

Naked Strong Evaluation

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A SECULAR AGE

by Charles Taylor

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RELIGIOUS FAITH today is one option among others. Many people—call them secularists—live without any transcendent source of value. Some, but not all, are militant atheists. A millennium ago, this would have been unimaginable. Everyone believed in God and oriented their lives in reference to that belief.

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* offers an invaluable map of how the modern religious-secular divide came into being. He concludes that modern Western secularism has its roots in Christian theology and that secularism and Christianity reveal a common ancestry in their shared commitment to human rights—a commitment that does not follow from atheism as such.

Taylor is Catholic, and he is clearly trying to make the case for theisms like his own. Taylor's history refutes what he calls the "subtraction view" of the movement toward secularism, according to which the decline of religious belief is simply the result of the falling away of superstition and the growth of knowledge. Rather, modern secularism is a religious worldview, with its own narrative of testing and redemption, and shares the vulnerabilities of such views. The news that secularists also live in glass houses has implications for ongoing stone-throwing operations.

In the primitive world of nature rituals and tribal deities, there was no clear distinction between the immanent and the transcendent. The sense of cosmic order pervaded everything; there were no clear boundaries between self

and non-self, personal agency and impersonal force. Possession by demons was a real and terrifying possibility. In such circumstances, unbelief was unthinkable.

Around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., the great world faiths appeared. Confucius, Lao-tse, Siddhartha Gautama, the Hebrew prophets, Socrates, and Plato brought new visions of universal ethics and individual salvation. A world that had been unified was now divided between the disordered lower realm and the higher aspirations toward which individuals were to strive.

A Secular Age focuses on the evolution of the Christian world. From the beginning, Taylor argues, there was a tension in Christianity between salvation for all, promised by a transcendent God, and the pagan practices and habits of mind that persisted among the laity. This kind of tension, between the life of religious ascetics and the inevitably less perfect lives of ordinary people, is present in all civilizations organized around post-pagan religions, but Latin Christendom is distinguished by "the deep and growing dissatisfaction with it."

The movement that culminated in the Protestant Reformation began in the Middle Ages. There were repeated efforts by the church, first to reform its own practices and later to restrain as idolatrous the veneration of saints' relics, magic, miracle-mongering, and dancing around the maypole. The Reformation radicalized this move by abolishing this tension and inaugurating the "priesthood of all believers." Ordinary life—work, play, sex—began to take on sacred meaning. The Christian virtues were no longer those of ascetic monks; an ethos of personal responsibility and self-discipline became available to everyone.

This attempt to bring Christ into a world that had become desacralized inspired a new focus on the world. Human beings now had to inhabit the world, writes Taylor, "as agents of

instrumental reason, working the system effectively in order to bring about God's purposes; because it is through these purposes, and not through signs, that God reveals himself in his world."

This disengaged stance toward a disenchanting world became the moral basis of the new scientific method. Technological control of the world became yet another way of doing God's work, benefiting the human race in accordance with his plan. The highest goal was understood to be "a certain kind of human flourishing, in a context of mutuality, pursuing each his/her happiness on the basis of assured life and liberty, in a society of mutual benefit."

The "this-worldly ethos" eventually made it possible to cut loose from religiosity altogether. Once "God's goals for us shrink to the single end of our encompassing this order of mutual benefit he has designed for us," it is easy for God to drop out of the picture completely. The goal of order becomes simply a matter of human flourishing, and the power to pursue that goal is a purely human capacity, not something we receive from God.

Thus a reforming movement in Christianity was in time transformed into militant secularism. In this new vision, Christianity is a danger to the goods of the modern moral order; it risks fanaticism and estrangement from our own nature. Religion is suspect because it posits transcendent goals and is alien to human fulfillment; it is, in fact, the enemy of human fulfillment. Moreover, the problem of theodicy becomes more acute in a world in which the purposes of the world are understood to center around human flourishing: "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, and can check the results against the intention."

But the secular worldview has its own discontents, manifest in repeated waves of Romantic protest. It can create a sense "that something central is missing, some great purpose, some élan, some fulfillment, without which life has lost its point"; it has no good account of its own commitment to universal benevolence, which it cannot disentangle fully

from its roots in Christian *agape*. Taylor writes,

That I am left with human concerns doesn't tell me to take universal human welfare as my goal; nor does it tell me that freedom is important, or fulfillment, or equality. Just being confined to human goods could just as well find expression in my concerning myself exclusively with my own material welfare, or that of my family and immediate milieu.

The claim that universal benevolence is just part of human nature is not especially plausible. It also isn't consistent with "our sense that there is something higher, nobler, more fully human about universal sympathy." A secular worldview has notorious problems dealing with the facts of suffering and evil. Secular language finds it difficult to articulate the force of ethical demands or for that matter the power of artistic experience.

Secularism and religious belief are each animated, for many of their adherents, by pictures of the world in which the other position is simply unimaginable. "What pushes us one way or the other," writes Taylor, "is what we might describe as our over-all take on human life, and its cosmic and (if any) spiritual surroundings." It is possible to feel some of the force of each opposing position—to stand "in that open space where you can feel the winds pulling you, now to belief, now to unbelief"—but this is relatively uncommon.

What is more common is to occupy some specific intermediate point between the polar positions. For the past few centuries, there has been a growing proliferation of views that do this, first among the elite and then later generalized to the whole society. Whatever position is held depends on its resonance for the individual. The reforming emphasis on free faith inevitably decentralizes; it is contradictory to seek "a Church tightly held together by a strong hierarchical authority, which will nevertheless be filled with practitioners of heartfelt devotion."

TAYLOR IS RIGHT that secularism is missing something important. There is a gap in the narrative. But this is not a comparative disadvantage for secularism, because the precise area of weakness—a normative commitment to human rights that can't be ac-

counted for—is equally present in traditional religious worldviews.

In a religious worldview, one can say that what grounds one's commitment to treating people decently is that the will of God makes everyone sacred. But then what grounds one's belief in God? We have moved from one shaky foundation to another; there is no gain in confidence.

Taylor is right that "going one way or another requires what is often called a 'leap of faith.'" Secularism has the advantage of parsimony in its leaps. In its most common modern form, it relies on a humanitarian impulse that has no articulable foundation. But this intellectual weakness isn't any more troubling than any of religion's. In fact, it is probably less so, because it doesn't require belief in improbable events in historical time—golden plates borne by the Angel Moroni, a messiah resurrected from the dead. Religious people are divided about the importance of such claims. Taylor, for example, thinks that propositional beliefs, such as the existence of God, are not essential to religiosity, but are derivative from one's broader sense of what is important in life.

Taylor has noted that a central element of ordinary moral reasoning is "strong evaluation": the "discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."

It is doubtless true that for many people strong evaluation is inseparable from religion. On the other hand, there are secularists for whom the rejection of what they regard as religion's superstitions and fanaticisms is as much a matter of strong evaluation as their commitment to human rights (a term I'll use to represent not just the right to be free from torture and indefinite detention without trial, but more generally the claim to decent treatment for all human beings). Their commitment to human rights lacks any further grounding. It certainly doesn't follow from their secularism. As Friedrich Nietzsche showed, the rejection of religion can easily be accompanied by the rejection of human rights.

What secularists are committed to might

be called "Naked Strong Evaluation": the idea, unsupported by any particular metaphysical claims, that the commitment to decent treatment for all human beings is a mandatory criterion for judging our desires and actions. Does the nakedness of this commitment weaken it? Not necessarily.

Here I can offer some pertinent introspection. I'm a specimen of what Taylor is studying, a modern secularist with a deep commitment to human rights. Since it's my worldview that he's anatomizing, I can offer some data as an anthropological informant.

I'm not prepared to argue, as Richard Rorty does, that there is no transcendent basis for my commitment to human rights and that it is a purely contingent historical formation. Rorty is mighty sure of himself. I just don't know. So there is what appears to be a permanent gap in my belief system. If I were a religious person, I guess I'd be entitled to call it a Mystery. This gap doesn't trouble me. All belief systems have Mysteries. My agnosticism is in many ways the functional equivalent of atheism: I don't rely on a belief in God to justify my human rights commitments. I don't think I have to. Naked Strong Evaluation works for me.

THE QUESTION about the relation between religion and human rights is chronically confused because it is really four different questions:

(1) *Epistemic: How do we know that there are human rights?* Taylor is right that the secularist commitment to human rights is curiously ungrounded and that religious revelation is one answer. It would be implausible, however, to suggest that it is the only answer. Knowledge of God's existence has no more secure epistemic foundation than Naked Strong Evaluation. On the contrary, it raises new problems: How do we know, for example, that the bush that Moses saw was burning and not consumed?

(2) *Justificatory: In a materialist universe, how can there be any compelling warrant for moral statements?* The question's implication is that moral obligations can't be justified in a godless universe. (Taylor doesn't claim this, but others have.) This also is problematic. In order for this argument to be persuasive, it would

have to be shown how God helps—how warranted moral claims can be dependent on God's existence. There are ancient and unresolved difficulties about whether morality is a divine command or whether it is also a constraint on God, whether evil deeds would become good if God did them, and so forth. If God is subject to moral judgments, then God can't be the source of all moral judgments. Naked Strong Evaluation doesn't have these problems. There certainly is something mysterious about strong evaluation in a materialistic universe. The Transcendent Something toward which all this points is, however, obscure.

(3) *Sociological/psychological: Can human beings sustain their allegiance to human rights if they don't believe in God?* It is sometimes suggested that the answer to this question must be no. But this claim is obviously silly. Taylor certainly isn't saying this; one of his primary data, needing explanation, is the existence of secularists like me who are firmly committed to human rights.

In a 2004 essay, "A Place for Transcendence?", Taylor raises an interesting psychological question about secularism and human rights. It is true that "no previous civilization has accepted the obligation to help human beings, wherever and against all, as our contemporaries have." But the whole operation depends on maudlin emotional appeals: "Spectacular events, affecting images, keep the money rolling in, but there are often more pressing needs elsewhere, and we have to either re-allocate the public's contributions elsewhere without telling them or inflect the priorities of action in order to follow public emotion." The morality of compassion appears to exceed our emotional capabilities; "what we are missing is a love for the human being as he/she is, with all its imperfections, weaknesses, idiocy, ugliness." Taylor thinks that only Christian *agape* or Buddhist *mahakaruna* can fill this gap. But this is pure speculation. People manage, through varying methods and with varying degrees of success, to accomplish this psychological trick within themselves.

(4) *Historical: Did the idea of human rights, at least in the West, emerge from Christian doctrine?* The answer to this is yes, as Taylor has shown more thoroughly than any-

one before him. Some people (not Taylor) have taken 4 to be evidence of 1 or 2. This is a jejune error in logic. Our knowledge of the truth may be—often is—rooted in previous errors. Modern astronomy is rooted in astrology, but astrology is not a good epistemic path to knowledge of astronomy, nor do the data of astronomy need a justificatory basis in astrology.

LATE IN THIS BOOK, Taylor makes a Kantian argument: "Does not a great deal of our political activity take as its goal, if only as an idea of reason, a world order in which peoples live together in equality and justice? Does not a great deal of our efforts at healing take as a goal the wholeness of the person? How easily can we set these goals aside?" Kant thought that morality required, at a minimum, the belief that God and a future life are possible. The highest human good had to be a real possibility in order for a person intelligibly to take it as a practical end. Both secular and religious people seem to share a similar sustaining hope, a vision of a world in which our benevolent aspirations can be realized.

The Kantian nature of Taylor's argument for religion is apparent in a debate that he has been having over the past twenty years with fellow philosopher Martha Nussbaum. In a 1988 review of her book *The Fragility of Goodness*, Taylor pressed Nussbaum for a clearer articulation of her own evaluation of the aspiration to transcend ordinary human life—an aspiration that she explores in ancient Greek thought. Nussbaum responded to Taylor in a later essay, "Transcending Humanity," arguing that we should "reject as incoherent . . . the aspiration to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity, and to seek for a life that is really the life of another sort of being—as if it were a higher and better life for *us*." If one aspires to "a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world" than the one we now inhabit, then "there is a great deal of room for transcendence of our ordinary humanity—transcendence, we might say, of an *internal* and human sort." The extra-human transcendence that Taylor has in mind has its dangers. "If one thinks that the really important thing is to get over to a different sort of life altogether, then this may well make one

work less hard on this one.”

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor observes that Nussbaum is making the familiar secularist objection to religion: it pulls us away from the benevolent project that should be our real preoccupation; it keeps us from taking human desire and neediness seriously. Taylor responds that the move toward transcendence is always internal in its basis, so the distinction between internal and external transcendences can't do the work that Nussbaum intends. Human aspirations don't all fit together; they are in tension with one another. Ethical demands and erotic love are both felt internally, but both may seem to be external from the standpoint of the other, each threatening to marginalize an important part of our lives. The same is true with the admiration for military heroism and the desire for perpetual peace. We don't want to renounce either, but it is not possible, in this world, to have both. Taylor thinks that the “this-worldly” humanitarian concern that Nussbaum advocates points beyond itself toward the transcendent.

TAYLOR ENDORSES what Jonathan Lear calls (in a book with that title) “radical hope”—a hope that is, as Lear puts it, “directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is.” In a review of Lear's book, Taylor is uncertain whether radical hope “can be sustained without some kind of formulated faith in something, whether religious or secular—faith in God, or in History, or in our own resources, or in human resilience.” Any formulation, however, will be inadequate to that toward which it points. It is part of our nature that “we long for things that we do not yet fully understand.”

For many people, this hope takes a religious form, and probably could only take a religious form. Consider a crucial episode in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. During the Montgomery bus boycott, a series of death threats, some of them directed at his family, had left him demoralized. “I was ready to give up,” he recalled. Sitting in the kitchen, unable to sleep after a threatening phone call, he began to think of how he could pass the leadership of the desegregation movement on to someone else. He began to pray out loud and, as King recalled, “it seemed to me at that moment that I could

hear an inner voice saying to me, ‘Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.’” King's new courage resulted from direct, felt connection with Christ—“I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me.”—and he persisted in his civil rights advocacy. It made him into the closest thing to a secular saint that twentieth-century America produced. It also got him killed.

I'm confident that King was not a fool or a sucker. I can't tell you why I think that. And so I'm in a poor position to attack the hopes—hopes that to me (in most of my moods) are deeply implausible—that supported him in his confidence. Perhaps he could have arrived in the same place on the basis of Naked Strong Evaluation. Some have. But to do that, he would have had to change in so many ways that it is hard to imagine what he would have looked like. Martin Luther Kings don't turn up that often, so I'm not inclined to tinker with the ones we have.

Wherever you situate yourself in this landscape, your view of the moral universe won't—and can't be—a neat, closed system with all the loose ends tidied up. Recognizing this can inoculate us against two related errors: One is to think that we have all the answers. The other, perhaps even more malign, is to be too confident of what the other fellow's beliefs entail: that his or her “belief in God produces fanaticism” or “atheism leads to immorality.”

Naked Strong Evaluation is very difficult, perhaps even unimaginable, for many people who can be reliable allies in the cause of human rights. On the other hand, quite a lot of people seem to be able to pull it off. We're all stumbling around in the dark, grabbing as much of the elephant as we can. It is unseemly to mock one another's shortsightedness. Taylor's book does a wonderful job of elucidating the predicament that is, at the deepest level, what unites us. ●

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