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Whatever Happened to the Ontic Logos?

GERMAN IDEALISM AND THE LEGITIMACY
OF MODERNITY

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I

Charles Taylor's unique voice – intense, acute, challenging, profound, but never pompous or pretentious – has enriched the conversation between philosophy and politics for more than fifty years. His work is an inspiration and ideal, even to those of us who respectfully dissent from some of the positions he advances. In this paper I am going to register both agreement and disagreement.

Let me start, very briefly, with what I take to be a profound methodological agreement. I too am happy to shroud myself within what, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor light-heartedly calls “the spectre of idealism,”¹ by which I take him to mean that the best way to connect philosophy and society is to understand that ideas – ways of seeing and understanding the world – are not mere by-products of material or economic processes. The mistake (my language, not his) is to imagine that idealism must be simply the inversion of materialism: that the idealist perspective understands society as ultimately determined by a set of independently developing ideal processes in the same way that the Marxists imagined it was by independently developing economic processes.² But that is not the way in which idealism should best be understood.

Moreover, Taylor is also absolutely right, in my opinion, to think that what is at issue in the human sciences is not “mechanistic materialism” so much as “motivational materialism”³ – and that motivational materialism

is something that we should be very reluctant to accept. Human beings are essentially normative agents and any reductive attempt to give an account of their activity in prudential or instrumental terms – as maximising some non-normative value – needs to have a very good reason to undercut what is so salient in any sane person's observation of politics and society: that values and ideals are central to political practice. It would take far more than a vague, generic commitment to "materialism" or the idea of scientific method to make such radical revisionism plausible.

I move now to disagreement. I do so not because I wish to dwell on those disagreements but because I want to use the picture that I shall develop in contrast to Taylor's as a background against which to depict what seem to me to be crucial aspects of a period of thought to which Taylor himself has given the deepest study, but which has receded in prominence in *A Secular Age* – German Idealism. I shall argue that German Idealism represents a seminal moment in the long, drawn-out process of secularization, one that initiates a distinctively modern conception of self-transcendence through community.

To start, here are two pictures of (Latin) Christianity. According to the first, when Christianity was in its heyday – from, shall we say, around the time of the fall of Rome until about 1500 – human beings lived in what was, effectively, a different world. The natural world was a cosmos, an embodiment of divine order and agency. The social world was an integral part of that cosmos, deriving its legitimacy through its relationship to a transcendent source. Furthermore, human beings themselves were different, finding expressive identity within ways of life and political structures whose validity was not a matter for challenge or question. Succinctly put, this was a world "in which spiritual forces impinged on porous agents, in which the social was grounded in the sacred and secular time in higher times, a society moreover in which the play of structure and anti-structure was held in equilibrium; and this human drama unfolded within a cosmos."⁴

Here, in contrast, is a different picture. Human beings seek reconciliation – that is, they need to find ways of understanding the world that enable them to live lives they find acceptable in the face of the inescapable human facts of death and suffering. Appreciating this need must frame our understanding of religions as well as of other systems of belief and practice that may not count as religious, if, by "religion," we understand

something that makes reference to a reality that transcends the world as mortal human beings experience it.

Christianity and its monotheistic sister-religions, Judaism and Islam, respond to the need for reconciliation in a distinctive way. They are both monistic and, essentially, rationalistic. That is to say, they represent views of reality within which everything can ultimately be explained in relation to the agency of a single omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent creator-God.

Yet this monistic rationalism brings with it severe tensions, tensions which express themselves particularly acutely when it comes to reconciling human beings with evil, particularly those evils that are not (at least, are not obviously) the result of human agency: death and physical suffering.⁵ So much so that Christianity is haunted by, as Blumenberg puts it, the “threat of gnosticism.” Evil always threatens to become independent in some way, whether personified in the form of Satan and his fellow “rebel angels” or, more subtly, in compromising the full scope of each of the divine characteristics I mentioned earlier.

Here is Taylor’s own, obviously heartfelt, response to this problem:

Someone close to you dies. You may want to hang on to the love of God, to the faith that they and you are still with God, that love will conquer death, even though you don’t understand how. What do you say to the challenge of theodicy? One answer could be: that in a sense, God is powerless; that is, he cannot just undo this process without abolishing our condition, and hence our coming to him from out or through of this bodily condition – although occasionally the spark of our coming to him lights up, and there can be surprising cures.⁶

Note three things about this passage. First, there is the acceptance of a limitation on divine omnipotence. Evil is the price to be paid for good, even by God – in this case, the good of human, physical embodiment.⁷ But then why should a just God allow this price to be paid by the innocent? At this point, we need to think of an afterlife (“love will conquer death, even though you don’t understand how”). Finally, the door is not closed on the miraculous (“there can be surprising cures”), modern science notwithstanding.

II

My point in putting the problem of theodicy at the centre of our understanding is not to belabour the internal difficulties of Christianity but to bring out the way that this leads to an, as it seems to me, important contrast with the picture of Christianity taken from Taylor that I sketched earlier. If we accept that first picture, the transition away from the embedded world of social meaning of Christianity in its heyday must be puzzling. Why should human beings have chosen the modern world with its coldness, isolation, and disorientation over its rich, meaningful predecessor? Western Europeans appear to have sacrificed their birthright of experiential plenitude for a mess of instrumental knowledge and control. On the second picture, by contrast, a central part of the story of the transformation of Christianity is that it is endogenous; changes came about as human beings responded to problems internal to Christianity that can be connected back to its origins. Given the tensions endemic in the monotheistic project, it is no surprise that no single set of solutions should have proved enduringly stable.

For Augustinian Christianity, the world is *not* good. Fallen humanity has been cut off from divine goodness by Original Sin (although, thanks to the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, not from divine grace) and our life in this world gives constant testimony to this fact – our suffering here serving to point to the central truth that the kingdom of Christ is “not of this world.” Yet this biblical/Pauline/Augustinian narrative of Original Sin is in obvious tension with God’s goodness. If God is good, then he is just, and, if God is just, then, even if it was right for him to punish Adam and Eve a few thousand years ago, how can it be just for him to continue to punish us, their presumed descendants? (This is one of the arguments that added to the agony of Pascal.)

From this perspective, the great watershed of Christianity is not the Protestant Reformation (Luther and Calvin continue the Augustinian tradition, albeit with very different accounts of divine grace) but the early modern assertion of the goodness of the world – an assertion associated with (but not confined to) Deism. The world is good because it has been ordered to further human well-being; the great law of nature is that everything is to be preserved (to use Locke’s phrase) “as much as may be.”⁸ The assertion of the goodness of the world proved fragile, however. Belief in it is widely assumed to have been destroyed by some combination of

the Lisbon earthquake and Voltaire's *Candide*. The problem lies not just in the continuing fact of suffering, which appears to compromise divine omnipotence (why must God "pay the price" of evil for the achievement of the greater good of an overall order?) but also in its uneven distribution, which appears to conflict with divine goodness (how can it be just for some to bear the necessary costs, even if others benefit?). An afterlife, of course, might square accounts, but then there would be no fundamental difference between this view and its Augustinian predecessors – this world is morally incomplete without another one to point to.

III

It may be surprising when I say that Kant – the author of an essay "On the Failure of All Previous Attempts in Theodicy" – should have an answer to the problem of theodicy at all. But he does, I shall argue. Kant's radical solution serves to highlight monotheism's difficulties. But, at the same time, he opens the way to a very different strategy of achieving reconciliation, one that is, I shall argue, transformed and extended by his Idealist successors, and that, after them, becomes a potent ingredient in the self-understanding of our "secular age."

The early modern assertion of the goodness of the world takes an important premise for granted. If the problem lies in death and suffering, then it would seem to be assumed that the goodness of the world lies in – what? – life and happiness. In other words, the problem is posed in what are, broadly speaking, eudaemonist terms. It is this premise that Kant rejects. God's goodness does not consist in his having placed us in a world created for our well-being (in the sense of happiness) but in his gift to us of moral agency – agency in the full, radical sense, so that we are each individually capable of being held responsible for our actions by an impartially just God. For this to be the case, we must be free, informed, and so on.

From this perspective, aspects of Kant's moral philosophy – his doctrine of noumenal freedom, his insistence on the purity of moral motivation and his assertion of the intrinsic value of punishment, to name three of the most salient – that his modern, secular admirers downplay emerge as consistent – indeed fundamental – elements in his enterprise. If I am right – and I think that I am – Kant is not the half-hearted secularist that readers since Heinrich Heine ("*Der alte Lampe muss einen Gott haben*")

have supposed but someone with a strong, if highly unorthodox, religious position – one that comes very close, so far as I can tell, to Socinianism.

But I have no time to explore this here. What is important for my argument is that, for Kant, the central issue of theodicy becomes not happiness but justice – “the bad state which the disproportion between the impunity of the depraved and their crimes seems to indicate in the world.”⁹ What matters, says Kant, is not the sufferings of the righteous, but the fact that evil goes unpunished: “the lament over the lack of justice shown in the wrongs which are the lot of human beings here on earth is directed not at the well-being that does not befall the good, but at the ill that does not befall the evil (although if well-being occurs to the evil then the contrast makes the offence all the greater). For under divine rule even the best of human beings cannot found his wish to fare well on God’s beneficence, for one who only does what he owes can have no rightful claim on God’s benevolence.”¹⁰ It is this – and not the need to compensate unhappy yet morally worthy individuals by offering them happiness in a future life – that makes belief in immortality compelling. “It is from the necessity of punishment that the inference to a future life is drawn,”¹¹ Kant writes in a footnote at the end of the *Metaphysics of Morals* that seems, you may not be surprised to hear, largely to have escaped the notice of Kant’s modern advocates.

Now perhaps this reading makes certain of Kant’s less plausible doctrines consistent, you might say, but if that is the position one ends up with then Kant’s answer to the theodicy problem is hardly an improvement over its predecessors. Be that as it may, the transition from happiness to justice has an extraordinarily important consequence. If the reconciliation of human beings with their condition requires the abolition of death and suffering then it is clear that that is a project that only a divine agent, capable of action that transcends the laws of nature as we know them, can achieve. But Kant’s change of theological perspective creates a secular historical *telos* for the goodness of the world: justice – the coincidence between agency and outcome – is a human project, something that we can bring about together in this life. As he says in his *Lectures on Ethics*:

The final destiny of the human race is moral perfection, so far as it is accomplished through freedom, whereby man, in that case, is capable of the greatest human happiness. God might already have made men perfect in this fashion, and allotted to each his share of

happiness, but in that case it would not have sprung from the inner *principium* of the world. But that inner principle is freedom. The destiny of man is therefore to gain his greatest perfection by means of his freedom. God does not simply will that we should be happy, but rather that we should make ourselves happy, and that is the true morality. The universal end of mankind is the highest moral perfection; if only everyone were so to behave that their conduct would coincide with the universal end, the highest perfection would be thereby attained. Every individual must endeavour to order his conduct in accordance with this end, whereby he makes his contribution such that, if everyone does likewise, perfection is attained.¹²

To put it briefly, we are dependent on one another for justice. The “highest human happiness” is attainable. But to achieve it is a collective endeavour that requires human beings to work together. In a world in which murderers lurk at the door, following our individual duty of truth-telling may lead to horrifying results. It is not enough for one or a few of us to do our duty; every individual must make his contribution – the free riders must pay their fares or get off the bus! Kant’s conception of the highest good brings religion and politics together in the idea of an ethical community. However remote the achievement of justice may be, it remains a viable political ideal: “this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole ... toward a system of well-disposed human beings ... a universal republic based on the laws of virtue.” It is entirely appropriate that Kant raises this idea in his writing on religion, for, as he recognizes, the idea is exactly that of a church – a church whose members are united in the common enterprise of the realization of a virtuous community. Yet it brings the idea of a church down to earth – the attainment of justice is a collective human project, one in which we should see ourselves as engaged through history.

IV

If Kant’s account of the goodness of the world in terms of justice, not happiness, set the frame for what followed, later German Idealism represented a rejection of two of its basic elements. The first (and best-known) is the rejection of the Kantian framework of morality as a matter of law,

duty, choice, desert, punishment and justice – a framework that is, I have claimed, essentially connected in Kant to the idea of the individual as apt to face the judicial verdict of a just God. The rejection of this conceptual network – *Moralität* – is especially clear in Hegel’s early, theological (or theologico-political) writings. Since it is very well known, however, I shall not dwell on it here, except to assert as strongly as I can that the critique of *Moralität* by no means represents a restoration of the kind of connection between morality and happiness that Kant so austere rejected.

Less obvious, but vital, in my opinion, is the abandonment by the later German Idealists of the doctrine of personal immortality. This, of course, was not something to be asserted bluntly and directly at that time, especially not by men seeking employment in state-controlled universities. Yet it is apparent enough in that least diplomatic of the German philosophers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Fichte. Fichte, you will recall, lost his professorship at Jena over what came to be known as the “Atheism Dispute.” Complicated and tangled as that story is, it is worth remembering that its origin lies in the publication by Fichte in his *Philosophisches Journal* of an essay by Friedrich Karl Forberg, one of whose main contentions was to deny belief in an afterlife as necessary to a “moral religion.”

Yet take away the belief in personal immortality and we do not fall back (as was alleged) into “nihilism” – the acceptance of human existence as no more than a limited concatenation of experiences, pleasurable or otherwise. On the contrary, as Hegel documents with brilliance and (perhaps deliberate) obscurity in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, there are other, potent ways of seeking reconciliation through self-transcendence, even when individualistic beliefs in reward and punishment through personal immortality have lost their hold.

Belief in personal immortality offered the hope of self-transcendence through the preservation of personal identity, despite physical destruction. In its place, German Idealism initiates the exploration of self-transcendence through – to use an anachronistic but still, I think, apt term – *identification*.

To get a flavour of what is involved, we can do no better than consider this quotation from Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Gelehrten*. Our spirits are exalted, says Fichte, when we see the way in which human beings have co-operated in a community so that “the successful progress of any member is the successful progress of them all” and all the more so, when we think of it from our own perspective:

Our sense of our own dignity and power increases when we say to ourselves what every one of us can say: My existence is not in vain and without any purpose. I am a necessary link in that great chain which began at that moment when man first became fully conscious of his own existence and stretches into eternity. All these people have laboured for my sake. All that were ever great, wise or noble – those benefactors of the human race whose names I find recorded in world history, as well as the many more whose services have survived their names: I have reaped their harvest. Upon the earth on which they lived I tread in the footsteps of those who bring blessings upon all who follow them. Whenever I wish, I can assume that lofty task which they had set for themselves: the task of making our fellow men ever wiser and happier. Where they had to stop, I can build further. I can bring nearer to completion that noble temple that they had to leave unfinished.

‘But,’ someone may say, ‘I will have to stop too, just like they did.’ Yes! And this is the loftiest thought of all: Once I assume this lofty task I will never complete it. Therefore, just as surely as it is my vocation to assume this task, I can never cease to *act* and thus I can never cease *to be*. That which is called ‘death’ cannot interrupt my work; for my work must be completed, and it can never be completed in any amount of time. Consequently, my existence has no temporal limits: I am eternal. When I assumed this great task I laid hold of eternity at the same time. I lift my head boldly to the threatening stony heights, to the roaring cataract, and to the crashing clouds in their fire-red sea. ‘I am eternal!’ I shout to them. ‘I defy your power! Rain everything down upon me! You earth, and you, heaven, mingle all of our elements in wild tumult. Foam and roar, and in savage combat pulverize the last dust mote of that body which I call my own. Along with its own unyielding project, my will shall hover boldly and indifferently over the wreckage of the universe. For I have seized my vocation and it is more permanent than you. It is eternal, and so too am I!’¹³

Listening to Fichte, we can quite plainly hear (for the first time?) the voice of that distinctive figure of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the secular revolutionary, eager to sublimate his identity into the collective progress of mankind. “The revolutionary,” as Nechayev puts it in his “Revolutionary Catechism,” “is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no

business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution.”¹⁴

Identification with the progressive transformation of society is not the only way for individuals to seek transcendence in community, however. It may equally take a conservative form. It is striking, is it not, how far the rhetoric of modern, romantic conservatism – the submissive self-identification of the individual with the transcendent, organic power of tradition – came on the scene at exactly the same time as Fichte’s radicalization of Kantianism – above all in that “revolutionary book against the Revolution” (Novalis), Edmund Burke’s *Reflections*.

V

What does all of this tell us about the “legitimacy of modernity”? It is common enough for those who criticize our secular age from a commitment to traditional religion to depict the modern world as under the dominance of rationalism, individualism, and voluntarism. Yet to do so ignores how far the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were – for better or for worse – centuries of collectivism, community, and commitment. This is self-transcendence, however, within what is, to use Taylor’s terminology, an “immanent frame.” Such visions of collective self-realization make no claim to overcome the existing laws of nature, entail no belief in an afterlife. They involve forms of identification of new kinds, not mere hand-overs of earlier structures in which an omnipotent creator-God stood at the centre.

Indeed, this turn to the search for self-transcendence through the identification of the self in community has come to inhabit modern theism itself. Rationalistic religion having foundered on the rocks of the theodicy problem, God is no longer the cognitive foundation he was in the heyday of Latin Christianity, confidently issuing dogmatic pronouncements on belief and conduct to be enforced coercively against heretics and unbelievers by his institutional representatives. So what is left? There are, of course, anti-rationalist escape routes – the ostrich strategy of fundamentalism, that accepts “on faith” accounts of the nature of reality that blatantly conflict with everything that we know from science and history; and the desperate, Kierkegaardian/Wittgensteinian fideism that seeks to place religion outside the realm of the factual entirely. For the most part,

however, religion, it seems, has itself become part of the post-Romantic project. God has retreated until he is no more than an elusive and ambiguous horizon at the edge of the search for expressive meaning in community. Perhaps it is better that way.