

Deconstructing Taylor's *A Secular Age* to Get at a Deeper Sense of the Philosophical Problem

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Abstract

This paper will analyze various themes in the philosophies of Heidegger and Rorty to frame a discussion of Charles Taylor's relatively recent and monumental work *A Secular Age*. We will examine the limits of Taylor's philosophical arguments to handle concepts of secularism, atheism, religion and the very process of modernization itself. The paper concludes with a return to the philosophical complexity of Hegel to evaluate early twenty-first century attempts, such as Taylor's, to get at the problem at hand, namely the fate of religion and secularism in our contemporary times.

For twentieth century existentialism, particularly of the Sartrean brand, existence is action and is the highest philosophical mystery prior to any essence. Subjectivity is the center of being. But for Heidegger, *neither* subjective existence or essence *nor* objective existence or essence is at issue for genuine philosophical questioning. Essence is not a philosophical concept drawn from the history of metaphysics (Plato's 'Form,' Aristotle's 'Metaphysics,' Leibniz's 'Monad,' Kant's 'transcendental categories' or Hegel's 'Spirit'). And existence is not the factual and empirical existence of a being called man or any other subject studied by the social sciences for example, i.e. human psychology. Ex-sistence stands out—man has a unique position as a relation of the clearing of Being and the Truth of Being. But we cannot move too quickly in trying to gain some immediate, phenomenal sense of the phrases the 'clearing and Truth' of Being.

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Man's being gets decided therein and is not given in advance to human subjects who inquire into the existence or essence of man's being through science (biology) and philosophy (applied ethics or political philosophy). Existence is not an existent- or something that exists because the question of Being (the Being of the being called 'is') is prior to any being that is, i.e. a tomb, adome, or a star. What gives time and being and their relation as some uncanny projection that is withheld is precisely what makes possible the human subject who inquires about his existence or essence.

Man is flung outwards where the impossible tries to occur- trying to think about his time as a being while trying to think being as flowing in time while occurring as both being and time and their mysterious, irreducible and non-representable relation. For a living being, time may seem endless even though the being knows factually that it has to die but decides not to think about it, i.e. the peak of fallenness and inauthenticity. And when time runs out, a being tries to maximize its infinity in some heroic self-delusion about one's importance or posterity for all history as if they willed their own eternity (i.e. Nietzsche's superman). But for Heidegger, this is not how we should think about the matter at all. All of this talk about *either* infinite being *or* time or finite being or time gets lost in the history of metaphysics and ultimately in Sartre's subjective humanism as the raw existence of decision, action and engagement. Metaphysics and nihilism are two sides of the same coin.

To unravel Heidegger's relations of terms in a "Letter on Humanism" is daunting task in its own right. But to tackle Heidegger while deconstructing Taylor's views on secularism and religion and the modern age requires that we take a step back and compare Heidegger's critique of humanism as yet another form of metaphysics (as is nihilism because it too stems from the human subject) with Heidegger's arch-enemy: this means we have to engage Hegel again, particularly the movement from "Revealed Religion to Absolute Knowing" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. That passage is where Spirit leaves the shape of religion and enters philosophy and by then the human subject is nowhere to be found.

And yet what is at stake—in this return movement back to Hegel as a supersession of the later Heidegger²—is what Taylor calls the ‘unthought’ in all current philosophical and sociological discussions about the nature of secularism and the recurrence of religion in our contemporary age.³ The ‘unthought’ has yet to be explicated in the depths of philosophical speculation on par with Hegel. Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” is a powerful but opaque attempt to distance the project of authentic thinking from simple philosophies of subjectivity, existence and action that abounded at the time of its composition, i.e. the 1940s. The Hegelian movement above and beyond this Heideggerean opacity is required to engage what remains unarticulated in Taylor’s allusion to the ‘unthought’: and this can help us understand what is truly at stake when we talk about secular modernity and the so-called retreat of religion in the West.

As much as we admire Taylor’s magisterial tracing of the conditions by which secularism and religion have been conceived in the modern age, we remain fundamentally dissatisfied with his thinking as lacking in speculative depth. Perhaps a more fitting comparison with Taylor’s work is that of Hans Blumenberg’s highly original, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, which appeared in German in 1966.⁴ The philosopher Richard Rorty offers a very penetrating summary of the crux of Blumenberg’s argument:

His attempt to legitimate the modern age is an attempt to defend all the things which Heidegger despised about the 20th century: its proliferating curiosity, its urge for technical mastery, its refusal to be interested in something larger than itself which contains it and makes it possible, and its consequent orientation toward an unknown future. For Blumenberg, the Romantic attempt to discredit the Enlightenment, and the continuation of this attempt by Nietzsche and Heidegger, confuse a justified criticism of the Enlightenment’s attempt at ‘self-foundation’ with an unjustified criticism of its ideal of self-assertion.

² Letter on Humanism was written in 1947. See Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (London: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 214.

³ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 428.

⁴ See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

The Enlightenment was, indeed, wrong to see itself as the discovery of the true, ahistorical framework of human existence – as the first occasion on which humans had seen themselves as of they truly were. But one can agree with Nietzsche's and Heidegger's and Derrida's criticisms of the very idea of such a framework ('the metaphysics of presence') without despising the mode of life which the Enlightenment made possible for us. Blumenberg wants to abandon Husserl's nostalgic Cartesian hope to escape from history into presuppositionless philosophy (a hope still shared by many analytic philosophers). But he insists that the fact that the modern age lacks 'foundations' is to its credit, not a reason for mistrusting it. It is an indication of courage, not of weakness or of self-deception. The legitimacy of our modern consciousness is simply that it is the best way we have so far found to give sense to our lives. This is to say that it beats the only other two ways we know about – the ancient attempt to find philosophical foundations, and the medieval attempt to find theological ones. So Blumenberg can pretty much agree with Heidegger's account of the stages we have traversed since Parmenides, but whereas Heidegger sees these stages as successive fallings-away from primordial greatness, Blumenberg sees them as rational rejections of alternatives that didn't work out. The rejections were rational not by reference to ahistorical criteria, but merely by reference to what he calls 'sufficient rationality' – rationality as pragmatic choice among available tools, without recourse to antecedent standards of preference. This is just enough rationality 'to accomplish the post-medieval self-assertion and to bear the consequences of this emergency self-consolidation'. Blumenberg wants to make a virtue of what the Romantics rightly diagnosed as a necessity for those who think of empirical science as the paradigmatic human activity: viz. the abandonment of a context for human life larger than that provided by the activities of our contemporaries, and the abandonment of some more definite object of hope than the unknown fortunes of our descendants.⁵

⁵See Rorty's tempered appreciation of the salient value of this work in contrast to contemporary postmodern criticisms of modernity in the review, "Against Belatedness" in the *London Review of Books*, Vol. 5, No. 6 (June 16th, 1983): 3-5.

Rorty essentially argues for the strength of modernity via Blumenberg's notion of 'self-assertion.' It takes 'courage' to engage in the questioning of foundations and to pragmatically test our ideas against our experiences in an open experiment with the future rather than a passive fear of falling away from unchangeable dogmatic ideologies and metaphysical systems, i.e. 'antecedent standards of preference.' It is better to be an unknown entity thrown into an open future than someone who already knows who they are and can not escape from their past.

In our time Taylor's account too gives us food for thought about what we can admire about secularism in relation to religion, which give us a pluralistic account that appreciates our modern, diverse, liberal search for meaning and not the simple abandonment of meaning altogether in hopeless and incessant self-critique. Taylor speaks of a decline of widespread religiosity as the foundation of our age but also the proliferation of new forms of religious search that is intrinsically differentiated in which the 'non-religious and anti-religious' also coexist with fledgling religious identities. He says:

It should thus be clear that this is not an attempt to show that religion remains constant, that, suitably defined, its continuance refutes secularization (the ground floor). On the contrary, the present scene, shorn of the earlier forms, is different and unrecognizable to any earlier epoch. It is marked by an unheard of pluralism of outlooks, religious, non- and anti-religious, in which the number of possible positions seems to be increasing without end. It is marked in consequence by a great deal of mutual fragilization, and hence movement between different outlooks. It naturally depends on one's milieu, but it is harder and harder to find a niche where either belief or unbelief goes without saying. And as a consequence, the proportion of belief is smaller and that of unbelief is larger than ever before; and this is even more clearly the case, if you define religion in terms of the transformation perspective.

Thus my own view of "secularization", which I freely confess has been shaped by my own perspective as a believer (but that I would nevertheless hope to be able to defend with arguments), is that there has certainly been a "decline" of religion. Religious belief now exists in a field of choices which include various forms of demurral and rejection; Christian faith exists in a field where there is also a wide range of other spiritual options. But the interesting story is not simply one of decline, but also of a new placement of the sacred or spiritual in relation to individual and social life.

This new placement is now the occasion for recompositions of spiritual life in new forms, and for new ways of existing both in and out of relation to God.⁶

What is interesting in this passage by Taylor is the idea of new forms of spiritualization and positioning that can exist alongside the dogmatic faiths that have descended from history, which in his personal case is Christianity. It is this openness to "existing both in and out of relation to God" that must be examined in relation to the self-asserted values of secular modernity: for the latter is typically characterised by science, rationality, technology and a healthy skeptical attitude towards essential truths that arise above human experience and the empirical senses. The pragmatic point of view is the best we have if we hope to be honest with the limitations of the human mind, which itself is limited by what we can experience (leaving aside what technology may alter in the future), while pursuing any notion of the 'transcendent' or 'transcendental experiences.'

Taylor opens chapter 12 of his book, a chapter titled "*The Age of Mobilization*," with a basic framework that will help us understand the presuppositions of traditional "secularization theory."⁷ He states:

Here we enter onto the terrain of "secularization theory." This has been mainly concerned with explaining various facets of secularity 1 (the retreat of religion in public life) and 2 (the decline in belief and practice), but obviously, there is going to be a lot of overlap between these secularity 3 (the change in the conditions of belief). In particular, the relation of this latter with secularity 2 is bound to be close. This is not because the two changes are identical, or even bound to go together. But the change I am interested in here, (3), involves among other things the arising of a humanist alternative.

⁶Taylor, p. 437. Indeed a compelling book project would be a comparison of Blumenberg, Taylor and Habermas on questions of religion, secularization and modernity which we hope to undertake in the future. All three present very complex and nuanced views about how the modern age deals with its identity and its polymorphous evolution: this requires that we think beyond simple, traditional dichotomies of religions vs. secularism. Of course Hegel's ingenious analysis of the Enlightenment as a step before absolute knowing must be reckoned: the Enlightenment does mark an advance in the shape of Spirit beyond the forms of consciousness, self-consciousness and Reason but still falls short of achieving Spirit's Notion in its dialectical complexity.

⁷Ibid., p. 423.

This is a precondition for (2) the rise of actual unbelief, which in turn often contributes to (2) the decline of practice.

Nothing makes these consequences ineluctable, but they cannot happen at all unless the original pluralization of alternatives occurs.⁸

Taylor is interested in change but not as a historian or sociologist. And yet he is not engaging in the classical metaphysical problems of time and motion, which descend from the Pre-Socratics, either. He does have a specific historical object in mind, namely “secularization” theory which is associated with the modern age. He has to assume that some change came about in order for the modern age to not only emerge but that the emergence be understood on the basis of a theory of secularization that explains why we think the modern age is what it is. It comes down to how the modern age tries to justify its legitimacy vis a vis past architectures of the historical age. Secularization has these ‘facets’-

- 1.) “the retreat of religion in public life
- 2.) The decline in belief and practice
- 3.) Change in the conditions of belief”⁹

He says changes 2 and 3 may be close but are not identical; nor do they entangle themselves in each other. 3 takes the priority over 2 as its precondition. With 3 an alternative to religious belief (in the public sphere) emerges, which is a humanism and this serves as the precondition for both the decline in belief and practice. To be more specific a rise of humanism is related to a rise of unbelief as the precondition of a decline in belief and practice. We have a double movement to account for. In actuality we have many things occurring all of which are not synonymous in meaning—a retreat, decline, arising in relation to the conditions of how we understand the diminishment of belief and the ascendance of unbelief and what this says about the fundamental genesis of our modern identity and what that means for history itself.¹⁰

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ The deep philosophical question is why did history shift from an age of religion as a universal foundation to an idea of universals in the plural that are open to questioning about foundations even with regard to what constitutes a ‘universal’ idea.

What can the meaning of the rise of unbelief be if it is not simply understood as a negation of religion's content and function but part of a theory of transformation in which an 'alternative' to one mode of thinking Being (to use Heidegger's language) begins to disclose itself? However, for Taylor, the consequences of these changes are not inevitable as part of some grand design of history. Nevertheless these changes cannot happen until an "original pluralization of alternatives occurs." It is the meaning of this original pluralization that remains undisclosed in Taylor's analysis to which only Heidegger's philosophy can give us access.

Before we deconstruct Taylor's nuanced arguments about the occurrence of this 'original pluralization of alternatives' we need to step back and plunge briefly into Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism." There Heidegger exposes the futility of humanism as an alternative to any theism without rebounding back to dogmatic religion or religion of any identifiable kind. At rock bottom, humanism is a failure of authentic thinking. In the opacity of Heidegger's discourse are intriguing reflections on evil and how anything like 'religion' today becomes possible for us in relation to a sense of the holy, the transcendent, and 'God'—none of which are possible without a deeper mediation on the primordial question of Being itself.

Heidegger is not interested in the meaning of secularism whether it is considered opposed to religion or not; he is not considering the genealogical conditions for the modern age to identify itself with a secular conception, which in turn requires certain preconditions of the empirical retreat and decline of belief and the rise of unbelief. (The overvaluation of unbelief conceals the negative that it is in order to pass itself off as a new positivity and superior antidote to what is no longer binding, namely religious belief.) The theory of change is not taken for granted because the omnipresence of being in the modern age is not given. For Heidegger, time is the mystery, which means nothing like secularism, religion or the modern age can be taken *prima facie* as that which is most critical when we engage who we are as human beings. And this has nothing to do with a defense of atheism or nihilism, which has abandoned all values.

So let us turn to the “Letter on Humanism,” but this time with an appropriation of certain profound moments in Hegel’s “Revealed Religion” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that will help us override some of Heidegger’s limits and fill in the gaps by way of some new speculative leaps: this way we can pose a serious attempt to think Taylor’s ‘unthought’—or that which does not come to the surface in his voluminous text.¹¹

As an addendum to these opening remarks, we are not going to follow Taylor’s engagements with sociological theories of secularization or what he calls the ‘orthodox’ mainstream and its variants.¹² Rather, we need to expose how un-philosophical Taylor’s project really is in contrast to someone like Heidegger even though Taylor thinks he is offering a philosophical contrast (i.e. the “unthought”) with the orthodox assumptions embedded in the social sciences and their theoretic-empirical understanding of secularization, modernity and modernization. To deconstruct Taylor’s quasi-philosophically-motivated historical inquisitiveness one needs to revisit Heidegger’s destructive anti-ontology as the radical philosophical condition by which we any historical discussion should proceed. In short, there is no point in tackling the subject of secularism, religion and the modern age if one does not have a sufficiently complex understanding of the philosophy of history.

The philosopher of history does not simply ask about a philosophy of history or our current historical epoch (say the modern age as a theory of secularization or a theory of the modern age as secularization); nor does she try to understand changes in epochs that have successively led from the past to the present (ancient to medieval to modern). Rather, she must first inquire into the nature of time itself before one can assume anything regarding the self-sufficiency or illegitimacy of any type of claim, say the dominance and superiority of secularism as an idea or world-view to define an age over religious belief or faith.

¹¹ Taylor says: “for this reason we have to be aware of the ways in which an ‘unthought’ of secularization, as well as various modes of religious belief, can bedevil the debate.” (2007, p. 428). And furthermore, “now of course, my writing is also shaped by a different ‘unthought,’ and I want to try to articulate some of that here, because I think that this is the way to advance the debate. But I can best do this by contrasting it with that implicit in much mainstream secularization theory.” (Ibid, p. 429).

¹²Ibid.

This is something that Hegel understood very well before embarking on his incomparable *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Secularism and religion quite frankly are not what they appear to be—in any kind of identity, difference, relation and non-relation of identity and difference.¹³

¹³ This behooves us to return to Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and Weber's *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* as the twin foundations that laid the groundwork for all twentieth-century sociology and philosophy of religion models. Religion has to do with a certain practical function that escapes strictly scientific categories of explanation. What the philosopher refuses to believe as the a priori condition of possibility of understanding what religion truly is by way of what its content offers, sociology is equally reductive in its attempt to broach religion externally as if it were just another item in man's cosmos worthy of detached theoretical reflection.