

A Misplacement of Emptiness

August 10, 2011 Category: Religion

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For personal reasons that may well remain unknown to him as well as to the rest of us, Charles Taylor has used his position as a scholar to contribute to a deranged caricature of secularism. In his 2007 tome, *A Secular Age*, he indulges in flagrant mis-caricaturizations that reinforce existing mis-impressions—thereby fueling the on-going bigotry against the non-religious. Shame on him. His contempt for free-thought belies a glaring insecurity regarding his own hidebound dogmatism—an insecurity with which he has evidently not come to terms. Psychologists call this Reaction Formation. For simplicity's sake, let's just call it intellectual dishonesty.

According to Taylor's thesis, secular people are somehow “deprived”—lacking “fullness”. In this depiction, the free-thinker is “thrown into” a world in which there is no one to appeal to outside his own mind. The secular person therefore finds it difficult to experience the spiritual “fullness” that his religious ancestors experienced. In this vein, the secular life is an unfulfilling life. Moreover, the freethinker has trouble with authenticity. *Really*, Charles? Surely, you can't be serious.

One can't help but wonder: Is Taylor's absurd book just an elaborate case of projection? Individual autonomy doesn't mean isolation—and is not antithetical to a sense of community, to human solidarity, to authenticity, or to living a fulfilling life. Au contraire, individual autonomy and authenticity are conditions for any healthy human bond—the means by which *authentic* fraternity is realized. (See “species being”, Karl Marx.) Religion may seem “fulfilling”, but what are religious people being filled with? (Those like Taylor conflate “fulfilling” with “satisfying”, rendering a subjective state an indication of a hoped-for objective state.)

To call free-thinkers “deprived” and inauthentic is not just untrue, it's rather vulgar—not to mention obnoxious. To say that one is “deprived” of ignorance and illusion is an odd articulation. It's like saying a healthy person is “deprived” of sickness. (Shall I provide my body with sustenance so that I may “deprive” it of malnourishment?) Taylor confuses the phony authenticity found in religion with, shall we say, the genuine authenticity of freethought. Such meta-authenticity, then, becomes the issue.

Freethinkers aren't “thrown into” anything, Charles. The fact of the matter is that they have the will-power to *resist* being “thrown into” something (something quite appealing to religionists). There is something that religionists will not—or can not—resist allowing themselves to be thrown into. So who's really being “thrown”, Charles? Religionists take a leap of faith; the problem is that this is often a matter of jumping off an epistemic cliff (in the hopes that they will somehow take flight). The point of freethought is refusing to be thrown.

As for there being no one to appeal to outside of the free-thinker's own mind: This seems to be a perfect description of precisely the condition the freethinker takes pains to *avoid*. To depict individual autonomy as nihilism is stupendously disingenuous—perverse distortions of Nietzsche notwithstanding. The essence of free-thought is, indeed, individual autonomy—with the recognition that critical reflection *and criticism from interlocutors* is crucial to one's edification. After all, peer review (i.e. subjecting one's theories to critical inquiry) is the point of a naturalist approach to life...even as such things are anathema to the religionist. (How much peer review does the Vatican entertain from beyond its hermetically quarantined microcosm?) Taylor confuses the free-thinker's resistance of dogmatism with epistemic narcissism.

(Again, an apparent case of projection.)

To make the case that a religionist in the Dark Ages somehow managed—in his quagmire of dogmatism—to experience a spiritual “fullness” that the contemporary secular thinker misses out on is nothing short of preposterous. Charles, not only are you demonstrably wrong (given the mountains of counterfactuals); you’re just being silly. Taylor has never been truly secular, so how in heaven’s name would he have any clue how spiritually fulfilling free-thought is? He has thoroughly convinced himself that the fulfillment (gratification?) that Catholicism offers him is the only “real” kind of fulfillment. So he infers that those heathens that don’t partake in the properly-anointed institutionalized dogma must be “unfulfilled”.

According to Taylor, secularists are living in a kind of denial. What Taylor seems not to grasp is that the entire point of secularism is to rise above the denial endemic to religiosity—a denial that Nietzsche called No-Saying. As Nietzsche—a far greater thinker than Taylor—pointed out: Free-thought is about Yes-Saying: saying yes to life—affirming one’s own capacity to discern. The True Worlds on which Taylor stakes his validation are chimerical edifices. He is content, then, to smugly indict free-thought for denying those edifices.

One wonders whether Taylor understands the first thing about Nietzsche. He makes the utterly preposterous claim in a later essay that Nietzsche “rebelled against the idea that our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering.” Really, Chuck? Evidently, you haven’t read *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; for such preservation is the essence of Yes-Saying. It is the religionist who fails to say yes to THIS life, to THIS world...and looks to True Worlds instead. Nietzsche noted that it is Yes-Saying that makes one authentic. Individual autonomy (what Kant called “maturity”) is what enables one to be authentic. Moreover, existential philosophers generally concurred that heteronomy is the basis for inauthenticity.

In his writings, Taylor champions “authenticity” and “fullness” / “fulfillment”...even as each is best realized via freethought. That Taylor doesn’t understand that freethought is the optimal condition for realizing authenticity is ironic, since he seems to deem *himself* authentic. (One wonders if it is possible to simultaneously be authentic and take the Vatican seriously.) If Taylor wants a case-study in authenticity, he may want to better acquaint himself with the life of Wittgenstein, and stop looking for it in dogmatic traditions.

Indeed, some people who are secular are existentially disoriented...or just living an empty life. But to attribute this sad state to lack of religiosity is asinine. (Taylor’s use of “disenchantment” is peculiar. To describe a secular age as a “disenchanted” age is disingenuous and very misleading.) Taylor never explains exactly how he draws this alleged causation from imagined correlation.

The salient juxtaposition that Taylor obfuscates with his disingenuous caricature is as follows: Religion is typically predicated on submission, penitence, supplication, and acrasia. By stark contrast, free-thought is predicated on mental discipline, Kantian “courage”, *arête*, and *encraseia*. Point in case: Religionists obstinately cling to delusions of immortality as a means of both solace and threat. Who, then, is afflicted with *kenosis*, Charles? What Taylor seems not to grasp is that emptiness masquerading as “fullness” is still emptiness. The superficial will-power exhibited by religionists is far from *encraseia*; it’s impassioned—even obsessive—obedience. (A peculiar thing, the will-power to capitulate.)

According to Taylor, secular life “is beset with the malaise of meaninglessness”. One must ask: Has Charles ever actually met a free-thinker? Perhaps he is misconstruing the critical reflection of a freethinker as ennui...while misconstruing the passion of the vociferous religionist as existential integrity. (One

pictures Taylor announcing to all of Scandinavia: “Because you’re not religious, your lives are meaningless.”)

It is a mistake to infer the loss of meaning from a renouncing of superstition. Abdicating dogmatism entails relinquishing *meaning based on dogmas*. It would have been interesting for Taylor to notify Baruch Spinoza, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Arthur Schopenhauer, Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, and Amartya Sen that their lives lacked “meaning”. (If only they’d listened to the pope, perhaps they may have avoided a “malaise of meaninglessness”!) Surely, Taylor jests. Suffice to say: If he wants to observe spiritual vacuous-ness, he should visit the Vatican, not the NAS.

Contrary to Taylor’s contentions, secular explanations of the world have not made the world less wondrous. Experiencing the wonder of the flight of a bird is not undermined by understanding more than did our (superstitious) ancestors about how the bird evolved—and about the principles of aerodynamics. (I suggest that Taylor read Dawkins’ 2011 book, *The Magic of Reality* for more on this point.)

Memo to Charles Taylor: *Fabricated* meaning is hardly *meaningful* in any meaningful sense of the word “meaningful”. The ersatz “meaning” religion offers is a mirage. While those like Taylor keep eagerly drinking the sand in their ersatz oasis, they denigrate the secularist for trying to dig a well.

For his mischaracterization of secularism, Taylor won the infamous Templeton Award. Needless to say, this is a red flag—as no serious scholar would associate himself with the Templeton Foundation. Indeed, no self-respecting intellectual would accept money from such an institution. This should have been the first clue that something fishy was afoot. (The Templeton Award succeeded in tarnishing the reputation of the otherwise esteemable physicist, Freeman Dyson.)

The TF is notorious for endorsing charlatans, and should be recognized for precisely what it is. (If one wants to learn about astrophysics, certainly a publication that has won an Astrology Foundation’s “book of the year” award may not be the most credible source.) When someone purporting to explain, say, chemistry becomes involved with an organization that promotes alchemy, he has forfeited his right to be taken seriously. Charles Taylor should do himself (and everyone else) a favor and stop pretending that he has a profound understanding of genuine secularism.

Admirably, Taylor tries to formulate a way that people of different cultures and heritages can live harmoniously with one another. Taylor’s endorsement of pluralism is admirable enough—yet he makes the common mistake of equating multi-culturalism (noble) with cultural relativism (idiotic). He misses the point of multi-culturalism qua cosmopolitanism: pan-human solidarity can only be forged on a meta-religious (i.e. secular) basis. (Ref. “species being”, Karl Marx; “agape”, the ancient Greeks.)

Taylor’s book would have been more accurately titled, *An Age of Cult Activity That I Will Misleadingly Label “Secularism”*. Someday, perhaps, he might try to write a book about actual secularism. First, he should learn what it means.

(For a more extensive discourse on the points addressed in this book review, see my essays, *Secularism 101* and *5 Myths About Secularism*.)