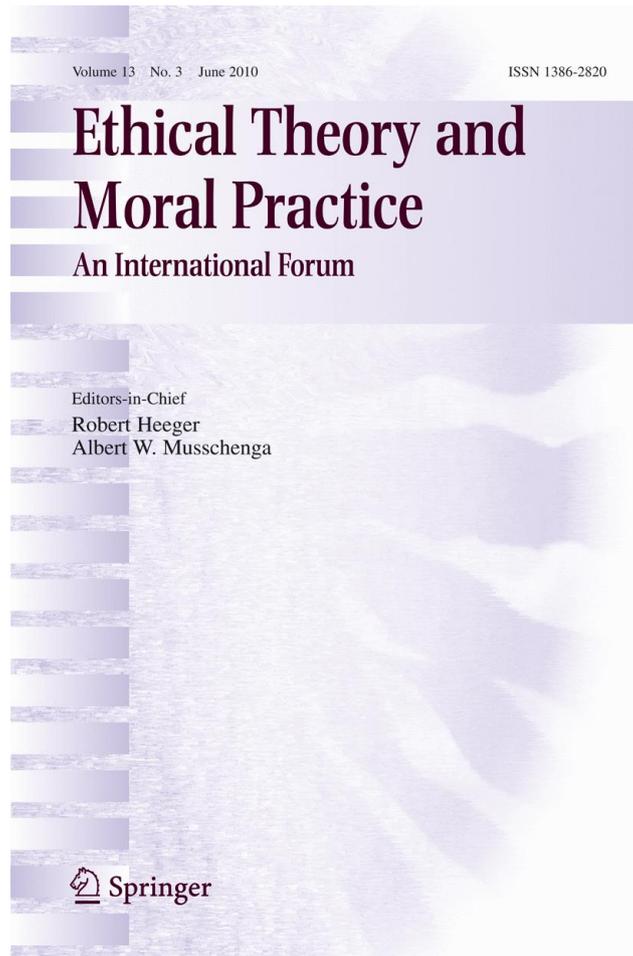


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Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass; London, England, 2007, ISBN: 0674026764, 874 pages (incl. notes and index), £29.95 (hardcover)

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Charles Taylor has written three big books on the self-understandings of modern age and modern individuals. *Hegel* (1975) focused on one towering figure, and held that Hegel's aspirations to overcome modern dualisms are still ours, but Hegelian philosophical speculation is not the way to do it. *Sources of the Self* (1989) ran the intellectual history from peak to peak, stressing the continuous presence of modern tensions and cross-pressures between Enlightenment and Romanticism. *A Secular Age* (2007) aims to cover the valleys as well, trying to explain how certain "secular" understandings have come to existence and have managed to spread themselves from the elites into the prevailing taken-for-granted background imaginaries.

Taylor begins by distinguishing three senses of secularity. The first can be called "political", focusing on the separation of state and church, while the second one is "sociological", focusing on the statistics of religious belief and practice. The third one can perhaps be called "existential" and it seems to be harder to define. It concerns what Taylor calls broad background conditions of belief and spiritual searching: something like the general assumptions implicit in one's lived experience, social and cosmic imaginary, which make a difference to what form (if any) one's religious aspirations take. Taylor focuses on this third sense and asks what has changed in that respect between 1500 when lack of belief in God was unimaginable, and 2000, when belief is one option among many.

Taylor's discussion proceeds in terms of the ethical or existential issue of "fullness" and meaning in one's life. He puts great, perhaps too great, weight to this issue in explaining the changes in worldviews: wide acceptance of some worldview presupposes that the worldview has strong appeal to the ethical sensibilities of the masses. In a philosophically problematic way, he connects this to the notion of a constitutive "moral source" (such as God, Kantian autonomous will, Nature). The idea is that all moral outlooks have an implicit god-analogue, some source from which goodness or morality springs. This assumption

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overlooks all the views which hold that something good isn't good because gods or god-analogues love it, but rather gods or god-analogues love it because it is good. Defenders of such views are of course free to agree that experiences of fullness, meaning or value are relevant in explaining human affairs.

In general, Taylor is opposed to (idealtypical, not very clearly identified) "subtraction stories" concerning secularization, which see the transition as one where something is merely dropped off (the transcendent bit) but otherwise things remain as before. For Taylor this is too linear, and misses the zigzags, undercurrents, unintended consequences and historical innovations involved in the process. The very distinction between immanent and transcendent (or natural and supernatural) is a product of history. In Taylor's picture, today's religious believers and spiritual searchers share with unbelievers the starting point, the secular "immanent frame" (roughly, the idea of a homogeneous rupture-free causally closed universe, void of magic)—the believers just add a transcendent or supernatural element to the shared frame. Taylor thus sees the very distinction between the two elements as an emerging result of the secularization process, whose starting point is an undifferentiated God-infiltrated enchanted universe. By contrast, the subtraction stories assume that the separation of natural and supernatural is at work already before the secularization process, which then merely chops off the transcendent bit.

One turning point in Taylor's story is modern Deism with the idea of impersonal order, created by God, who does not intervene in its course afterwards. From that it was a short step to drop God from the picture altogether. But Taylor insists that even this change was not merely a matter of dropping something out, but of providing appealing new alternatives, with distinctive understandings of "fullness" and sources of meaning, this time immanent to human life and human capacities, such as reason, natural benevolence or the authentic "inner voice".

Throughout, Taylor stresses the general spirit of what he calls "Reform", "the attempt by elites to make over society, and the life and practice of non-elites, so as to conform to what the elites identify as higher standards" (242). Taylor sees the spirit of Reform already implicit in Axial revolutions (the birth of great religions and Platonic philosophy between 800 and 200 BCE). They challenged "pre-axial" understandings, which can be summed up as a triple embedding of humans: first, embedding in an enchanted cosmos, with one's mind porous and open to all sorts of ghosts, spirits, and divine voices (as opposed to modern "buffered selves" with minds directly accessible only to the individuals themselves); second, embedding in a deeply collective society, membership in which determines the imaginable boundaries of one's identity; and third, embedding in relation to an encompassing view of the human good (as opposed to the demands in Axial religions to transcend human flourishing).

In the Axial revolutions these views were challenged, but the result for a couple of millennia was merely an unstable compromise, a "post-axial equilibrium" between the pre-axial and post-axial elements. In 1500 the pre-axial elements still had a considerable hold. What Taylor calls Reform was motivated by and directed against the malaises of such an unstable compromise. In his view, the spirit of Reform can shed light on how Renaissance humanism, scientific revolution, rise of "police states" and the religious Reformations had the effects they had. These, and numerous other intellectual movements after them, have then brought us to the modern moral order and modern social imaginaries. Taylor recounts how unbelief or "exclusive humanism" first became an option for elites, and after becoming an option, was multiplied in very diverse variants. And finally, in the last decades, during "the age of Authenticity", the hyper-pluralization of options for belief and unbelief has reached the masses in the modern West. As a result, one thing that is shared by everyone in

the contemporary West is the self-understanding of one's spiritual views as just one option among many.

All in all, Taylor's historical narrative is quite suggestive, although rich with idealtypes and speculation about the motivations of the people involved. Perhaps one can see Taylor making a huge historical hypothesis, and arguing how the identified transitions would make sense in light of the assumed motivations of the parties, rather than really doing the serious historical research to try to support the hypothesis properly. Whether or not they are historically adequate, the idealtypical understandings attributed to different phases in the past can be of help in illuminating the nature of our current understandings, by providing a striking contrast.

In addition to the historical narrative, Taylor seems to have a critical agenda: can non-theistic ontologies make sense of the rich variety of aspirations or value-orientations that people have? Can they provide motivating "moral sources" which would enable us to pursue demanding aims, moral or other? Taylor's suggestions on this front are not likely to come even close to convincing anyone not already convinced about the need for a theistic moral source.

The book is massive, for example it reprints most of Taylor's book *Modern Social Imaginaries*, which now covers only three of the twenty chapters. Unfortunately, the new book remains badly in need of copyediting. I like Taylor's easily approachable, colloquial style, but at places this book reads like an unedited, repetitive manuscript (comparing the portions of text which appeared in *Modern Social Imaginaries* by Duke UP in a slightly edited and easier to read format is revealing). At places it is unbearably difficult to follow where the second point will come, after Taylor has announced that he will make two points—sometimes they are separated by seventy pages, sometimes thirty pages, and there are countless further first and second points in between. Given the potential importance of the volume, it was a missed chance not to have it copyedited more thoroughly—I would like to suggest a second revised edition right away.