

## NATURALIZING CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A Critique of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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### **Abstract:**

This essay critically engages the concept of transcendence in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. I explore his definition of transcendence, its role in holding a modernity-inspired nihilism at bay, and how it is crucial to the Christian antihumanist argument that he makes. In the process, I show how the critical power of this analysis depends heavily and paradoxically on the Nietzschean antihumanism that he otherwise rejects. Through an account of what I describe as naturalistic Christianity, I argue that transcendence need not be construed as supernatural, that all of the resources necessary for a meaningful life are immanent in the natural process, which includes the semiotic capacities of *Homo sapiens*. Finally, I triangulate Taylor's supernatural account of transcendence, naturalistic Christianity, and Dreyfus and Kelly's physis-based account of “going beyond” our normal normality in *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics for Meaning in a Secular Age*.

**Keywords:** god | humanism | naturalism | nihilism | secular | transcendence

### **Article:**

#### **1. Introduction**

The title of my paper is something of a misnomer insofar as it implies a comprehensive critique of Taylor's magnum opus. My actual ambition, which is much less expansive, is to pull on a particular thread in Taylor's complex argument. Given the immense analytical ambition, historical scope, erudition, and moral seriousness of Taylor's text, I shall be hard pressed to do even this. An additional purpose is to provide a preliminary outline of a “naturalistic Christian ethic” where Christianity is *merely* one response among many to the ontological question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” and a response to the ethical question, “How should I

live?” Most important, perhaps, it is one expression among many of the often unarticulated desire to be captured, swept up, and carried away—to become “other.” Thus we have the theoretical, practical, and ecstatic dimensions of religion. On this thoroughly anthropological view, humans create religions just as surely as spiders spin webs, bees make honey, and birds build nest. The cultural-performative-semiotic activity of religion-making is no less natural.

I should say at the outset that the broad outline of Taylor's argument is persuasive. But as that well-worn cliché would have it, God and the Devil are in the details. There is a particular detail, actually an ensemble of ideas that merit special attention: Taylor's account of transcendence as a *superhuman* phenomenon; his claims regarding its relation to the spiritual or ethical life; and the invidious distinction he makes among “orthodox” Christian ethics, the ethics of secular humanism, and various middling positions that include neo-Nietzschean antihumanism and, presumably, my own naturalistic Christianity. Taylor assumes that a “fully” significant life cannot be lived without transcendence whose meaning must resemble the “orthodox” Christian notion. I place the term “orthodox” in scare quotes to signal Taylor's use of an ideological term for which he does not make an argument. Perhaps what I should say is that the argument does not persuade me. In any event, Taylor clearly defines orthodox Christianity. He refers to the broad trajectory of Western Christianity from the church councils of late antiquity through the split-off of the Eastern Orthodox Church to what, post-Reformation, we call Roman Catholicism. This is not to say that Protestantism is not part of the team, but it is clearly a second-string player (within the Christian fold but deficient because of its complicities with a secularizing modernity). This is especially true of its most liberal forms. Meanwhile “Oriental Christianity,” dissident, and eccentric forms of Christianity—such as the naturalistic Christianity that I shall describe more fully later—are simply excluded from his account. But this is not where I wish to place my argumentative energies. Rather, I wish to contest Taylor's account of transcendence, which is part of my critique of what Taylor calls the “immanent frame” of the secular age. All of this is constitutive of an alternative account of spiritual life (religious, aesthetic, and ethical), and provides a different answer to the question, “How should I live?” This alternative avoids the materialistic reductions and fake heroism that Taylor criticizes without adopting his account of transcendence.

## **2. Transcending Transcendence**

Taylor is a “catholic” thinker in both the general and specific sense of that term. *A Secular Age* is a fascinating inquiry into the Christian foundations of Western ethics. He provides a strong reading of the virtues of the Christian ethic as such without ignoring the diversity of Christian practice or denying the historical evils, the violence and exclusion, associated with it. Specifically, Taylor reasserts the foundational and fundamental importance of Christian ethics in a distinctively secular age: a period in which the default position, at least among intellectual elites, is nonbelief. Why, he asks, is it so difficult now, in the year 2000, to believe in transcendent realities (Plato's Forms or the Christian God) when in the sixteenth century it was hard not to believe? His answer is complex, distinguishing among three kinds of secularism.

Secularity 1 is the exclusion of God from the proverbial public square, from government, schools, and so on. Secularity 2 consists of the deterioration of religious belief and practice, exemplified by declining church attendance. Secularity 3 refers to “the possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age,” that is, the very conditions of belief are now defined by circumstances that make belief in transcendence very difficult (Taylor 2007, 2, 14). Echoing Alasdair McIntyre (1981) but without the same sense of a post-Christian moral apocalypse, Taylor claims that the differences in the lifeworlds of sixteenth-century Europe and the contemporary West are radically different, supporting and undermining different (naïve versus reflective) kinds of religious experience. Where a Christian construal of things was once obvious if not “necessary,” a corporate and theopolitical matter of life and death, it is now a low-intensity choice, an object of market-style consumerism, one “shiny” option among many. An immanent frame of thought is now the taken-for-granted reality for believers and nonbelievers alike. In the secular age, a naïve<sup>1</sup> belief in transcendence has become exceptional if not exceptionally difficult (Taylor, 12).

More important, and I think controversial, is Taylor's claim that secularity 3 constricts our vision in such a way that “spiritual mediocrity” becomes our dominant existential possibility. Taylor does not use the term spiritual mediocrity; he speaks, rather, of a declining sense of “fullness,” an experience of plenitude or “presence” that reorients by disorienting, which disrupts our average, middling, common denominator, mediocre, and normalizing normality. Early in the book he remarks:

I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*, that is, ways that people account for existence or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to do is focus on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it is like to live as a believer or an unbeliever [Taylor, 4].

Thus Taylor takes his notion of “fullness,” which is practical-and-existential in orientation, as cutting across belief (“theistic” or otherwise) and “naturalism” construed as unbelief. The scare quotes signal the fact that there are versions of theism and naturalism (for example, panentheism and pragmatic naturalism) that deny the God-nature distinction that Taylor assumes, albeit in different ways, to different degrees, and from opposing ends of the duality. But I digress. The point I wish to establish is that Taylor associates the sense of fullness with various forms of existential depth captured by the question “How should I live? His answer involves acknowledging or serving a good that is independent of human flourishing (Taylor, 16). Taylor remarks:

In both Buddhism and Christianity, there is something similar in spite of the great difference in doctrine. This is that the believer or devout person is called on to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing in their own case; they are called on, that is, to detach themselves from their own flourishing, to the point of the extinction of

self in one case, or to that of renunciation of human fulfillment to serve God in the other. The respective patterns are clearly visible in the exemplary figures. The Buddha achieves Enlightenment; Christ consents to a degrading death to follow his father's will [Taylor, 17].

Neither Taylor nor I are Buddhist scholars. We are informed, nonexpert readers who understand Buddhism differently. I do not believe that Buddhism does the support work; the comparative, de-parochializing work that he wishes it to do. As I understand it, the basic point of the Buddhist notion of anatman, no permanent self or eternal soul, is not detachment from human flourishing but from delusions regarding its nature. All forms of being within the wheel of existence are unsatisfactory. All sentient beings, including the gods suffer. However, only those reborn as humans can attain enlightenment. Though it has compassionate ramifications for all beings, enlightenment is human-centered. If we disassociate the term from its Western specificity, especially the “bad” connotation of exclusivity, and the debased if not sinister connotations derived from Heidegger (1977), then we might say that Buddhism is humanism. Speaking of Christianity, Taylor asserts that “flourishing is good, nevertheless seeking it is not our ultimate goal” (Taylor, 18). He acknowledges that he is not sure whether this tension between the good of flourishing and the goodness of an ultimate goal that is independent of the human good is present in Buddhism. We appreciate his honesty. As I understand it, enlightenment (becoming fully awake) is not a good that is independent of human flourishing. It is precisely what human flourishing is, what we come to recognize it to be, when we attain true wisdom and insight (*prajñā*) and see things as they really are. Enlightened human flourishing is not exclusive or independent of the flourishing of other sentient beings (so to say that Buddhism is a kind of humanism is not to say that it is indifferent to other beings—flourishing is interdependent). Within the context of Taylor's ostensibly comparative account, I question the very notion of “fullness.” It sounds peculiar in a tradition where absence rather than presence, the “lack” of inherent, eternal existence, if not reality is a basic doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Taylor appears to see Buddhism through his own misprision; that is, he mistakenly takes Buddhism to be like Christianity regarding issues of fullness and lack.

Were Taylor to concede my point, then he might reassert his Christian-specific claim without the “comparative cover” that he hoped Buddhism would provide. In this case, he would forthrightly assert the superiority of Christianity on the question of fullness. Though he is coy on this point, it appears to be the claim that he wishes to make and in fact does make implicitly. Though he does not provide a definitive argument, Taylor doubts the possibility of a proper understanding of morality and ethical life within a naturalistic ontology. He doubts whether it “can make sense of the phenomenology of universalism, the sense of a breaking out of an earlier space and acceding to a higher one” (Taylor, 609). Such a breakthrough from normal and ordinary (lower) space to extraordinary (higher) space is Taylor's characterization of transcendence. This higher space is transformative, entailing a radical “reeducation of desire,” a fundamental reorientation of one's life. Though he expresses doubts about the adequacy of Humean naturalism, I suspect that his

objection is to naturalism as such—that is, naturalism *per se* is defective. I have no desire to rescue Humean naturalism, though I do not find it nearly as objectionable as he does. But I should add that Taylor's reductive account of naturalism is not the only account.

Taylor sets up his argument in reference to believers and unbelievers. “Believers” refers to all subjects of “orthodox” and “traditional” religion—including Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists—but, preeminently, to Christians. Within the category of unbelievers, he distinguishes among inclusive humanists, exclusive humanists, and neo-Nietzschean antihumanists. The bulk of his argument is directed against exclusive humanism of which much of the book is a long “Nietzschean” genealogy. In debunking this kind of humanism, he shows how it disenchants and flattens human life, draining any element of the sublime and the tragic, while coloring everything gray. In contrast, the only thing Taylor says about inclusive humanism is its vague openness to transcendence; meanwhile, neo-Nietzschean antihumanism accents the tragic, heroic, and sublime dimension of human existence that it accuses Christianity and humanism of extirpating. Taylor seems to acknowledge that neo-Nietzschean antihumanism has a conception of transcendence. But it is clearly an inferior kind insofar as it does not have a *superhuman* referent (something that is nature-transcendent) of the Christian or Platonic kind. Taylor focuses on the extreme positions—traditional, unreconstructed, orthodox Christianity, on the one side and exclusive humanism, on the other—that he persuasively argues define the middling alternatives. By doing so, however, he fails to acknowledge intermundane, “this-worldly,” and naturalistic forms of transcendence. As I construe it, “naturalism” is neither “naïve” nor innocent of “construction.” It is a metaphysically laden category that describes everything that is and the “appearance” of everything that is: both ontic and ontological, nature naturing and nature natured, that is, nature doing what it does and everything that follows that agency. On this view, no one quite knows what nature can do. The “self-surpassing” capacities of nature continually surprise, mystify, and enchant. Nature is “magical.”

### **3. Secular Age Dilemmas**

Taylor's description is complicated and resists a simple linear account. So my approach in this section will be somewhat elliptical as I take several passes at the dilemmas of the modern secular age that Taylor describes. Even though he writes about the “immanent frame” of the secular age that “enframes”<sup>3</sup> the world of post-Enlightenment modernity, Taylor is concerned in the first instance with its effects on Christianity. This concern is on display when he addresses “the case against Christianity,” specifically the humanist and antihumanist claim that it rejects or impedes human fulfillment. Noting the paradoxical, bi-directional nature of the charge, he remarks:

On the one hand, religion actuated by pride or fear sets impossibly high goals for humans, of asceticism, or mortification, or renunciation of ordinary human ends. It invites us to “transcend humanity”, and this cannot but end up mutilating us; it leads us to despise and neglect the ordinary fulfillment and happiness which is within our reach. . . . On the other hand, the reproach is leveled that religion cannot face the real

hard facts about human nature and human life: that we are imperfect beings, the product of evolution, with a lot of aggression and conflict built into our natures; that there is also much which is horrible and terrible in human life which can't just be wished away. Religion tends to bowdlerize reality [Taylor, 623–24].

While Nietzsche did not invent this critique, he certainly stereotypes it. He uses metaphors such as “castration” and “domestication” to describe the Platonic, Christian, and humanist approaches to human desire: the will-to-power, the wild and untamed, violent and sexy, dimensions of human being (Nietzsche 1990, 52, 53; 1994, 91–94, 98). He contrasts the freedom and health of wild animals and the sickness of domesticated animals. (Zoo animals seem to be an anomalous intermediate category, much like criminals whom Nietzsche describes as strong types who have been made sick.) Docile and decadent, the wild nature of domesticated animals has been bred out of them, if not literally castrated. Taylor uses “mutilation”—think male and female genital mutilation—to capture the spirit of Nietzsche's critique. To be a subject of the secular age is to be in the crosshairs of Nietzsche's critique of Christian and humanistic decadence.

So Taylor does not believe that the two-horned dilemma described in the previous block quote—the mortification of ordinary desires, on the one horn *and* the denial of hard realities, on the other—is exclusively Christian. On the contrary, Christians, secular humanists, and antihumanists face a common dilemma that characterizes the secular age as such, cutting across distinctions between believer and nonbeliever, and among Christian, humanist, and antihumanist. These dilemmas have much to do with the maximal demand for “fullness” that spiritual life—*aesthetic, ethical, and religious*—presents to its subjects. He captures the meaning of “maximal demand” in the following question: “how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings while showing a path to the transformation involved which does not crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?” (Taylor, 639–40). If believers (Christian and otherwise) and nonbelievers (humanist and antihumanist) are constrained by the central dilemma of the secular age, then

[w]e have to face the possibility that . . . squaring our highest aspirations with an integral respect for the full range of human fulfillments may be a mission impossible. That, in other words, we either have to scale down our moral aspirations in order to allow our ordinary life to flourish; or we have to agree to sacrifice some of this ordinary flourishing to secure our higher goals. If we think of this as a dilemma, then perhaps we have to impale ourselves on one horn or the other [Taylor, 640].

In light of this account, Taylor construes the exclusive form of secular humanism as a dual failure. Gored by both horns of the dilemma, its proponents set their sights too low (bowdlerizing the maximal demand) and simultaneously minimize the costs of suppressing the sublime (erotic and violent) side of human nature. Thus they mortify ordinary human life, subjecting it to the impossibly high demands of the heroic life. On the one hand, they make a virtue of a necessity, baptizing Zarathustra's “last men” as if they were supermen. On the other hand, they crush

ordinary human desires with the same ruthlessness they attribute to Christianity. So Christians, humanists, and (as we shall see) neo-Nietzscheans are equally “on all fours” where this dilemma is concerned. As if to accentuate this point, Taylor remarks that the radical transfiguring of “even the most purblind, self-absorbed and violent” people to which Christianity aspires will only arrive when the Kingdom of God comes. Until the eschaton, the *fact* that one has evaded the horns of the dilemma and met the maximal demand is a matter of faith and the faithful prefiguring of the kingdom within exemplary communities and lives.

If exclusive humanism is doubly inadequate because it bowdlerizes and mortifies ordinary human desires and notions of flourishing, then neo-Nietzschean antihumanism is one-sided. Setting its sights incredibly high—transcending quotidian humanity, accenting a superhuman notion of heroism—antihumanism is dripping with contempt for the ordinary. Its notion of transcendence costs ordinary people, the vast majority of us, “the herd,” quite dearly. Here mortification is instrumental to the flourishing of “higher types,” ordinary people be damned.

There is something interesting and perhaps revealing in Taylor's argument. The neo-Nietzschean argument appears to do most of the critical work: both identifying the existential issues that are at stake in modernity *and* providing a critique of secular humanism. Taylor's use of this perspective as the spear tip of his critique reminds one of Alasdair MacIntyre (1991). MacIntyre uses the Nietzschean-Foucauldian genealogist to undermine Enlightenment models of moral inquiry and clear discursive ground for his preferred tradition-based model. In addition, one is reminded of John Milbank's (1990) use of the antihumanism of French poststructuralism for similar purposes—that is, pro-tradition, “radically orthodox,” anti-Enlightenment. As with those texts, Taylor's Christian critique seems oddly dependent on the critical power of the anti-Christian Nietzschean perspective.

Whatever we make of this oddity, it is here, when speaking of the antihumanist option, that we see a certain slippage and ambiguity in Taylor's use of the term “transcendence.” Though he acknowledges the complexity of the concept and how easily it supports non-edifying forms of argument, he constantly conflates transcendence *as going beyond human flourishing* and transcendence *as going beyond ordinary, commonly accepted forms of human flourishing*. This conflation is essential, I think, to the invidious distinction he wishes to make between post-Axial Age theistic notions of transcendence (especially Christian ones) and naturalistic notions of transcendence. Naturalistic transcendence is the notion that immanence has innate powers of *self-overcoming*, which entails going beyond the normal space and time of quotidian experiences. Immanence is inherently uncanny and magical. Taylor claims that the proponents of immanence cannot consistently make the distinctions that “we” wish to make and, thus, cannot properly motivate ethical life. I am suspicious of this conflation. It makes me wonder whether he is more sympathetic to the traditional view than he claims. Despite his claims to the contrary, Taylor appears to be exposing his own anxieties when, regarding the traditional view, he remarks: “The denial of transcendence is bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual break-down of all moral standards. First, secular humanism and then eventually its pieties come under

challenge. And in the end nihilism” (Taylor, 637). Careful, often compelling, and always provocative, Taylor does not make this argument explicitly. However, he dances around if not to the threshold of this traditional claim; the gestalt, Eros, and overall thrust of his analysis are in the spirit of the traditionalists while avoiding their specific claims.

Taylor is not content to leave matters here. He wants to make an affirmative argument—even if oblique, faith-based, tentative, and elliptical—about the superior capacity of Christianity to meet the maximal demand. As a preface to that argument, he nuances his position by identifying four possible subject positions in a secular age: secular humanism, neo-Nietzschean (antihumanism), and two kinds of believers in transcendence. The first category of transcendence believers includes “reactionaries” who wish to return to the “naïve” religious status quo of “orthodox” Christianity before the emergence of deism, the older cousin of secular humanism. (The subjects of this view are those we encountered in the previous paragraph who claim that denying transcendence leads to nihilism.) The second category of transcendence believers includes “anti-reactionaries” such as Taylor himself, who, as an eminent Hegelian scholar (Taylor 1975), provides a quasi-Hegelian description of this subject position. In an effort to channel this Hegelian spirit, I call Taylor’s position “reflected traditionalism.” Reflective traditionalists (whose views remind one, in some respects, of the positions staked out by the Anglican tradition of radical orthodoxy)

think that the practical 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. (We might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be a provocative way of putting it.) 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 [Taylor 2007, 637].

Taylor identifies three misprisions—that is, misinterpretations of the Christian tradition, and even gross distortions—that inhibit evidence-based arguments for Christianity’s superiority in meeting the maximal demand for existential fullness. Again, what this demand entails is the pursuit of our highest spiritual aspirations, fully aware of the difficult transformations required, while resisting the ascetic, sacrificial urge to mutilate essential parts of ourselves. These misprisions are distorted notions of transcendence, sacrifice, and of the relations between “good” and “bad” passions (Taylor, 643–46). As Taylor remarks, disentangling the virtues of these categories from their vices is a difficult undertaking. In contrast to merely adopting a propositional attitude, there is no way of living our aspirations without loss. Some things will not survive the process of transformation; nor should they. But how to distinguish what is essential, what we should continue to value through and beyond transformation, what should be left unscathed, from those things we should let go? In short, what is and what is not well lost? Taylor does not believe that there is a clear, non-faith-based answer. But on his faith-full reading, the superiority of the Christian response is apparent.



Against the “Platonizing error” of construing bodily desires as inessential and not worthy of survival post-transformation, Taylor counterpoises Christian agape that renders ego-boosting satisfactions irrelevant (albeit in eschatological time), and that is “bound up with a compassion which is itself incarnate as bodily desire” (Taylor, 644). In short, Christianity preserves the body, which Platonism incorrectly thinks is something that is well lost. Against Platonic and Stoic notions of sacrifice, Christian notions when freed from the distortions, affirm the value of what is sacrificed. There is no “sour grapes” disposition toward what is sloughed off, as if it does not really matter, and we really did not want it. As if the Christian with regenerated eyes now sees that what she valued before her act of sacrifice had no value worth preserving. Such an approach to renunciation, to the objects forgone “makes nonsense of the sacrifice of Christ.” Taylor argues that Christian renunciation is not a negative judgment of human fulfillment. The fact that unbelieving critics and much of conservative Christianity reads renunciation in this manner is evidence of the power of this distortion of sacrifice. Finally, against the “most reductive Enlightenment theories” that call for an extirpation of vice so that virtue may flourish, Taylor cites a Biblical perspective where “the wheat [virtues] and the tares [vices] are so inextricably interwoven that the latter cannot be ripped out without also damaging the former” (Taylor, 646).

Presumably, Taylor knows that this answer is not sufficient as it stands. Even if we discount René Girard's claim that “[v]iolence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred” (Girard 1977, 31), religion does in fact inspire violence. Religion is a house of violence: both shelter *for* and quarantine *against* (Girard, 24). As Taylor acknowledges (Taylor 2007, 674) and as others have shown in spectacular fashion (Carrasco 2000), blood sacrifice, including human sacrifice, is a primordial and persistent expression of *homo religiosus*. He recognizes the cathartic and sexy allure of violence (Bataille 1992), the terrible love of war—whether on a battle field or a football field (Hillman 2004)—and that the violence of war is “the force which gives us meaning” (Hedges 2002). However, he traces a history of “reformation” from Judaism through Christianity in which efforts to tame violence, without mutilating those aspects of human nature to which it is bound up like wheat and weeds, have been fruitful. As if to forestall critiques from those readers who would find this to be too optimistic an interpretation, Taylor claims that Christianity provides a metabiological account of the human propensity to violence, namely, the concept of sin that appears to be truer to the evidence of human behavior and nature than secular humanist accounts are.

Taylor's metabiological account never quite takes off. Or differently put, his Christianity-based account of the human propensity to violence does not do the explanatory and persuasive work that he wants it to. It dies the death of the many qualifications that Taylor as a careful scholar feels obligated to make. Taylor's hope was that the Christian account could both explain the allure of violence and provide a “redefinition or transformation” that carried us beyond it. To the question “does Christianity take us out of the space of dilemmas that exclusive humanism seems unable to escape?” he had hope to answer “yes.” But the mysteriousness of the transformation required, the ambiguity of the evidence, the interpretation of which is mediated by a particular

kind of Christian faith, means that “the answer could also be no” (Taylor, 673). Taylor's honesty even in face of great desire for a different answer leads him to this conclusion. He remarks:

Both sides need a good dose of humility, that is, realism. If the encounter between faith and humanism is carried through in this spirit, we find that both sides are fragilized; and the issue is rather reshaped in a new form: not who has the final decisive argument in its armory—must Christianity crush human flourishing? Must unbelief degrade human life? Rather, it appears as a matter of who can respond most profoundly and convincingly to what are ultimately commonly felt dilemmas [Taylor, 675].

Taylor is skeptical of secular responses. Underlying his question—“Can the values we take as binding really be invented?” (Taylor, 589)—is a fear of nihilism, even if his understanding is “reflected” rather than traditional. Thus his claim that a fully human life must be oriented toward something that transcends human life, that is independent, external, superhuman, and even antihuman. For Taylor that reality is *the* Christian god. This is true despite his use of Plato's Forms as argumentative scaffolding and of Buddhism as a kind of comparative, de-parochializing cover for his parochial argument.<sup>4</sup> Short of this kind of transcendence, his *theistic hunches* tell him, a properly understood and motivated ethical life is unlikely. Rather than say that his hunches are false (can we know such things definitively?), I will say that *myanthropological hunches* tell me something quite different. In the next section, I describe a way of being that is neither theistic nor atheistic, whose subjects are neither secular humanists, nor neo-Nietzschean antihumanists, nor believers in transcendence as Taylor construes it. I contend that this way of living adequately accounts for the aesthetic, ethical, and religious life—that is, the existential depth dimension, the doings and sufferings of spiritual life, without the transcendental anchor that Taylor deems necessary.

#### **4. Toward a Naturalistic Christian Ethic**

Metaphysically speaking, I subscribe to the claim that “nature is all there is.” In the first instance, nature is simply another way of saying “all that is.” This should not be confused with the claim that scientific accounts capture everything that nature is and that needs to be said. Though the sciences have been very successful in telling us what nature is and have earned a privileged place in any account, cultural phenomena, especially aesthetics and ethics, elude their non-trivial grasp. Nonscientific accounts of various kinds are superior and essential. How the “global” conception of nature articulates with “regional” conceptions, scientific or otherwise, is not a matter I will address. However, I do acknowledge that more needs to be said.

With this overture in place, I can say that naturalistic Christianity is the view there is no transcendent, holy, or sacred object of devotion independent of nature. The ontology of sacred realities is the human imagination, which is underwritten by the “semiotic sociality” of the species. On this view, Christianity is among a handful of great wisdom traditions<sup>5</sup> that offer comprehensive and highly influential accounts of how we should live. Since the Axial Age, these

traditions have captured the imagination and loyalty of billions of people, and have come to define in large part though not exclusively what we mean by religion. I contend that naturalistic Christians need not accept Taylor's account of transcendence as something that breaks into immanence. Indeed, we need not accept the immanence-transcendence duality at all. Immanence and transcendence are human constructions or modalities of the natural process. That we do not accept Taylor's account does not require us to embrace the mechanistic, selfish-gene, reductive versions of scientific naturalism (Patricia Churchland 1986; Dennett 1991, 1995; Dawkins 1976, 1996, 2005; and Paul Churchland 1995), which are the conjoined twin of Taylor's "exclusive humanism."<sup>6</sup> Naturalistic Christianity is a variant of what I have elsewhere described as pragmatic religious naturalism (Hart 1998, 2000). Other versions include Henry Samuel Levinson's "festive American Jewish naturalism" (Davaney and Frisina 2006, 115).

If religious narratives and disciplines can be understood naturalistically without obliterating their particularity or the difference they make in people's lives (Levinson 1992, 7), then we might describe such religion as "disillusioned." The discipline of disillusionment goes hand in glove with George Santayana's "wistful materialism" that he distinguishes, according to Levinson, from metaphysical idealism and skepticism (Levinson, 7). The wistful materialist denies the necessity of a transcendental turn for critical thinking. To William James's question of what makes life worth living, the wistful materialist answers: look no further than matter and history. On Santayana's view as explicated by Levinson, "We can account naturalistically—materially and historically—for parts of spiritual life that matter to us, even though spiritual life has traditionally (and mistakenly) depended on a supernatural or metaphysical explanation" (Levinson, 73).

I share this wistful, nonreductive view as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. Like Santayana and Levinson, I do not choose between the reality of physical things and nonphysical things such as minds, aesthetics, and ethics. However, they do not provide a causal account of how brains produce consciousness and minds. The relationship between minds and brains is controversial. On the one side is the argument that naturalism is deficient insofar as experience (sentience, consciousness, and mind) is not a constitutive aspect of matter. Some argue that consciousness is just as fundamental as matter. We need to adjust our physics to properly account for it (Chalmers 1996, 4, 126, 214, 297). Others claim that experience is not an emergent and secondary expression of matter but an intrinsic property. They see accounts of mind in terms of "emergence" as magical thinking. On this *panprotoexperiential*<sup>7</sup> view, feeling, consciousness, mind, and "spirit" are the evolutionary developments of experiential precursors in matter and energy (Whitehead 1978; Griffin 2001). Indeed, there is an element of this kind of thinking (James 1983) in the tradition of pragmatic naturalism. Or consider Charles Sanders Peirce. "Peirce believed that mentality in the form of feeling, effort (or the category of Secondness), and habit (Thirdness) to be present at the beginning of evolution and in the fundamental elements of nature, which he regarded, along with nineteenth century physicists, to be atoms" (Clarke 2007, 39). James remarks: "*If evolution is to work smoothly, consciousness in some shape must have*

*been present at the very origin of things*" (1983, 152).<sup>8</sup> On the other side—I take Owen Flanagan (1991, 1992, 2000, 2002) as an influential representative—is the view that a materialist and non-magical account of consciousness and mind is precisely what contemporary brain science provides. I find myself vacillating between these perspectives. Every time I think that I have settled on one of them, I read something that unsettles me. So I vacillate.

This vacillation notwithstanding, naturalistic Christianity is a religious perspective that has been subjected to the discipline of dis-illusionment (not to be confused with disenchantment) that modern/postmodern knowledges, especially science, have wrought. Drawing on Santayana, Levinson provides an elemental distillation of a religion of disillusion:

- 1 The universe is indifferent to human existence and well-being; humans are neither the masters nor justification of the universe
- 2 Morality, reason, and spirit are human artifacts and responsibilities
- 3 Life has a narrative, ritual character that is nonreductively material and tradition-bound
- 4 Goods are rooted in common human affects; there are no spiritual exceptions, no spiritual exceptionalism
- 5 Disillusion religion fosters “imaginative practices of spiritualization that let people love life in the consciousness of impotence (giving the lie to any religion confessing belief that any power, human or otherwise, can *make* a new heaven and a new earth)”[Levinson 1992, 114].

We might call point number (1) a nonhuman-centered humanism. The perspective from which this judgment is made is necessarily human but there is no illusion that the universe is about us, that we are the culmination of evolutionary and cosmic processes. Taylor all but asserts that a nontranscendent perspective, by definition, must be only about human flourishing. But this claim merely reflects his assumptions and commitments. A similar judgment can be made regarding point number (2), the claim that a properly motivated ethical life must have a nonhuman reference. This is a perennial idea within the Platonic and Christian West that is captured powerfully, and for many convincingly, by the character Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*: “if there is no immortality of the soul, there can be no virtue and therefore everything is permissible” (Dostoyevsky 1970, 105). As a popular paraphrase puts it, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” Though Taylor's claim is not as extreme as Ivan's and does not imply the same nihilistic consequences, his argument regarding the necessity of a theistic source of ethics shares the same logic.

That Taylor finds this logic compelling is evident in his claim that there is a gap between the phenomenology of secular humanism (its ethical universalism) and its immanent ontology. The ontology cannot properly motivate the phenomenology. I should note that Taylor does not argue this claim as much as assert it. The pragmatic naturalist can account for the force of moral claims

without the kind of transcendent appeal that Taylor thinks is necessary. It is accurate to say that moral claims, phenomenologically speaking, strike us as true independently of certain contexts and perhaps, of human desires and standards altogether. They strike us as *obvious* and noncontroversially true. Thus we often react with incredulity, anger, and disgust toward those who do not acknowledge their truth. Such is our subjective relation to our moral claims. We might even say that the force and certainty of moral claims—for example, “the Rwandan genocide was wrong”—is cosmologically inscribed, constitutive of the very nature of things. We might say, further, that moral claims strike us as *superhuman orantihuman*, as divine commands—“Thus sayeth the Lord!” There is naïve realism in the way we experience moral claims. Pragmatic naturalists can account for this phenomenology within a naturalistic ontology, without adopting Taylor's transcendent perspective.

Such an account might go something like this. Since the times of our paleolithic ancestors, we have told stories about our lives and the nature of our world. As myth-makers, we become who we are through the stories we tell and rituals we perform. These narratives and performances are essential aspects of our ongoing, sign-mediated social-creation. The traditions that enable and constrain us that give us breath and choke us are the products of our myth-making, performative, and practical activities. Life is stormy, perilous, and uncertain. Through ritual and ceremony, trial and error, we seek protection, relief, comfort, and joy. We imitate forms of beauty that we perceive in our environment and create forms of beauty that did not exist until we imagined them. All the goods that we have are rooted in the abundance and the scarcity of earth and sky—those that are given to us by forces we might never fully comprehend, which come to us as *gifts* and tempt us to imagine that there is a person-like giver, and those that we invent. As sign-using social organisms, in a universe “perfused with signs” (Peirce 1998, 394), spirit is our capacity to go beyond our normal normality, to go deeply inside or to get outside of ourselves. This self-surpassing capacity is rooted, non-reductively and non-mechanistically, in our being-organic. If humans (body/brain/mind) are artifacts of biological evolution, then spirit, a capacity of body/brain/mind, is a distal product of a multilevel evolutionary process. Spirit is mediated, amplified, and transformed by culture. Though the polarities of matter and spirit, body and mind, physical and mental are nominally distinct, they are not ontologically different. They are not dual realities or different kinds of “stuff,” as Descartes and contemporary dualists believe. These polarities are aspects of the same reality: the natural process.

With this ontology in mind, naturalistic Christians claim that nature is the being of humans and gods, including the “one true god” and all the “false gods.” Imagining gods and entering various relations with them is a marvelous way, perhaps a miraculous way, of discovering our own capacities and expanding our world in indeterminate directions. (This is the cunning of the human sign-using imagination.) By imaging gods and complex relations among them, humans, and the cosmos, we reimagine and recreate our very being. Among the greatest characters ever created, the gods, including the Christian god, expand our aesthetic categories, which pass subtly into our ethics. Even as they stimulate and dignify our thoughts about the kind of life worth

living, they inspire our speculative, engineering, and technological efforts. Through the gods we speak our own voice and hear it in ways we had not before (Santayana 1982).<sup>9</sup> Through the gods, we hold a mirror before our own eyes, discovering what we might be at our very best, what we are at our genocidal worse, and what we can never be. Thus our god-filled narratives enable us, more effectively than do philosophical arguments and scientific analyses, to see just how good and evil we can be. Marx (2002, 73) and Richard Dawkins (2005, 28, 52) are wrong: as gifts that we give to ourselves, the gods enrich more than they impoverish (though we must acknowledge the sometimes poisoned nature of their gifts).

Gods are the phenomenology of our deepest hopes and greatest fears, our darkest resentment and most heartfelt gratitude. They are the way that our best and worst qualities appear to us, as if they were objective, external, and other than us. By creating gods, we give our acts—of exalting and debasing, explaining and mystifying, rewarding and punishing, terrorizing and comforting—cosmic support [Hart, 2008].

By creating the gods—the one and the many, “one true god” and all the “false gods”—we enchant our world, give it charm, and discover its tragedy, sublimity, and magic.

Though not enchanted in the traditional, “pre-reflective” way that Taylor attributes to premodern Christianity and apparently finds satisfying (though conceding that it is no longer possible) or in the reflected manner that he desires, the world of the naturalistic Christian is hardly disenchanted. An antidote to flat, gray boredom that Taylor attributes to enlightened modernity, the gods of the naturalistic imagination enchant us, bringing excitement, joy, and sorrow. As idealizations of the human condition, the gods, including the Christian god, poeticize and dramatize our existence through bawdy comedy, heart-wrenching tragedy, and romance all the way. With this understanding of Biblical narratives in view—where Jesus is the greatest character ever imagined within the greatest story ever told—we have the outline of a naturalistic Christian ethic. Lest there be any misunderstanding, I shall reiterate my claims. Christianity is merely one way of answering the question, “How shall I live?” It is a product of human culture in all of its semiotic complexity. Like every other god, the Christian god is an artifact of imagination. This god's ontology is imaginary. Just as spiders spin webs, bees make honey, and birds build nests, humans create gods. These acts of imagination are natural to human being. The Christian god is the god that Christians created. I suspect that this highly reflected creed, which relegates the gods and transcendent things to the sign-dependent powers of the human imagination, will not persuade neotraditionalists such as Taylor. It will leave them cold. For them, this account is probably a symptom of the dis-ease.

## **5. Conclusion**

The orientation that I have described is something of a “high wire” act. Naturalistic Christianity is an elite formation, an acquired taste that requires considerable cultivation, and entails an ironic relation to the tradition. “Festive irony,” to coin a phrase, is the distance between an enthusiastic

embrace of the ceremonies, rituals, and disciplines of a tradition combined with a cool skepticism, if not a satirical orientation toward its creedal, doctrinal, and dogmatic expressions. Naturalistic Christianity is a religion of “festive irony.” One engages fully in the ceremonial, ritual, and performative life of the tradition: dancing, singing, and shouting. One drinks deeply from its spiritual disciplines: prayer, scripture-reading, fasting, alms-giving, and meditation. But one's understanding of them is radically transformed by a *disillusioned*—again, not to be confused with disenchanting—festive irony. Through these spiritual disciplines, these technologies of the individual and corporate self, a naturalistic Christian engages in care and compassion.

### **5.1 Last remarks**

*All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (2011) by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly (DK) may be the first book-length response to Taylor's *A Secular Age*.<sup>10</sup> DK share Taylor's concern regarding the nihilism of the secular age: that it disenchanting and flattens human life, draining any element of the sublime and the tragic, while coloring everything gray. Here is their diagnosis of the cause:

Friedrich Nietzsche, the great German philosopher of the late nineteenth century, famously claimed that God is dead. What he meant by this is that we in the modern West no longer live in a culture where the basic questions of existence are already answered for us. The God of the Middle Ages played the role of answering existential questions before they could be asked; but such a role is no longer conceivable. This is true for modern religious believers and skeptics alike, as the contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor points out. Even if there is, as some have claimed, a Third Religious Awakening in the modern United States, the kind of religious belief available in our culture today is not sufficient to quell existential questioning. It is no longer taken for granted that nonbelievers are outside the realm of the human. This was the case in medieval Christendom: to be a nonbeliever was ipso facto to be evil, to have set yourself against the delights of all that is humanly worth attaining [Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, 20].

But for DK the problem is more acute than it is for Taylor. It is not just the case that modernity has made life flat, boring, and dull, largely bereft of the “shining things” that characterized the premodern West. Things may be worse than he thought. Using the writer David Foster Wallace as an exemplar, they paint a very dark picture of contemporary nihilism. Wallace committed suicide by hanging himself in 2008. Without making the claim baldly (they gesture toward the “neurophysiological and neurochemical aspects” of his depression), the implication of DK's account is that Wallace could not live the nihilism that he embraced. The metaphysical individualism that he thought his neo-Nietzschean views required him to affirm—which demanded that he, as an individual, create his own table of values, as if he were God, as if the world was devoid of value if he did not create it—was a burden he could not bear. And it was a burden DK argue that he did not need to assume. But he did assume Nietzsche's burden, and his

tragic suicide is partially attributable to this mission impossible (Dreyfus and Kelly, 22–23, 42–47, 49, 56–57). To say that his mission was impossible, however, is not to say that the Christian mission as Taylor conceives it is possible. DK do not believe that Christianity is the answer to the existential challenges of modernity. Jewish and Christian monotheisms,<sup>11</sup> they suspect, cannot satisfy the needs of modern, post-Enlightenment, post-Nietzschean people for whom the “cat” of existential curiosity, questioning, and doubt is permanently “out of the bag” (Dreyfus and Kelly, 21).

DK trace a rather different itinerary than does Taylor, moving from the Greece of Homer the poet to that of Aeschylus the tragedian, rather than through Plato the philosopher. Where Taylor's “axial metaphor” is a nonhuman, superhuman, if not antihuman notion of transcendence, DK retrieves the old Greek concept of *physis*. *Physis* is conventionally defined as the principle or source of growth, change, and develop in nature. Without rejecting the conventional definition, DK offer a somewhat different account: “The most important things, the most real things in Homer's world, well up and take us over, hold us for a while, and then, finally, let us go. If we had to translate Homer's word *physis*, then whooshing is about as close as we can get” (Dreyfus and Kelly, 200). According to DK, there are various occasions for such experiences in a secular age (sports is an exemplar but not the only possibility) where we undergo contagious forms of ecstasy, charisma, and effervescence that keep nihilism at bay without banishing it, and which ground our existence and make life worth living (Trotter 1919; Girard 1977; Reicher 1982; Weber, 1978; and Durkheim 2008).<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the traditions that Taylor describes as attempting to ground meaning and value in various notions of transcendence, DK offer a *physis*-based notion:

This situational notion of what grounds our existence, for example, is nothing like the eternal and everlasting kind of certainty and security that philosophers from Plato to Descartes to Kant desired. And it is nothing like the monotheistic, unified kind of certainty that the Judeo-Christian religions offer either. Rather, this pre-Axial kind of certainty is transient and multiple and it requires care. As Homer knows it carries you along for a while but it cannot last forever [Dreyfus and Kelly, 200].<sup>13</sup>

On my reading, *physis* may be “superhuman” but that does not mean that it is “supernatural” or transcendent, in Taylor's sense of the term, rather than immanent. In this respect, I think that DK's views and my naturalistic Christian views converge.

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## **Footnotes**

1. In a sense, Taylor is exploring the possibility of a second naïveté.

2. See Loy 2002.

3. I suspect that Taylor's use of this Heideggerian sounding language and all that it implies is intentional.

4. This is not necessarily a critique. Anytime we engage in a comparative venture we are subject to the charge that our understanding of other traditions is parochial. This is the cost of doing this kind of scholarly business.

5. Of course, these traditions are human-all-too-human. As such, they are full of a great deal of nonsense as well. So it is also accurate to refer to them as “folly traditions.”

6. Just to be clear, I object to the reductive features of these accounts. My objection is not to the basic orientations of these accounts.

7. Panexperientialism is an idea associated with the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. However, the term was coined by David Ray Griffin. Protopanexperientialism is a qualification of Griffin's view.

8. I first encountered James's comment in Kim 1999.

9. Prayer is one of the ways that we talk to ourselves by speaking to the gods. Santayana famously remarks: "Prayer is a soliloquy; but being a soliloquy expressing need, and being furthermore, like sacrifice, a desperate expedient which men fly to in their impotence, it looks for an effect: to cry aloud, to make vows, to contrast eloquently the given with the ideal situation, is certainly as likely a way of bringing about a change for the better as it would be to chastise one's self severely, or to destroy what one loves best, or to perform acts altogether trivial and arbitrary. Prayer also is magic, and as such it is expected to do work. The answer looked for, or one which may be accepted instead, very often ensues; and it is then that mythology begins to enter in and seeks to explain by what machinery of divine passions and purposes that answering effect was produced." And, he adds: "The mythology that pretends to justify prayer by giving it a material efficacy misunderstands prayer completely and makes it ridiculous, for it turns away from the heart, which prayer expresses pathetically, to a fabulous cosmos where aspirations have been turned into things and have thereby stifled their own voices" (available at [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/vol3.html#Page\\_28](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/vol3.html#Page_28)).

10. As Dreyfus and Kelly indicate in "Acknowledgment," the book developed in part as a result of their participation in a seminar on *A Secular Age* at Harvard in 2009.

11. They do not mention Islam. Presumably their doubts about Judaism and Christianity are applicable to Islam as well.

12. Steve Reicher is the contrarian among this group.

13. I should note that religion scholars regard the concept of "Judeo-Christian" as dubious.