of these terms. He offers alternative definitions, which consider the historical origins of these words, as well as their substantive and functional significance. Following a rigorous analysis, Taylor posits multiple definitions of secularity and religion, highlighting the plurality of the modern condition of belief.

Taylor attributes the modern condition of belief to the shift in moral values initiated by the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, which first diminished and later eclipsed the significance of God as a moral source and altered the understanding of human agency and selfhood. This shift in values fundamentally altered the Western conception of God. Subsequent theological and philosophical movements further exaggerated the moral eclipse of the divine. Taylor's description of the historical origins of the modern identity, however, reveals the continued significance and necessity of the transcendent for the comprehension of human agency.

Taylor demonstrates that the modern buffered self is under continuous pressure to refute the significance of the transcendent in moral life, and to adopt a singular, exclusively

⁴²⁸ Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, 8.

immanent, moral framework. The plurality of human morality and religious experience is denied by this framework. Taylor contends that this denial, in addition to the perennial issues of suffering and violence, are the leading ethical dilemmas of modernity. He therefore proposes a solution to these dilemmas, which balances between immanence and transcendence, through a re-interpretation of Christianity.

5.2 *Observations*

Taylor's narrative of modernity is symbolic of the author's progression from observer to participant. Taylor maintains that all explanations of human practices are subjective; they assume that certain facts and statements are immutable. People are drawn to these explanations, in part because they affirm the existing vision of the human agent. Taylor asserts that without a shared framework of understanding, theories of human practices are unintelligible. In positing a narrative, which offers an alternative explanation of modernity than the mainstream account, Taylor is acknowledging the plurality of frameworks in Western culture.

For Taylor to offer an explanation of modernity without reference to his own religious beliefs would be in contradiction with his observations. Taylor's framework is theistic, and, consequently, Taylor's narrative of modernity reflects his religious orientation. The embedded suggestion that God - or transcendence – is necessary for moral life is undoubtedly a reflection of Taylor's religious framework. Taylor is very much aware of the reflection of his religious beliefs in his work. He writes:

“I believe in God, because I sense something which I want to describe as God's love and affirmation of the world, and human beings. [...] What I believe in is what figures in my best account of this world, history, and my experiences as a moral and spiritual being, but what figures in this account are experience-transcendent things. The God who figures in my account is not a function of my experience, although of course my belief in him, access to him, is. [...] when I speak of 'my' best account, I don't mean one that I would identify as totally self-generated. I just mean the one which in fact makes most sense to me. My community, my history, exceptional models, and my own reflection, have all combined to offer me a language in which I make sense of all this. I will almost certainly become aware, in our world, that there are other languages [...]”⁴²⁹

⁴²⁹ Taylor, “Reply and re-articulation” *Philosophy in an age of pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 226-227.

As this quotation demonstrates, Taylor is unapologetic for the influence of theism in his work. He recognizes that personal influences are unavoidable. Any explanation of modernity is ultimately nothing more than the author's "best account" of their experiences, observations, and intuitions. Taylor states that God is not a function of his experience, God is an independent reality. His belief in God, however, is a reflection of his experiences in the world, and necessarily figures in his explanations of humanity; however, the conception of God as an independent reality is not a universal truth, and he reveals that through encountering the world this point is made all the more evident.

The inclusion of religious elements in *A Secular Age* is not a mistake, or an oversight. The stated purpose of Taylor's narrative is to provide an alternative account to the mainstream stories of modernity, which are dismissive of belief and hostile towards religion. A large majority of modern society affirms some form of religious belief. Taylor's narrative is directed towards those individuals who feel alienated by mainstream theories of modernity, and cannot engage in the traditional, or orthodox, religious perspective of modern culture. Taylor's solution for modernity is written specifically for this audience, as well as those who espouse a humanist, anti-humanist, or closed world structure.

5.3 Summary of Contributions

The primary contribution of this paper is in the advancement of the academic study of *A Secular Age*. As of the deposition of this project, significant research of this text has yet to be published. This paper also contributes to the understanding of Taylor's terminology and definitions of secularity and religion presented in *A Secular Age*, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, *Varieties of Religion Today*, and *Sources of the Self*. Additionally, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of Taylor's solution for modernity, considered against the background of his philosophy of identity, morality, and interpretation of Catholicism.

5.4 Clarifications

The conclusion of Chapter 4 ends with the suggestion that the religious themes in Taylor's solution for modernity are a limitation to the appeal of his solution. I propose that

the Christian message renders his solution untenable to many persons. This proposition requires further clarification to avoid misinterpretation.

I maintain that Taylor's religious perspective does not preclude the applicability of his solution for non-Christians, agnostics, or even atheists. The plurality of moral frameworks proposed by Taylor allows for unbelieving and believing frameworks to co-exist, provided that they respect each other's difference. He writes:

“What does this call for? Everybody has to put it in their own language [...]. And part of respecting it is coming as best as I can to understand it. But that means precisely not trying to reduce it to some common denominator [...]. We have to come to be able to understand – and therefore also admire – spiritualities which are nevertheless not ours.”⁴³⁰

Taylor's solution is to present plurality as a constitutive good, which makes the love and respect of plurality unavoidable. His suggestion is for others to do the same in their own moral languages.

Taylor does not promote a singular, theistic moral vision, as some commentators have claimed.⁴³¹ According to Taylor, the conception of human agency is connected to the conception of God, or the transcendent. Transcendence is part of the modern moral ontology. Transcendence, reason, and nature must all be permitted to exist as realities in Western culture for human beings to articulate a vision of the agent. Consequently, Taylor contends that the widespread denial of the reality of transcendence threatens the meaning of human ontology. This threat is avoided so long as belief exists in modern society, and the shared moral frameworks remain open to transcendence. Conversion to a theistic frame is entirely unnecessary. Taylor equates the belief in God, and religious practice, with the recognition of any dimension of transcendence as a constitutive good. The existence of such belief in modern society, he proposes, is a moral necessity. For individuals, however, religious faith remains optional.

⁴³⁰ Taylor, “Reply and re-articulation” *Philosophy in an age of pluralism: the philosophy of Charles Taylor in question*, 229.

⁴³¹ Lane, “God or Orienteering? A Critical Study of Taylor's Sources of the Self”.56; Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor*. 59.

Taylor's proposed moral path, his Catholic solution for modernity, is merely a recommendation. (The ethical dilemmas of violence and suffering are problematic for modernity; however, they do not threaten human ontology. Taylor's interpretation of Catholicism demonstrates the flexibility of religious tradition, which contradicts the secularist caricature of religion as rigid and paternalistic. His Catholic solution should therefore be interpreted as a competing portrait of religion, designed to re-establish a positive view of religious belief.

5.5 *Concluding Remarks*

Taylor's personal religious beliefs are evident in his work. They influence his moral theory and philosophy of identity, and exercise a determining effect over his narrative of modernity. Taylor readily acknowledges the influence of his faith, and the limitations of his own subjectivity. The challenge for scholars, and interpreters, of Taylor's work is to recognize the presence of religion in his Philosophical Anthropology project without passing overt judgement. As his subject, the modern West, is one that touches us all in deeply personal ways, this challenge is indeed difficult, but not insurmountable.

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