

This article was downloaded by: [ITHOMSON@UNM.EDU]

On: 21 March 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 935218819]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Inquiry

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713393858>

Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche

Iain Thomson^a

^a University of New Mexico, USA

Online publication date: 21 March 2011

To cite this Article Thomson, Iain(2011) 'Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche', *Inquiry*, 54: 2, 140 – 159

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/0020174X.2011.559050

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2011.559050>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche

IAIN THOMSON^{†*}

University of New Mexico, USA

(Received 22 January 2011)

ABSTRACT *This paper examines Charles Taylor's case against complete secularization in *A Secular Age* in the light of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's critiques of the potential for nihilism inherent in different kinds of philosophical appeals to "transcendence". The Heideggerian critique of metaphysics as ontotheology suggests that the theoretical pluralism Taylor rightly embraces is more consistently thought of as following from a robust ontological pluralism, and that Taylor's own commitment to ontological monism seems to follow from his own desire to leave room in his theoretical account for an ontological creator God who stands outside the world and ultimately unifies its meaning. The Nietzschean critique contends that any such appeal to something that transcends the limits of human finitude remains nihilistic, insofar as such valorizations of the otherworldly undermine our capacity to appreciate and experience the genuine meaningfulness of human existence in its this-worldly finitude. The paper explores Taylor's response to this Nietzschean critique, showing that Taylor "deconstructs" the crucial distinction between immanence and transcendence that any "exclusively humanist" worldview must presuppose. Taylor's response only partly resolves the problem, however, because the Nietzschean can still draw a defensible distinction between legitimate and meaningful appeals to transcendence and illegitimate and nihilistic ones. The paper concludes by suggesting that traditional appeals to a transcendent creator God, a heavenly afterlife, and so on, continue to run afoul of Nietzsche's critique of the nihilism of otherworldliness, and that we would do better to explicitly abjure such otherworldly appeals.*

"I would say: no human being is without religion. And: Every human being, in a certain sense, opens out beyond himself [*über sich hinaus*]; that means [we are each] de-ranked [*ver-rückt*]."

Martin Heidegger (1964)¹

Correspondence Address: Iain Thomson, Humanities 523, MSC 03-2140, 1 University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001, USA. Email: ithomson@unm.edu

I. What does the owl of Minerva do all day? (Or, must the sleep of reason produce monsters?)

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* is a humbling book, deeply impressive in its breadth of references and largely convincing in its clear and creative interpretations of a huge range of difficult thinkers and their ideas. Let me mention just two of my favorite examples. First, Taylor revealingly illuminates the way Saint Augustine uses the concept of eternity as a higher-order temporal perspective from which the everyday disarray of life's chronological unfolding can be organized into a meaningful whole. Second, Taylor also shows, with surprising sympathy, how Camus' proudly atheistic embrace of a world without any overarching meaning led to his "taste for lost causes [*les causes perdues*]", Camus' refusal of "the great, overall solution" (be it religious, political, or philosophical) and his consequent rediscovery of life's meaning in the always particular struggles of ordinary human life. Here the main difference between the Saint and the sinner is that, while Augustine thinks life's meaning would be hopelessly fragmented and dispersed without the perspective of the eternal from which to unify it, Camus rebels intellectually against the idea of any such ultimate order and instead locates meaning only in the specific struggles that constitute everyday life. This juxtaposition of Augustine and Camus thus raises the issue of whether we really need ideas like eternity, which wholly transcend the finitude of human existence, in order to be able to find this life fully meaningful, or whether life's meaning might be better respected by relinquishing such ideas.² That is the question I shall try to think through a bit here.

Taylor's interpretations of Augustine and Camus also show that he is capable of extending his interpretive talents to the very antipodes of the traditional continuum between religious belief and secular atheism. If there is a limit beyond which Taylor's considerable hermeneutic sympathies begin to wane, this point is not to be found in his treatment of those giants of twentieth-century existentialism, Heidegger and Camus, who secularized but still struggled with the question of the meaning of human existence. Taylor's sympathies start to fade only when he addresses some of the other heirs of this existential struggle, namely, "Nietzsche and his followers" (p. 299, p. 589), by which Taylor means those proudly-atheistic scientific naturalizers and "postmodern" philosophers for whom "[t]he transcendent is off the map" (p. 374). It is as if these post-Nietzscheans, standing on the shoulders of giants, just pick up where Camus left off. Foregoing their own heroic struggles with "the absurd"—that is, with the traumatic experience in which "the imperious demand in us to make sense of the world, to find some *unified* meaning in it," is "brutally denied by an indifferent universe" (p. 583, my emphasis)—these post-Nietzscheans reject any appeal to something that stands outside space and time and simply take it as axiomatic that we must understand the meaning of existence in "exclusively humanist" terms (p. 569).

The problem, Taylor contends, is that by presupposing Camus' conclusion, these post-Nietzscheans cover up that innate hunger for "wholeness," "fullness," and "fulfillment" (p. 5) that leads human beings out beyond the limits of their own lives in search of some greater meaning, some unified understanding of how it all hangs together and our place within that larger whole.³

I think Taylor is right that, for millennia, Western humanity's attempt to understand the meaning of existence has taken the shape of a quest for a single overarching or underlying vision that could explain the meaning of life in unified terms.⁴ But it is not immediately clear why Taylor thinks that humanity's pursuit of genuine meaning, of "fullness", should continue to take the form of a search for "unified" meaning, or "wholeness". Instead, one would think that Taylor's robust pluralism would incline him to the opposite conclusion, namely, that it is no longer credible to suppose that all existence could have a single, overarching meaning. The very supposition that there is (or even could be) a single meaning of being in general is something that the later Heidegger argues we should transcend as part of the ontotheological legacy of Western metaphysics—along with the very idea of a creator God who stands outside the secular world, implicitly unifying the meaning of existence (that is, both the meaning of the universe and of our own lives) from his God's eye perspective or "view from nowhere". The rejection of such a wholly transcendent standpoint, shared by thinkers as diverse as Heidegger and Nagel, cannot credibly be dismissed as "the claim of a certain trendy postmodernism" (p. 716), as Taylor sometimes seems wont to do.⁵ What the later Heidegger suggests, as I read him at least, is that, in our contemporary situation (dominated as it is by a "technological" understanding of all entities as intrinsically meaningless "resources" [*Bestand*] standing by to be optimized), the pursuit of genuine meaning is served better by cultivating a poetic sensitivity to multiple meanings than by continuing to pursue some single overarching or underlying unity to all things. Indeed, if there is any such unity to things, it is to be found only in that stubborn phenomenological excessiveness by which beings resist our best efforts to exhaust their meaning conceptually.

The later Heidegger's ontological pluralism thus suggests that the meaning of being itself is intrinsically multiple, and that this multiplicity of genuine meanings can never be reduced to a single all-encompassing understanding.⁶ Taylor seems to only half-agree with Heidegger. Taylor passionately rejects "nomolatriy" or "code fetishism" (p. 707)—that is, "the temptation to put into effect a code which brooks no limit"—as nothing less than "the spirit of totalitarianism" (p. 51). Taylor even claims to discern this totalitarian spirit at work in contemporary liberalism, suggesting that Rawls' and Dworkin's attempts to justify liberalism by appealing to "a single principle" demonstrate "how deeply modernity has invested in the myth of the single omnipresent code" (p. 52). Even after going this far, however, it is as if Taylor wants to stop half-way, confining his critique of humanity's belief in some monolithic

order to the philosophical, theoretical, and scientific attempts to *articulate and express* the meaning of existence in terms of some single theoretical framework. Taylor seems not to want to take the further step of suggesting that the reason we cannot exhaustively codify the meaning of our reality has to do not only with the limits of codification but also with the nature of this reality itself. In this way, Taylor resists the later Heideggerian intuition that the very meaning of what we like to call “reality” is itself inherently multiple.

In other words, Taylor seems to want to be an ontological monist and a theoretical pluralist, committed both to the idea that the meaning of reality is ultimately unified and to the impossibility of ever fully expressing that meaning in theoretical terms. The later Heidegger seems more consistent, in that he is both an ontological and a theoretical pluralist at the same time, convinced that the reason we will never exhaust the meaning of being in theoretical or conceptual terms is that the meaning of being itself is inherently plural. For, Heidegger adopts the phenomenologically realist intuition that it is the inherent pluralism of what we like to call “reality” that *lends itself to* our multiple ways of taking it up. (In Heidegger’s terms of art, the border between our intelligible “worlds” and the inexhaustible “earth” that “juts through” and supports these worlds but also withdraws from them should be understood as a “rift-structure”, that is, as a texture of rifts, edges, and partial borders that divide being itself asunder, fracturing and pluralizing the source of historical intelligibility.)⁷ Against such ontological pluralism, Taylor, the great Hegel scholar, holds to the more idealist intuition that reality is ultimately singular although our ways of taking it up are multiple. Yet, such a dichotomy between reality and our ways of taking it up seems to gain its intuitive plausibility from the same entrenchment of subject/object dualism in our thinking that Taylor’s “deconstruction of epistemology” convincingly undermines (pp. 557–65). And if this is right, then perhaps one is not entitled to have different, seemingly inconsistent theoretical and ontological commitments.⁸ In other words, if this very distinction between ontological and theoretical levels quickly breaks down (as it seems to), then robust pluralists like Heidegger and Taylor have no reason to believe that the meaning of existence could ever be unified. No reason, perhaps, but faith: If one believes in an ontotheological creator God who stands beyond space and time, implicitly unifying the meaning of creation, then one’s ontological commitments include an appeal to something outside the limits of possible experience, something on which our best theoretical efforts can gain no purchase. (Here we broach the question of “transcendence”, which will be of central importance in what follows.)

Also telling in this regard is the way Taylor presents his own version of the later Heidegger’s critique of Western humanity’s longstanding quest for metaphysical foundations. In Heidegger’s critique, metaphysical foundationalism takes the form of a succession of ontotheological attempts to grasp the entire intelligible order from both the inside-out and the outside-in, to reach both the innermost “ontological” core and the outermost “theological” perspective

on what-is. *A Secular Age* contains a poignant chapter on “The dark abyss of time”, in which Taylor points out that human intelligence can now grasp neither the outermost limits of the universe in space nor the evolutionary origin of the human species in time, and thus that our contemporary self-understanding hovers, knowingly suspended in a vast and “unfathomable” abyss (pp. 322–51). Here, in effect, Taylor substitutes a critique of the temporal gaps in the evolutionary record for Heidegger’s more general critique of humanity’s quest for *any* single ontological foundation underlying and implicitly unifying all entities. Taylor’s alternative account thus allows him to capture some of the force of Heidegger’s (Nietzsche-informed) critique of the groundlessness of our contemporary age without adopting Heidegger’s own view that *any* belief in the ultimate unity of being needs to be “gotten over” (*verwunden*) as part of the pernicious legacy of Western ontotheology.

It is not clear that we could ever finally decide this disagreement between Taylor’s ontological monism and Heidegger’s ontological pluralism, since there is no way to completely disentangle the meaning of being itself from our various ways of understanding it, so as to determine if being is ultimately singular or plural. This is why I have suggested that the very distinction between ontological and theoretical levels collapses, so that the more consistent position is simply to be a pluralist across the board. Yet, despite its conceptual problems, this is not a distinction without a difference, because something important turns on it: Taylor’s ontological monism allows him to reconcile his robust theoretical pluralism with his apparent belief in some form of transcendent ontotheological creator God who implicitly unifies the meaning of existence (albeit in some way that remains mysterious to human understanding). This desire to leave room for an ontotheological creator God thus seems to help explain why Taylor seems unwilling to follow the later Heidegger’s move from theoretical to ontological pluralism.⁹ Let us thus bracket their important disagreement on the question of whether the meaning of existence could ultimately be unified and turn to a side of Taylor’s critique of post-Nietzscheanism with which I think Heidegger himself would half-agree.¹⁰

What *A Secular Age* most forcefully objects to about the post-Nietzschean proponents of wholesale secularization is that their philosophical worldviews take the shape of what Taylor calls a “closed immanent frame” (p. 548) or “closed world structure” (p. 589), where (in both cases) “closed” means “closed to transcendence” (p. 557). Of course, what exactly “transcendence” means is not obvious, and Taylor himself exploits this fact in his efforts to challenge both the cogency and the desirability of the post-Nietzschean quest for a secularization without remainder. Taylor maintains that the aim of *A Secular Age* is to explain *secularization*, that is, “the rise of unbelief” (p. 568).¹¹ As one reads the work it becomes increasingly clear, however, that *A Secular Age* is dedicated not just to explaining but also to *resisting* “the coming of a secular age” (p. 14).

At its core, Taylor's intellectual resistance to complete secularization takes the form of an extended argument meant to suggest that two different forms of self-closure are equally illegitimate: neither the immanent subjective sphere nor the exclusively humanist worldview can make good on their pretensions to rigorous self-closure. If Taylor is right about this, then some of the same criticisms directed against modern "subjectivism" by Heidegger and his heirs should by rights also be turned against the post-Nietzschean worldviews of scientism and (much more problematically) "postmodernism," insofar as proponents of these worldviews believe they can secure the borders of their knowledge domains in a way that will rigorously exclude any appeal to something that wholly transcends these domains.¹² In the end, then, Taylor's stand against secularization comes down not to a clear line he draws in the sand but, rather, to a suggestion that no such clear line can be drawn between a legitimate immanence and an illegitimate transcendence, the crucial border on which the post-Nietzscheans rely. Let us thus explore Taylor's case against the post-Nietzschean rejection of transcendence, seeing in what sense the later Heidegger's views converge with Taylor's (since we have already seen just where they finally diverge).

II. "No human being is without religion. . . . Every human being . . . [is] deranged"

In Taylor's lucid genealogy of the historical rise of the modern subject (which draws on Hegel and Heidegger and recapitulates the central theme from *Sources of the Self*), *A Secular Age* convincingly "deconstructs" the picture of subjectivity as a self-enclosed sphere of immanence, showing instead that the self necessarily reaches beyond any such "closed immanent frame" (in its preconceptual practical relations to the world, its use of language and other inherently intersubjective or communal concepts, and so on). Taylor then shows that it is a natural (though not necessary) next step for those already committed to the modern myth of the self-enclosed subjective sphere to picture not just the self but knowledge in general as if it were a system capable of rigorous self-closure (pp. 539–93). In this way, *A Secular Age* helps explain the epistemological motivations behind the rise of reductive "materialism" (p. 302) and that scientific "naturalism" (p. 712) which believes it can eliminate anything that cannot be demonstrated empirically from its conceptual framework.

Taylor's response to such scientific hubris is quick but devastating: No theoretical framework can achieve rigorous closure by completely securing its own axiomatic presuppositions. Following Hegel (and building on Dreyfus's influential interpretation of Heidegger), Taylor argues that any adequate understanding of human knowledge must recognize and take into account the broader historical "social imaginary"—that is, the holistically interconnected and continually evolving "background" of largely preconceptual

practices—which forms the necessary precondition for the formation and intelligibility of explicit theoretical beliefs (pp. 159–211). For, explicit theoretical beliefs always draw on this preconceptual “background” without ever being able to exhaustively articulate it conceptually. As a result, one’s theoretical framework can never be purified of all the beliefs which appeal to something that has not itself been demonstrated empirically. The very belief that one’s system of knowledge is or could be purged of everything that has not been demonstrated can thus be understood as a dogmatic *faith* that underwrites eliminative materialism, scientific naturalism, and any other would-be “closed immanent frame”.

Here Taylor, in his own gentler and more modest way, comes very close to the provocation from the later Heidegger that I have made the epigraph of this paper, the surprising assertion that: “No human being is without religion. And: Every human being, in a certain sense, opens out beyond himself [*über sich hinaus*]; that means [we are each] de-ranged [*ver-rückt*].” In the televised clip of the 1964 interview from which these deliberately contentious lines are drawn, Heidegger prefaces them with an immanent critique of the proud atheism of Marxian historical materialism:

I would say also that human beings—for example, the communists—have a religion when they believe in science [or “knowledge”, *Wissenschaft*]. They believe unconditionally in modern science. And this unconditional belief—that means their confidence in the security of the results of science—is a belief and is something that in a certain sense goes beyond [*hinausgeht*] the existence of any single person, and is thus a religion.¹³

Here Heidegger is not only suggesting that the historical materialist belief that the laws of capitalist economics render the communist revolution inevitable is a contradictory form of anti-religious religious faith—that is, a faith that fails to recognize itself as faith. Heidegger’s larger point is that all of us in the secular world suffer this contradiction to some degree. No individual’s knowledge rests solely on what that individual has experienced for him- or herself; in fact, the foundations of our belief systems extend far beyond the limits of our own individual selves. The content of our selves is largely constituted in terms of these broader belief systems, so we are each bound to belief systems that shape us much more than we shape them, that have always already formed us in ways we will never fully understand. Thrown into a world we did not make (and whose influence on us we can never render wholly transparent to ourselves), we all understand ourselves in terms of belief systems which we can never fully reconstitute and reappropriate. All of us thus remain inextricably *bound* to these larger belief systems whose truth each of us always takes partly on faith; and in this literal sense, Heidegger suggests, we are each “religious” (from the Latin *religare*, “to bind”).

For the same reasons, Heidegger adds (giving his rhetorical knife a final twist), each of us is also “de-ranged” (*Ver-rückt*), in the literal sense that our tacit belief or confidence in the reliable orderliness of our self-understanding is “disarranged” or “put out of order” by the actual constitution of the systems of knowledge on which our self-understanding depends. For, these broader systems of knowledge do not take the algebraic shape of a single self-grounding hierarchy of propositions (let alone of a single system fully reappropriated within each self), but instead are holistically interconnected and spread across diverse communities of researchers (living and dead), in manifold ways.¹⁴ We could thus add that we also “de-ranged” in the other sense Heidegger and Taylor both suggest, namely, that the limited *range* of subjectivity, the allegedly self-enclosed borders of the subjective sphere, in fact already opens out beyond the subject itself, its borders criss-crossed in myriad ways (through our preconceptual pragmatic interactions, our use of a language whose meanings we did not invent, the communal nature of the foundations of our beliefs, and so on). Subjectivity itself is “de-ranged” in this sense because, as Heidegger puts it (in 1929–30), “to *be* a subject means to be a being in and as transcendence” (P, p. 108 / GA 9, p. 138).¹⁵ By “transcendence,” Heidegger means “being held out beyond entities” into their being, thereby opening up a world in which entities can become *intelligible* as entities (P, p. 91 / GA 9, p. 115). Heidegger thus agrees with Taylor that to be a human being is to transcend the limits of any allegedly self-enclosed subjective sphere. Dasein transcends subjectivity, but *can any clear limits be drawn around Dasein’s transcendence?* That, as we will see, is the crucial question.

The double jab by which Heidegger asserts that each human existence is *religiously deranged*—necessarily opening beyond itself and so never entirely orderable (which also means not fully amenable to direction or control)—reveals Heidegger’s wry and rather mischievous sense of humor. By suggesting that the scientific are religious, and the religious deranged, Heidegger’s joke seeks both to deflate the over-confidence of scientific self-assurance and to unsettle the sober rectitude of religious dogmatism.¹⁶ Beyond the joke, however, Heidegger’s lingering provocation is that all our “beliefs” that have not been validated by our own personal experience (an endless task, given the holism of knowledge) can be equated with religious “faith”. Taylor himself asserts something similar. Building on the work of René Girard, Taylor criticizes those who (like scientific naturalists) cannot stand to recognize their confidence in the security of their guiding presuppositions as *faith* (that is, as a belief that will never be completely justified by the results it generates). The problem is that those who cannot acknowledge their “faith” in the foundations of their own beliefs sometimes zealously dedicate themselves to eradicating an external enemy who symbolizes the very trait they can neither face nor eliminate in themselves. This “scapegoat mechanism” (p. 686) clearly helps explain some of the more aggressive atheistic assaults on religious belief that have emerged recently from scientific quarters (at least in the

case of Dawkins).¹⁷ Moreover, this equation of unshakable confidence in the never fully provable foundations of one's beliefs with religious *faith* is what motivates Taylor's broadest critique of any "closed immanent" perspective, that is, of any worldview that seeks to cut itself off from that which completely transcends humanity's experience of reality.

I think Heidegger's and Taylor's provocative equation of unconditional scientific confidence with religious faith is quite revealing. But I also think that recognizing the intellectually unconscionable dogmatism shared by both secular and religious extremists can help suggest a way in which we non-dogmatic secularizers can meet Taylor's challenge to demarcate a principled distinction between legitimate and illegitimate transcendence. What I would thus like to suggest is that there is an important set of dogmatically held beliefs in which the problem is that the task of validating these beliefs (by reconnecting them with the reality in which they are grounded) is not just an endlessly ongoing communal task but, instead, an in principle impossible endeavor. I think we can legitimately demarcate the border of some illegitimately transcendent beliefs, in other words, by identifying an important class of beliefs that are grounded not in foundations rightly recognized as never completely knowable but which, instead, appeal to foundations explicitly declared to be in principle unknowable by living beings.

Belief in that which is never completely knowable is what we living human beings have, once we reject the dogmatism that Taylor and Heidegger rightly uncover. Yet, believing in what is never completely knowable by living beings is different, in principle, from having faith in what is in principle unknowable to us or completely beyond the realm of possible experience by living beings. It is this dogmatic belief in the latter—faith in the *known unknowable*, if you will—that deserves to be rejected by non-dogmatic secularizers as a pernicious form of transcendence, at least in those cases (be they secular or religious) where this faith in the unknowable generates what Nietzsche teaches us to recognize as the nihilism of otherworldliness.¹⁸ Or so I shall contend by way of a conclusion.

III. Conclusion: Transcending versus transcendence

As I suggested earlier, Taylor's largest target in *A Secular Age* is not just atheism but any "exclusively humanist" worldview that would rule the appeal to transcendence out of bounds, dismissing it as methodologically illegitimate, historically outdated, ideologically oppressive, cognitively cowardly, psychologically stunted, and so on. Besides the moves already mentioned, another important strand of Taylor's defense of transcendence is his recurrent reminder that the human aspiration to transcend the given seems ineliminable. As Taylor points out, even the most militantly atheistic or resolutely naturalistic of Nietzscheans celebrate "self-overcoming" and continue striving to transcend the limits of the world as they find it (p. 630).¹⁹ Indeed, it seems

clear that even the most complacent “coach potato” wants *more*—more TV channels, more football games to watch, more beer to numb that vague sense of discontent which the chatter of the play-by-play and color commentaries cannot quite drown out. The seemingly incontestable fact that all ordinary human beings have unmet aspirations for fulfillment gives Taylor another reason to suggest, *pace* the post-Nietzscheans, that there is no rigorous way “to draw a clear line between acceptable and unacceptable ways of transcending” (p. 630). Thus Taylor challenges the secularizing proponents of any closed immanent perspective to draw a defensible distinction between “immanence” and “transcendence” (p. 632), a distinction which does justice both to our recurring lack of satisfaction with our existing world and to our ongoing efforts to transcend the limits of the world as we find it.²⁰

Now, I think one need not identify either with “Nietzsche and his followers” or with most self-described “postmodernists” in order to wonder if this is really such an insurmountable challenge. *Pace* Taylor, it seems clear that Nietzscheans do not typically downplay the perennial dissatisfactions of human life—quite the contrary.²¹ Nietzsche himself set the tone by celebrating our recurrent dissatisfaction with the high water marks of previous human achievement as salutary evidence that the evolutionary arms race between competing forms of life continues unabated, despite contemporary humanity’s tendencies toward a self-satisfied complacency. Recall *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s glorification of “the hour of the great contempt”, “the hour in which your happiness, too, arouses your disgust, and even your reason and your virtue”.²² Here Nietzsche advocates a recurrent rather than a permanent dissatisfaction, one which keeps human complacency at bay by celebrating our striving to surpass all earlier achievements, yet which does not pass over into nihilistic dissatisfaction with life on earth in general. How, then, does Nietzsche draw that crucial line?

Notice that in the same breath in which Nietzsche calls for continual overcoming, for relentlessly pushing the boundaries of achievement by pursuing difficult goals (such as goals which have never yet been achieved), he also criticizes the pursuit of goals that are by definition impossible for living beings to achieve. Thus, in the same speech that celebrates our tendency to grow dissatisfied with our highest achievements thus far (and so to seek to surpass them), Zarathustra famously calls for his audience to

remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes . . . Despisers of life are they . . . Once the sin against God was the greatest sin, but God died, and these sinners died with him. To sin against the earth is now the most dreadful thing, and to value the entrails of the unknowable higher than the meaning of the earth.²³

Nietzsche’s term for the type of transcendence he objects to is “otherworldly” (*überirdisch*, literally, that which goes beyond the earthly). In Nietzsche’s

conceptual vocabulary, the *otherworldly* is something impossible for living beings to attain or experience in life, our vain desire for which leads us to consider even the best we can ever achieve to be insufficient and unsatisfying. Nietzsche's two main examples of the otherworldly are the Platonic "forms" (according to which, for instance, nothing we ever encounter or create in this world will be as beautiful as the perfect "form" of beauty) and the Christian "Heaven" (conceived as a place some will go after this life, compared to which our world is a mere "vale of tears"). Hence Nietzsche's well-known quip that Christianity is merely "Platonism for the masses." The core of Nietzsche's objection is that the unfulfillable desire for the other-worldly generates a false sense of the meaninglessness of this world. The exact inverse of the "sour grapes" phenomenon (in which something desired but out of reach is deemed undesirable), this *nihilism of otherworldliness* denigrates even the best that we living human beings can attain in the name of something we cannot; our "earthly" aspirations are devalued by comparison to unfulfillable "otherworldly" dreams.

Nietzsche thus proposes, in effect, that we should embrace a "sour grapes" response to the otherworldly, consciously rejecting the pursuit of that which we know we can never attain in life. Christians understandably tend to bristle at this, so, for a less controversial illustration of the nihilism of otherworldliness, we might imagine a scenario in which Tantalus, finally given food to slake his immense hunger, spits it out in disgust for failing to live up to what he has long imagined would be the out-of-this-world taste of those tantalizing grapes hanging forever beyond his reach. Or, for a more mundane example, we might think of our many contemporaries who feel miserable with their bodies (or the bodies of their loved ones) because they compare so unfavorably with the air-brushed and computer-enhanced pictures in the magazines—in other words, because their bodies do not live up to a degree of beauty that no human body actually instantiates. Or, finally, recall the recent "Avatar effect," in which movie-goers reported feeling depressed by the comparatively "gray" and "meaningless" world they encountered when they left the movie theater. These viewers reported wishing they could instead follow the film's hero by dying to this earthly body and living on in another, virtual reality (like some orthodox Christians, no doubt, but even more like those would-be full-time denizens of *Second Life*, *World of Warcraft*, etc., for whose nihilistic aspiration to exist entirely online "Avatar" provides a striking apologia).²⁴ For good Nietzschean reasons, then, I think we can reject as illegitimately nihilistic any belief in the known unknowable that leads us to encounter what we can experience in this life as meaningless by comparison.

Of course, such examples will only work as illustrations of the nihilism of otherworldliness that Nietzsche criticizes if we assume that what is desired in each case is in fact unachievable by those who feel tortured by not possessing it. Yet, that assumption is precisely what Taylor calls into question. What Taylor's challenge suggests is that there is no easy way to determine whether

such goals are truly unattainable, or whether they might be attainable with sufficient effort (especially if we allow that effort to be stretched out over multiple generations of living beings). What if the fox in Aesop's fable had instead chosen to work on its vertical leap, or sought some other way to get those grapes? What if human beings dedicated themselves to engineering bodies as beautiful as those airbrushed ones in the magazines, or to making our world as lush and ecologically harmonious as the one those depressed moviegoers encountered in "Avatar"? How can we conclude ahead of time that all such tasks are doomed to failure? Clearly, we cannot. Hence Taylor's skepticism about drawing any rigorous distinction "between acceptable and unacceptable ways of transcending" (p. 630). I think Taylor is right in at least this much: A precise boundary between the attainable and the unattainable will be impossible to establish ahead of time in most of the interesting cases. These interesting cases will usually be found in the middle of the spectrum between those goals that are simple and those that are impossible to attain—as, for example, the desire to visit other inhabited planets falls somewhere between, say, the hope to feel sunlight on one's face and the wish to walk on the sun itself; or as the aspiration to make a significant work of art falls somewhere between the desire simply to draw and the wish to draw a perfect circle.

Yet, none of this undermines Nietzsche's critique of the pursuit of *in principle* unattainable goals as potentially nihilistic. Nietzsche suggests that the crucial difference between a praiseworthy *transcending* of the limits of one's current world (a transcending evident in trying to meet a difficult philosophical challenge, for example, whether or not one succeeds), on the one hand, and the *transcendence* which he criticizes as nihilistic, on the other hand, turns on whether or not that toward which one strives is *in principle* attainable for living beings. Taylor is right to suggest that this question of whether one is pursuing attainable ends cannot be answered a priori in a wide range of cases, but the crucial conclusion that Taylor wants to draw from this fact still does not follow, because traditional religious belief seems to be committed to precisely the sort of in principle unattainable goals against which Nietzsche's critique still holds. Taylor rightly shows that the line between immanence and transcendence is blurred, but in cases like this one, a blurred line between what is being distinguished does not do away with the distinction. The fact that night and day blur together during dawn and dusk does not mean that we cannot distinguish night from day in their ordinary instances, and the same, I think, holds for the distinction between "immanence" and "transcendence" (p. 632), despite the larger grey area between them. The post-Nietzschean can point out that some goals are unattainable in life by definition—for instance, goals which require one to die first, as part of the price of admission—and that the traditional religious understanding of Heaven is one such goal. As far as I can see, then, Taylor's challenge does little to block the brunt of Nietzsche's criticism of the Christian belief in an afterlife, in so far as this afterlife is ordinarily (that is, literally) conceived.²⁵

For the same reason, Nietzsche's criticism of nihilistic otherworldliness will also cut against any conception of God as both the sole source of the meaning of existence and as a wholly transcendent entity, that is, as a source of meaning understood to be in principle beyond the reach of the mortal existence. This criticism might bother Protestants more than Catholics, insofar as Protestants tend to stress the cognitive gulf between God and humanity, whereas Catholics tend to believe that it is in our nature to be able to know God and so emphasize the divine spark responsible for our intimations of the divine.²⁶ Of course, Nietzsche's response to the traditional Catholic claim that to be made in the image of God means to be constituted so as to be able to come to know Him is even more direct; Nietzsche's counter-claim that we have now uncovered the loss of this cognitive connection is central to his understanding of the "death of God". Remember that Nietzsche stages his "madman" as a messenger who would have us face up to the profound significance of an "event" which has *already* occurred. For Nietzsche it is Kant who "killed God" in this sense—who "unchained this earth from its sun"—by demonstrating the limits of metaphysical knowledge and the fallaciousness of the traditional proofs for God's existence.²⁷

I should perhaps close by saying whether I think Nietzsche's critique of otherworldly nihilism tells against Taylor's own understanding of God, but I found Taylor's views on this subject difficult to pin down in *A Secular Age*. Taylor repeatedly employs Capon's image of God as "a skilled tennis player, who can always return the serve" (p. 277), indeed, "as the supreme tennis player, who responds to our bad moves with new ways of countering them" (p. 671). This metaphor suggests a God who is both outside our history—situated on the other side of the net, as it were—and yet who acts within this history, returning even "the skewed serve" human beings "have lobbed into history" (p. 277) in masterful ways which we can never fully anticipate. In the end, I think it is only insofar as such a God both (1) stands outside history or experience and (2) leads us to denigrate this history or experience by comparison that Nietzsche's critique takes hold.²⁸ It seems clear that the second condition does not obtain in Taylor's own case, if we can take his inspiringly meaningful struggles here on earth as witness to the views he keeps closer to his vest in *A Secular Age*.

Notes

- * An earlier version of this paper was presented at the "Saving the Sacred in a Secular Age" conference at UC Riverside, 26 February 2010. For helpful comments and criticisms, I would like to thank Dana Belu, Albert Borgmann, Craig Calhoun, Hubert Dreyfus, Peter Gordon, Pierre Keller, Sean Kelly, Charles Taylor, Mark Wrathall, and several members of the audience (whose names I did not catch). My thanks also to the other participants in a lively reading group at UNM on *A Secular Age*: John Bussanich, Russell Goodman, Brent Kalar, Paul Katsafanas, and Phil Williamson.

1. This quotation is from a televised interview with Heidegger from 1964 (the segment is titled “Über Religion”). See “Inventer la télévision”, interview with Pierre Tchernia, Claude Santelli, and Michèle Cotta”, in: Bourdon *et al.* (Eds.), *La grande aventure du petit écran*, p. 20; quoted in part by Chaplin, Tamara (2007), *Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), pp. 214–15. I explain this quotation below.
2. See Taylor, Charles (2007) *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 55–59, pp. 583–89; the quotations are from pp. 585–86. (All subsequent unprefixed references in the text are to this work.) On the face of it, the fact that an eminent Catholic philosopher like Taylor should prove so enlightening about Saint Augustine will probably seem less surprising than that he demonstrates such sympathetic insight into Camus. Yet, because I count myself a member of Taylor’s secular audience, for me the opposite is the case: It seems at least as remarkable that Taylor should be able to convey the appeal of Augustine’s religious view as successfully as he does Camus’s heroic atheism. Of course, Taylor might be less happy to hear that I found myself thinking that much of what was so appealing about Augustine’s view could be secularized (by replacing “eternity” with a second-order perspective available in the here and now—such as Heidegger’s understanding of authenticity in *Being and Time*), and that to do so would constitute a significant improvement to the view. But I imagine, conversely, that Taylor’s own fondness for Camus might have something to do with the ironic fact that Camus’ heroic embrace of the endless uphill struggle now possesses a certain suggestiveness for an intellectual Christian laboring in today’s largely secular academy, who can thus draw religious inspiration from Camus’ originally atheistic idea that: “The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart.” (That, of course, is the penultimate line of the [1991] title essay of Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* [New York: Vintage], p. 123.) Many of us are indeed “cross-pressured”, as Taylor likes to say (Taylor suggests that we all are and will continue to be, but that seems more doubtful to me), and, depending on a reader’s own position along the complex continua of religious belief, Taylor’s book will prove edifying and challenging in different ways and degrees (especially to those who dogmatically occupy the extreme poles of belief and unbelief), a striking rhetorical fact that I take to be another sign of the work’s success.
3. We might even say: some understanding of “how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term”, as Sellars famously evoked the purportedly systematic aims of the philosophical desire to understand. See Sellars, Wilfrid (1963) *Science, Perception and Reality* (New York: Routledge), p. 37.
4. On Western humanity’s historical succession of “ontotheological” attempts to ground the intelligible order from the inside-out and the outside-in simultaneously, see my (2005) *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press), Ch. 1.
5. Even Taylor’s hasty critique of Lyotard as a self-refuting grand-narrativist of the end of grand narratives (p. 573) is based on a widespread misreading of Lyotard’s actual view. Although there are incautious sentences in Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* that his opponents have taken out of context to caricature his ideas, Lyotard’s considered view is that the two metanarratives originally meant to justify the meaning and purpose of the modern University are no longer credible. Lyotard argues that we should relinquish the metanarratives of “unity” and “emancipation”—i.e., the ideas that the new integration of active research that formed the modern university would lead us to uncover the organic interconnectedness of all knowledge, or else would contribute to the progressive emancipation of all human beings—because neither result obtained historically. Lyotard quite self-consciously proposes his own alternative metanarrative to justify the university today (in terms of “paralogy” rather than unity or freedom), and there is nothing self-contradictory in his so doing. Because Lyotard does not reject all metanarratives as

incredible, he cannot simply be refuted by pointing out that such position would be a metanarrative and thus would be incredible itself. On this common but superficial dismissal of Lyotard as a self-undermining relativist, see my (2011 forthcoming) *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press) Ch. 4.

6. (Hence Heidegger's Hegel-inspired pursuit of a "transcendence" or "sublation" of unity: In the later Heidegger's terms of art, we should learn to understand the being of entities in terms of being as such, that is, as always partly expressible but never fully exhaustible.) Heidegger does not remain agnostic about the ultimate nature of reality as Kant does but, instead, phenomenologizes the Kantian noumenal. Nor does the fact that in some subdomains of being, such as those studied by mathematics and physics, the goal has long been the precise exactitude of an ontological monism, show that being itself has or even could have only one meaning. Rather, Heidegger clearly thinks that the mathematical understanding of being is just one understanding: It is a particularly useful one, but the danger of its powerful usefulness is the temptation of the scientific illusion that all being could be understood in terms of such monosemic exactitude. Heidegger, following Aristotle, consistently maintains that it is a sign of a lack of education to try to impose the standards from one region of entities on another, or to think that "rigor" can simply be equated with precision when in fact, e.g., an interpretation of a poem that insists it mean one and only one thing would clearly rest on inappropriate standards and a failure to appreciate the essential polysemy of poetry (from which the later Heidegger learns some central lessons).
7. On this point, see my *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 3.
8. This seems to be the main point of the later Heidegger's appropriation of Parmenides' notoriously recondite saying, "For thinking and being are the same." For Heidegger, "sameness" is not "identity"; see my *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*. Heidegger's suggestion is not that being is ultimately one rather than many, but, instead, that we cannot fully pry being apart from our thinking of it, and vice versa. (In Heidegger's terms, being "needs" Dasein to take place; and conversely, without being, Dasein would have no intelligible world.) If this is right, however, then we are not entitled to the Parmenidean intuition that ultimately all is one, and that only our confused beliefs lead us to pluralize this oneness. (Borgmann forcefully suggested that our contemporary rejection of any ontological "dualism" should lead us to reject ontological pluralism as well, but that rejection seems to me to derive from an overly reductive eliminative materialism, a totalizing monism which would ultimately undermine theoretical as well as ontological pluralism. Nevertheless, I shall go on to suggest that the very distinction between theoretical and ontological levels breaks down, and thus that the most coherent pluralist position is simply to be a pluralist across the board.)
9. Taylor expresses his mixed, theoretically pluralist and ontologically monist view when he writes: "None of us could ever grasp alone everything that is involved in our alienation from God and his action to bring us back. But there are a great many of us, scattered through history, who have had some powerful sense of some facet of this drama. Together we can live it more fully than any one of us could alone. Instead of reaching immediately for the weapons of polemic, we might better listen for a voice which we could never have assumed ourselves, whose tone would have been forever unknown to us if we hadn't strained to understand it" (p. 754). Perhaps Taylor's basic difference from the later Heidegger-inspired position could thus be put this way: Taylor seems to believe in an ontotheological creator God who stands as least partly outside of space and time and who ultimately unifies the meaning of creation. This belief—that the meaning of being is ultimately unified—seems to underwrite the impressive ecumenicalism that has encouraged Taylor to engage in dialogue with diverse religious groups in order to work toward building a shared consensus about universal human rights and other politically important matters. Yet, despite Taylor's remarkable success in such political projects, it is not clear to me that Taylor's view—which looks to build mutual respect on the basis

of an overlapping consensus that progressively seeks to establish agreement on such matters as the universality of human rights—is in fact as robust a pluralism, or as firm a basis for respecting radically different groups, as a later Heidegger-inspired view. For the Heideggerian view suggests that our differences stem from the genuinely different (and even irreconcilable) ways in which being shows itself to us, and so not just from our different paths toward what is ultimately the same destination, the final act in the Hegel-inspired drama of alienation and reconciliation. On the Heidegger-inspired view, by contrast, we should not believe that we could ever discover an ultimate unity underlying our differences (or even that we will be able to agree about substantive questions of the good). Nonetheless, this ontological pluralism might still be the best possible basis for a fully robust political pluralism—one which grounds our differences in real difference, rather than in different approaches to sameness (and so suggests that we should *respect* these differences as such and thus renounce “the arrogant title of *tolerance*,” as Kant nicely put it)—as well as for a universality on important formal political questions (such as the universal establishment of political rights that protect us from the imposition of a single substantive understanding of the good), as Gianni Vattimo (among others) has argued. See e.g. Vattimo (2004) *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law*, Santiago Zabala (Ed.), trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press). See also Kant (1983) *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History, and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett), p. 45.

10. Heidegger’s works *circa* 1929 suggest that our presupposition that the meaning of existence must be unified derives from the way intelligibility is grounded in temporality, specifically, from the fact that the present underlies all experience, implicitly leading us to believe, falsely, that there must be some ultimate unity beneath experience. (See Heidegger’s 1929 works, “On the essence of ground” [P, p. 132 / GA 9, p. 171] and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, and, on the latter, my *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, p. 54 note 15.) But the later Heidegger soon abandons this view along with his earlier faith in fundamental ontology. More compelling, in my view, is the remaining question of whether Taylor is right to suggest that the meaning of a single human life can and should take the shape of some delineable “unity” or “wholeness”. Drawing on the Christian tradition, Kierkegaard thinks that we need a single unconditional commitment in order to make our lives meaningful (that “purity of the heart is to will one thing”, and thus to choose to be *either* a religious writer *or* a husband, e.g.). The early Heidegger partly takes over Kierkegaard’s explicitly “religious” view in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger too supposes that there should be some “ultimate for-the-sake-of-which” that unifies our lives, some project we place before all others (apparently on pain of the kind of *reductio ad absurdum* of life’s meaning that Aristotle first argued for in the *Nicomachean Ethics*), or which we would abandon last (and the loss of which would lead all our other projects to collapse into meaninglessness). Kierkegaard thought that our commitment to such a project must be absolute, such that we can never abandon it (even if its collapse should lead our lives into the manifest meaninglessness that such a wholehearted embrace of a single life-project was meant to avoid), because Kierkegaard maintained his faith in the miraculous possibility that things would work out, come what may, somehow. Secularizing Kierkegaard (and so eliminating this Christian faith in a miraculous salvation), the early Heidegger concludes that there had to be a point at which we should give up even the projects dearest to us, that we should resolutely “stick with them [but] without getting stuck with them”, in John Haugeland’s famously pithy formulation.
11. Taylor’s account of the rise of the secular age seeks to replace the standard “subtraction story” which treats the rise of unbelief as the natural result of removing the heavy chains of ignorance and superstition from the human mind, thereby helping human understanding to emerge progressively from that prolonged state of mental immaturity for which we ourselves are responsible (p. 574–75). Rejecting this enlightenment view, Taylor instead traces secularization back to a series of movements of “reform” that took place within

the Christian tradition, painstakingly showing how unbelief develops through a series of historical struggles that continue to shape Western humanity's fundamental sense of ourselves and our relation to the world. The rise of unbelief is accomplished creatively, in an ongoing struggle over the meaning of life; unbelief is not the "natural" state that stands revealed when all the illusions are stripped away. Of course, Protestants might initially be suspicious of a Catholic who blames unbelief on reform, but in fact Taylor's nuanced view traces reform back to currents internal to Catholicism and is also appreciative of reform's achievements (even if he remains more sensitive to its costs), and I for one found his central attempt to provide an alternative explanation of secularization highly persuasive.

12. What *postmodernists* believe that the borders of any knowledge domain can be secured in a way that will rigorously exclude the covert appeal to something transcending this domain? In fact, the major "postmodern" philosophers all seem committed (like Taylor himself) to the impossibility of any theoretical system's rigorous self-closure. Unfortunately, despite occasional remarks on Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault (and a single mention of Deleuze), Taylor's massive tome never engages in a serious way with any of these postmodern philosophers. The strange result is that Martha Nussbaum becomes Taylor's main representative of the post-Nietzschean position (p. 625–34), singled out for her espousal of the view that humanity's misguided quest for transcendence results from our failure to accept our essential finitude. But Nussbaum's view is drawn from ancient tragedy rather than postmodern theory (although, interestingly, such a reading of Sophocles is already anticipated in Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics*, as I show in *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 4; on Heidegger's critique of "subjectivism", see Ch. 3). In fact, despite their crucial difference over the possibility and desirability of renouncing the quest for the unattainable, I would submit that the disagreement between Taylor and the "postmodernists" remains something of a family feud, since they both share at least four more major theses: both 1) reject "scientism" and other anti-pluralist, monopolistic, or "totalizing" accounts of the human condition (unlike some those narrowly "naturalistic" contemporary Nietzscheans) and, instead, 2) "recognize that they are offering one interpretation of the human condition among many" (p. 837, note 67). Taylor also advances the typically postmodern views that 3) "the pure love of truth, uncoloured by any passionately held beliefs, is a reality of some other universe, not ours" (p. 332), and that 4) "the modern, liberal identity . . . [is only] one, historically constructed understanding of human agency among others" (p. 571, see also p. 119). One can, of course, contest these views in various ways, but—in the face of Taylor's remarkable proximity to these four paradigmatically "postmodern" ideas (or five, if we count their shared rejection of systematic self-closure)—I shall be more interested here in exploring their most important difference, namely, Taylor's challenge to the postmodern (and neo-Nietzschean) rejection of any appeals to a wholly transcendent realm as meaningless, obsolete, childish, cowardly, and so on.
13. See "Heidegger speaks", http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_vYz4nQUcs (accessed 12 February 2010).
14. In another clip from these televised interviews, Heidegger provides the following example: "Today, everyone is able to operate a radio or television without knowing which laws of physics stand behind them, without knowing which methods were needed to discover these laws, methods which, in the foundations of their genuine content, are understood today only by five or six physicists" (Ibid.). Heidegger goes on to draw an analogy between these few physicists who have personally experienced the disclosure of the basic laws of physics, on the one hand, and the few phenomenological ontologists who are capable of understanding the meaning of being which most people more or less thoughtlessly presuppose, on the other. (I think this analogy would be worth exploring, but cannot do so here.)

15. See Heidegger, M. (1998) *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), hereafter “P”. See also Heidegger, M. (1976) *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 9, *Wegmarken*, ed. F.-W. von Herrmann (Frankfurt: V. Klostermann), hereafter “GA”. For Heidegger in 1930, “transcendence” also entails that our existential projecting into projects always exceeds (i.e., is more than) these projects in terms of which we make sense of ourselves. Hence: “the human being, existing as a transcendence that exceeds in the direction of possibilities, is a *being of distance*” (P, p. 135 / GA 9, p. 175). Sartre clearly appropriated these views in *Being and Nothingness*.
16. Heidegger also unsettles the rectitude of *moral* dogmatism: Unlike the Kantian model of *autonomy* (in which contrary inclinations must be disciplined so that they learn to conform to the dictates of reason, a seemingly sadomasochistic logic, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously point out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), and the Platonic–Freudian model of *sublimation* (in which the aims of originally contrary inclinations at work in the self get redirected and so harnessed into the service of reason), Heidegger adopts a more Nietzschean model (at least in this middle period), according to which the highest form of self-development comes from nurturing the productive tension between the different forces at work in the self. This sheds a new light on those oft-quoted lines from “The self-assertion of the German university”: “All leadership must allow its following to have its own strength. All following carries resistance within it. This essential opposition between leading and following must be neither covered over nor obliterated altogether.” See, Figal G. (Ed.), trans. J. Veith, (2009) (*The Heidegger Reader*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), p. 115 / GA 16, p. 116.
17. Taylor mentions Sagan, Dennett, and Dawkins. For an argument that Dawkins’ view is starkly contradictory in just the way Taylor suggests, see my *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 1.
18. Here we might contrast the *known unknowns* of the background and social imaginary that Dreyfus and Taylor rightly recognize. The relevant difference between these “known unknowns” and the *known unknowable* is between beliefs that trail off or transcend into something not yet known (but which nevertheless stands in certain complex but discernible relations to those known beliefs) and belief in that which is declared to be in principle beyond any such relations not only to human knowledge but to any kind of experience by living beings. I develop this crucial contrast below.
19. It is the fact that we modern human beings seem to be perpetually dissatisfied that neo-conservatives from Bloom to Fukuyama appeal to in order to argue (against one of the theses that Taylor shares with many postmodernists) that Western liberal democracy is not merely one possible political arrangement among others (see note 12 above) but, instead, that our capitalist–liberal-democratic system thrives precisely because (for all its problems) it has taken shape as the system best attuned to our apparently unquenchable thirst for something more. See e.g., Bloom, A. (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster); Fukuyama, F. (2002) *Our Posthuman Condition* (New York: Picador). It is not clear to me how Taylor would respond to such arguments. Certainly he would agree that there is a perennial human longing for “something more,” but would he also suggest that this longing remains insatiable only so long as it is mistaken for a desire for material commodities rather than for spiritual insights and experiences? Perhaps not, since Taylor does not seem to believe in spiritual satisfaction as a permanent rather than as a temporary achievement. (Material and spiritual satisfaction are thus both transitory, whatever other reasons we might have for preferring the latter to the former.) Either way, does Taylor think that another political organization would better serve our *spiritual* aspirations for transcendence? Taylor clearly recognizes the needless suffering capitalism imposes, but does this recognition do more than suggest that capitalism needs a more finely-attuned welfare state? Does Taylor believe that a non-democratic or non-liberal political union would do better at eliminating unnecessary suffering? (On this question, *A Secular Age* remains silent, as far as I can tell.)

20. What I find most provocative about Taylor's account of secularization is his subtle challenge to contemporary unbelievers to provide a satisfying, wholly secular account of the highest aspirations of human beings, to explain our continuing pursuit of such existential goods as "wholeness", "fullness", "joy", and "fulfillment" (p. 5), as well as the testimony of many of our most sensitive thinkers that something profound seems to have gone missing with the rise of the secular age. Indeed, that is the challenge I try to meet in *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*. To the many poets and thinkers Taylor quotes in support of the idea that there is a God-shaped hole in the fabric of human experience, I might add the following lyrics from the band Built to Spill: "Words for fighting, words for fun / They've all melted into one; / On the tip of every tongue, / Like a new name for the sun. / I'm alarmed and I can't recover from / Crashing onto this Island we've become." ("Alarmed", from the album *Ancient Melodies of the Future*.)
21. One need only think, e.g., of the "extropians"—a group of Nietzschean cyber-utopians who call for humanity to abandon the body and find ways to download our consciousnesses onto the internet and live on as information—whom Dreyfus critiques in *On the Internet*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
22. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in: W. Kaufmann, ed. and trans., *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin), pp. 124–30; quotation from p. 125.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 125. See also p. 188: "Remain faithful to the earth, . . . serve the meaning of the earth . . . Do not let your gift-giving love and knowledge fly away from earthly things and beat with their wings against eternal walls . . . Lead back to the earth the virtue that flew away, as I do—back to the body, back to life, that it may give the earth a meaning, a human meaning."
24. In what has been dubbed "Avatar blues" and "the Avatar effect", viewers "say they have experienced depression and suicidal thoughts after seeing the film because they long to enjoy the beauty of the alien world Pandora". As one widely-quoted viewer, Ivar Hill, reports: "When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed . . . gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning. It just seems so . . . meaningless" (ellipses in the original). Another viewer ("Mike") said: "I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do it I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora." Dr. Stephan Quentzel, a psychiatrist at Beth Israel Medical Centre interviewed by CNN, nicely brought out the nihilism of otherworldliness at the heart of this phenomenon when he pointed out that "real life will never be as utopian as it seems onscreen. It makes real life seem more imperfect." See Joe Piazza, "Audiences experience 'Avatar' blues," CNN.com, 11 January 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html> (accessed 13 February 2010). On the nihilism of "Second Life," see Dreyfus's *On the Internet*, second edition.
25. I have argued that, ironically, Nietzsche's own conception of *amor fati* falls victim to his critique of otherworldly nihilism because of the way it relies on eternal recurrence; see *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 1. I have also elaborated a non-literal way to interpret the Christian understanding of death and rebirth (i.e., a way to secularize the conversion narrative so as to preserve the phenomenological insight at its core) in such essays as my (2004) "Heidegger's perfectionist philosophy of education in *Being and Time*", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 37(4), pp. 439–67; and "Death and demise in *Being and Time*", in: Mark A. Wrathall (Ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Being and Time* (New York: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming 2011).
26. This is a difference that Levinas seeks to split, not very successfully, with his paradoxical notion of "non-phenomenal revelation," or so I have tried to suggest in "Rethinking Levinas on Heidegger on death", *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Vol. XVI (Fall 2009), pp. 23–43; see esp. p. 41 note 35. The contrast between Heideggerian and Levinasian perfectionisms elaborated there reinforces Taylor's view that the central difference between

secular and religious views “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” (p. 17), except that for Levinas the self’s “eccentric” passage beyond itself turns out to be the highest form of its own flourishing. Yet, Taylor’s view of exclusive humanism as “accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing” seems too narrow to encompass the later Heidegger’s view, as I have suggested in “Ontology and ethics at the intersection of phenomenology and environmental philosophy”, *Inquiry*, 47(4), pp. 380–412. Such considerations leave me unhappy with the narrowness of Taylor’s definitional claim that “a secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (p. 19).

27. See Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols*, pp. 50–2; *The Gay Science*, (#125), p. 181. Nietzsche saw Kant as a Raskolnikov figure who set out to kill (indeed, to “kill god,” that is, to make reason rather than divine authority the foundation of morality), but subsequently felt he had to steal (adopting the Judeo-Christian value system) in order to rationalize this murder (and escape its guilt). For Nietzsche, Kant thereby avoided facing up to the true radicalism of his act, the fact that “the death of god” demanded a “revaluation of values,” i.e., a new, non-nihilistic value-system which would not de-value this world by comparing it to an “otherworldly” beyond, forever out of the cognitive reach of mortal beings like us. See Nietzsche, “On the pale criminal”, in: *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pp. 149–52; my *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 6; and, on Nietzsche’s still underappreciated debt to Kant: Hill, R. Kevin (2003) *Nietzsche’s Critiques: The Kantian Foundations of His Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
28. In this I think Nietzsche’s critique of otherworldly nihilism finds a perhaps surprising ally in the later Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, which suggests that the now widespread tendency to believe in a creator God standing outside history is an unfortunate distortion of religious experience by the metaphysical tradition. On this last point, see my “On the use and abuse of ontotheology for religion”, in: *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, Ch. 1; and see also Peter Gordon’s insightful (2008) essay, “The place of the sacred in the absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 69(4), pp. 670–73; and see Dreyfus, Hubert & Kelly, Sean Dorrance (2011) *All Things Sharing: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press).