6-2015

Narrative, Social Identity and Practical Reason: On Charles Taylor and Moral Theology

Mark Ryan
University of Dayton, mryan1@udayton.edu

Narrative, Social Identity and Practical Reason: On Charles Taylor and Moral Theology

Mark Ryan

THIS ARTICLE SEEKS TO DISCERN what we as moral theologians can learn from Charles Taylor, particularly his work on the modern self and the conditions surrounding belief in the modern, secular age.[1] In recent work, Taylor has gone further than before in bringing into play his own Christian faith, making an intra-Christian dialogue with him possible. There is an opening here for drawing out some of the implications of his arguments for moral theology.

Taylor would seem to offer rich ground to the work of the Catholic moral theologian, insofar as he resists naturalist accounts of human action and explores the role theism might play in negotiating the conflicts of the western identity. Taylor's work may also be taken as resembling what moral theologians do, insofar as he often describes it as "practical reasoning." Running through his descriptive analyses of periods of Western history, his engagement with social science, and his criticism of contemporary moral theory, one finds the basic questions, "What is the good human beings seek?" "Where does human flourishing lie?" and "How is this good embodied in societies?" We might refer to this as the basic anthropological center of Taylor's work, as it has developed over the years.[2]

Further, though it is in large part about a historical and descriptive study of the conditions of religious belief, together with the emergence of secularism, across the last 500 years, the argument of Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) leads toward the problem of what it means to be a Christian in our day.[3] Here Taylor comes quite close to the preoccupation of moral theologians, insofar as we aspire to help Christians to go on, practically, in the concrete circumstances of life. Yet there are also indications that what Taylor offers here will be inadequate for our task, or at least leave us with many important questions yet to be answered.

---

[1] Charles Taylor, *Sources of The Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1992).
[2] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), 1.
[3] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 728-72.

I believe the reaction of one astute Catholic reader of Taylor gives expression to the problem I am signaling. Peter Steinfels, after following him through several hundred pages on the contemporary predicament of religious believers, reports feeling deflated by Taylor's practical suggestions regarding where to go from here.[4] Taylor's examples of significant Christians who confront the conditions he has traced are drawn from a set of creative elites or "religious virtuosi" (Peguy, Maritain, Hopkins). What hope or guidance is held out for the typical suburban parish? This frustration, I think, responds to the somewhat ethereal quality of Taylor's *tour de force* through history as he makes his argument.

In short, Taylor's work has many attractions for moral theologians today, but there are also some warning signs. Could Taylor's work turn out to be a temptation for us? I will explore that question through the essay and offer a conclusion.

The paper has three parts. The first part recapitulates and examines Taylor's narrative in *A Secular Age* in order to both clarify what "moral anthropology" and "practical reason" mean for Taylor and enable us to see what a "theological anthropology" (or, going on in our times as a Christian) would look like for Taylor. Part two presents Jewish philosopher Martin Kavka's response to Taylor. Kavka shows why the anthropology that Taylor employs in *A Secular Age* makes it easy for him to neglect to include the Jews in his grand narrative, and he provides a glimpse of the Jewish way of going on in secular times. Part three elucidates, beginning with a response to Kavka's criticisms of him, a recommended disposition (i.e., wariness) for moral theologians toward Taylor's work.

THE STORY: PRACTICAL REASON, HISTORY AND THE AGE OF AUTHENTICITY

Taylor's narrative account of the modern identity and the modern age is not typical history; it combines moral anthropology and narrative.[5] Like the moral theologian, he is concerned about the agent's perspective. He seeks, that is, to uncover the moral motivations and sensibilities of human agents that underlie human history, allowing historical events to be intelligible to us, while at the same time providing at least one of the "causes" (i.e., moral agency) of these events. He

---

[4] Peter Steinfels, "Modernity and Belief," *Commonweal* (May 5, 2008).

[5] Indeed, Taylor's blending of the empirical and the normative has drawn criticism from historians. See Jonathan Sheehan, "When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age,* ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 2010), 217-42. Here, I should also note that in what follows I read *A Secular Age* as in continuity with the project of *Sources of the Self,* and thus go back and forth between them.

speaks of these motivations and sensibilities as "sources"—basic human orientations toward goodness/flourishing.[6] So, the first peculiarity of Taylor's narrative history is that it focuses on the moral sources of an age—both as these sources ground our identities and as they provide a background of meaning for our shared life.

He further tries to uncover how the sources of one age emerge in transition from the sources of an earlier age—a transition in which our self-understandings are gradually transformed. His account of the human agent within society that underlies the Age of Authenticity—the major dispensation of sources he outlines that is closest to us today—has its roots in an earlier transition from a "porous" identity to a "buffered" identity. He uses the term porous identity to describe the way in which the pre-modern agent felt vulnerable (permeable) to an array of forces, both evil and good, in the surrounding cosmos. The moral life of the pre-modern agent is a matter of properly negotiating these forces, or of putting oneself in right relation to the best and highest among them. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor described the porous identity as the kind of identity established by agents for whom the good was an *external* source, or a source existing "without."

In his account of this transition—the "Work of Reform"—Taylor describes how this vulnerability and permeability are exchanged for a "buffered self" whose moral sources are increasingly located "within." This transition takes us from the medieval into the modern age and it has many facets. While what has changed is perhaps not clearly expressed until the eighteenth century, many of its reforming motives can be seen in movements within the church as early as the thirteenth century.[7]

Eighteenth century "Providential Deism" describes another important change. It names the period during which the buffered self becomes able to invent the moral sources that make possible a completely "immanent" background of meaning. This background of meaning, powered by internal sources such as a conception of human freedom as disengagement from the surrounding cosmos, consists in the picture of a simply reasonable social order whose purpose is universal benevolence, where benevolence is understood in terms of providing material welfare. In the wake of the ascendancy of Providential Deism, exclusive humanism and atheism become live options for the first time.[8]

---

[6] In *A Secular Age*, he broadens and makes more complex the notion of a moral source, familiar from *Sources,* through that of a "social imaginary." Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 171-6.

[7] On the side of religion, Taylor emphasizes the Hildebrandine reformation issuing in a new attempt to lead ordinary lay persons into strict accountability for a life of discipleship to Christ. This was manifested materially in a new requirement of one to one confession for all church members. *A Secular Age*, 242-3.

[8] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 221-69.

The Age of Authenticity originates in a further transition. The original version of the buffered identity conceived of a person's worth as an agent in terms of the powers to control both one's own bodily life and one's own environment by means of self-discipline and instrumental reason. Gradually (here we are entering into the late eighteenth and on into the nineteenth centuries), symptoms arose of dissatisfaction and loss within some quarters of the buffered age. The loss was of a sense of meaningful connection to an external order; this in turn was seen to impoverish our full capacities as agents. The receding of the God in whom orthodox Christians confessed belief was one form of this loss. The recognition of this loss spurred a movement, the Romantic Movement, to reconnect the agent to sources of meaningfulness and wholeness. Even so, the moral sources of self-control and instrumental power over the environment remained grounds of the buffered agent's dignity.[9] Thus the self of the Age of Authenticity is best understood as a conception of the agent existing under the "cross-pressure" of rival sources: instrumental reason and romantic expressiveness.[10]

Because of its importance to a critique of Taylor later on, let me spell out further the nature of the Romantic reaction to the buffered self of the Enlightenment. To do this, we need to see that the effort of the cross-pressured self, through diverse strands of romanticism, to reconnect with nature had the shape of an interior quest. A public order of meaning fades away with the "porous self;" the buffered age demands that we search for natural depths "within." These inner depths, and their sensibilities, become the locus in which a connection to an external and harmonious nature can be recovered.[11] Yet, because of the resistance of instrumental reason and its fragmenting tendencies, cross-pressured agents have to work at (re-) integrating these inner depths so that "the harmony of nature" can resonate within them. The "agent" of this work of re-integration is creative imagination (genius), which gives expression to nature and at the same time constitutes our relatedness to it. (Because in the modern world there is no publically available conception of nature, only imaginative expression can give us access to nature.) The history of art in these centuries mirrors this transition, as a conception of art as mimesis gives way to an emphasis on idiosyncratic creative vision of the individual artist.[12] The agent's

---

[9] For a clear account of how the neo-Aristotelian account of the human being developed by Romantics such as Herder, was still significantly a *modern* account, see Taylor's *Hegel*, 17-28.

[10] While the good of instrumental reason is found in domination over external nature, that of romantic expressivism is found in a harmony between "internal" and "external" nature.

[11] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 313-17.

[12] More specifically, the drive to reform and its buffered self interrupt the mimetic approach and order of meaning on which it depends. This gives rise to an epoch in

(creative) activity in unveiling nature as a source of meaning—by, in part, constituting nature as meaningful through expression—is crucial to the reintegration. To put it simply, the meaning is now to be achieved by means of an interior quest. Christian creative elites named by Taylor (such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and Charles Peguy) may be seen as exemplars along the path of this quest. More to the point, these latter provide modern examples of Christian "conversion"—that is, of how a Christian may recover (or discover) her faith in a transcendent source by breaking through the buffered or immanent frame in a way marked by the cross pressures of authenticity.[13]

This narrative of sources and their historical transitions is integral to what Taylor means by "practical reasoning." What is the good of human life? For Taylor, the good plays the role of a source which orients us with an identity by mapping out for us and for our communities what matters most. Who am I? (Who are we?) Practical reasoning consists in articulating and re-articulating the self-source relation in dialogue with others. We are striving to understand human nature and human fulfillment more clearly, and more clear-sightedly, we seek such fulfillment. But our identities are historical and communal, so the way these identities unfold historically is essential to understanding them (thus, ourselves). Historical perspective, further, gives us the opportunity put in conversation the inherited voices of our pasts and present. Is the conception of identity in the early modern period a gain over that of the medieval period? In what respects? Is the immanent frame in which we live open to transcendence, and if so should we opt for the latter? Practical reason names the ongoing effort to provide reason*ed*—in the sense of "oriented to truth"—judgments about such matters.[14]

---

which the artist is called upon to invent new forms that invent and express meaning at the same time through "subtler languages" that go beyond typical forms. Thus, this vision of art and the artist is a response to, and shaped by these historical circumstances. See, Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 352-61.

[13] What I think must be challenged here is not Taylor's attribution of significance to these figures in itself, but how he fits them into his narrative account of the Christian predicament. By emphasizing the path they forge through the existential complexities of modernity, he at the same time downplays the way they have been (e.g. Hopkins) formed in the life of the church. The importance of this formation is something I will come back to. I owe this insight in part to Matthew Whelan's comments on an earlier version of this essay. Personal Correspondence, June 22, 2012. For a similar argument, see Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*," *Modern Theology* 26.3 (July 2010), 355-7.

[14] What would this look like in a concrete case? Taylor provides an illustration of how his conception of reasoning makes a difference to historical interpretation much later in the book, *A Secular Age*, when he applies to the debate around the meaning of Vatican II. Since we live within histories of transitions—i.e., within the pull of distinct

What does his narrative suggest for how Christians are to go on in our times? Or, put differently, what would a "theological anthropology" look like for Taylor? Taylor avers that, in light of the history of sources he has narrated and especially the creation of purely immanent sources, no believer can hold her faith with the confidence possible in ages past. We are fated to be aware that faith is not the only possibility for us. However fervent they may be in it, believers are aware that their faith has been made "fragile" by the presence of different faiths or lives lived without faith. Thus, we all live on a secularized or "immanent" landscape. The question of theological anthropology is that of how we choose to "spin" the sources bequeathed to us. One option is to read, or spin, the immanent existential frame so as to be "closed" to transcendence. Alternatively, there is a spin that sees it as "open." Taylor's theological anthropology asks what is signified by spinning

conceptions of fulfillment--Taylor's approach to practical reason requires close attention to experience.[14] Practical reason sometimes takes the form of "ad hominem" argument, as he puts it.

The way we interpret and assess Vatican II, and the changes it generated in Catholicism, can take two (argumentative) forms, Taylor avers. According to the first form, partisans will line up against each other and take a black/white stance, asking, "Was Vatican II was good/bad for Catholicism? Was it a gain or a loss?" Debaters may look at various sides of the council, finding some things positive and some negative. But in the end, it's either "thumbs up" or "thumbs down." The statement, "Vatican II was a gain," must be either true or false. Coming to an absolute verdict drives the whole approach. For this reason, the context out of which the promoters of the council acted is of interest only to explain why it pushed them to do wrong, or right.

The second form of argument, which Taylor recommends, approaches Vatican II in a different spirit. Rather than being driven by the supposed necessity to make a summary judgment, we can attend to the council as expressing certain insights about Christian faith. These insights, furthermore, grow out of the experience of particular Christians of the time who were themselves struggling to respond well to the historical conditions in which they found themselves. Following this line, we will want to attend closely to the personal spiritual journey, the "itinerary of faith," expressed in the lives of Catholics like Charles Peguy or Henri DeLubac who inspired the council. By "itinerary of faith" Taylor refers to the shape of one person's quest for authentic Christianity that cannot be loosed from their experience, though it may speak to many others. And this can only be understood by attending both to the milieu out of which she thought and acted and to her actions and thoughts themselves.

When we approach practical reasoning this way, we assess an expression of faith (or, of the council, in this case) not primarily in order to determine whether it gets a single issue right or wrong. Rather, we take it that "what is at stake is complementary insights," each of which "bring[s] a fresh perspective which augments and enriches our understanding" (752). Taylor's conception of practical reasoning thus urges a generosity born of the requisite humility to say, "I don't have all the insights." Thus, Taylor writes, "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 might have forever been unknown to us if we hadn't strained to understand it" (754). Thus, for Taylor practical reason signifies an open-ended conversation in which we attend to each other, including our companions from other times, not simply as right or wrong, but as embodying an insight (of faith, in this case) to which we might otherwise have no access.

the immanent frame as "porous" to transcendent conceptions of full-
ness.

A JEWISH CHALLENGE TO TAYLOR

I now turn to Jewish philosopher Martin Kavka and his response
to Taylor's project in *A Secular Age*. Kavka interrupts the flow of Tay-
lor's grand story by pointing to what Taylor leaves out—namely, the
Jews. Going further, he provides a portrait of what is lost by Taylor,
by pointing to concrete resources for how religious persons are to go
on in our times. In the next section, I will suggest that the fates of the
Jews and of Christians are linked in Taylor's grand narrative.

As we saw above, Taylor's work is driven by his construction and
revision of a moral and theological anthropology. In this regard, he
has been asking, "What is the good?" and "What is a full human life?"
In his most recent work, he is especially concerned with how religious
belief enters into the answering of these questions. Specifically, in our
secular age, he puts the question in terms of whether the "immanent
frame" of existence which we have developed can be "spun" as open
to "transcendence." As we also saw, these questions do not pertain
merely to the individual as an atomized "self," but include the social
imaginary within which flourishing is understood. The basic question
driving Kavka's rejoinder to *A Secular Age* is, "What is immanent in
Judaism?"[15]

Kavka identifies Taylor's moral anthropology with Taylor's larger
goal of a reconciling philosophical narrative, and he places *A Secular
Age* in relation to Taylor's work as a whole, with particular attention
to its Hegelian roots. As just hinted, there is a social purpose in Tay-
lor's construction of a moral and theological anthropology. Conflicts
over basic anthropological questions are at the root of a personal and
social identity crisis. In *Sources of the Self,* Taylor wonders whether
the moral ontologies of the Western mind would any longer be suffi-
cient to support the practical, moral commitments we have made to
such notions as universal human rights and the alleviation of suffering
for all. In *A Secular Age*, he has his sights set on seemingly intractable
issues of the culture wars, such as homosexuality.

Kavka, therefore, identifies Taylor's moral anthropology with his
larger goal of personal, social, and metaphysical unity. The history of
moral and spiritual sources Taylor constructs ultimately aims to ame-
liorate the tensions (the "malaise" as he has previously called it) in

---

[15] Martin Kavka, "What is Immanent in Judaism: Transcending Charles Taylor's *A
Secular Age*," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 40, no. 1 (March 2012): 123-37.

Western social life, be it in the form of a deeper "politics of recognition,"[16] or some other unity in our diversity.[17] In *A Secular Age*, he is particularly focusing on the conflicts of self-interpretation between religious people and those who proclaim some form of non-belief, each of which comes in several varieties that don't always reconcile easily with one another. He articulates these differences with such anthropological questions as: Are the satisfactions of life, liberty and the satisfaction of ordinary desires enough? Or, does the human heart remain restless? What might provide unity (reconciliation) between such groups? His hope is that his history will go deep enough into their shared genome of moral sources that some commonality might be found.

Kavka further notes that Taylor's theological anthropology is deeply shaped by Taylor's chastened Hegelianism. Taylor wrote two substantial books on Hegel early in his career, and the problems engaged there have been enduring for him. To begin, the language of "immanence" versus "transcendence" resembles Hegelian language for describing the unfolding of objective Spirit in his dialectic. Kavka notes that Taylor has always been driven by the twin aims of resisting behaviorism's attempt at an "objectivist" explanation of the agent's experience and seeking a nuanced universalism that would allow us to make progress toward recognition and harmony. This project leads to "a view of history as a perpetual groping after new, better, and fresher explanatory models."[18]

We also find here Hegel's terminology of "alienation and recognition." The human desire for self-realization leads inevitably to alienation when the agent fails to find its "particular mode of self-realization [to] be reflected by nature or by others."[19] Taylor's re-narration of the universal (or what I have been calling his theological anthropology), in other words, hopes to bring us further along the quest of social harmony such that the self's longing for recognition might be satisfied (the longing to have one's sense of identity reflected by nature and by others). Kavka shows that Taylor's Hegelianism shapes his theological anthropology. Thus, about Taylor, he writes, "The mediation of transcendence is described… only in terms of the production of a frame in which members of a polity can make choices about the good life."[20]

---

[16] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1994).

[17] His approach to debate within the church, which I described above, is one form of this "reconciling of the solitudes." I think it is in a specific context like this one that his work may be most helpful to us as moral theologians.

[18] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 124

[19] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 124

[20] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 130.

Kavka goes on to note that these Hegelian categories, and German idealism more generally, have been unable to cope with the particularity of the Jewish tradition and thus are frequently blind to Jewish markers. (Indeed, members of the idealist movement often sought to eradicate the Jewish roots of Christianity.) As Kavka's title question—"What is immanent in Judaism?"—hints, Taylor's anthropology is unsurprisingly ill-suited to cope with Judaism. It is therefore unsurprising that Taylor fails to include the Jews in his narrative.

Indeed, the Hegelian anthropology described above seems destined to be anxious about the presence of religious difference. When human desire fixates on the harmony of visions that seems forever out of reach, it is easy for a kind of tragic longing to set in. This might tempt one to paper over differences that are in fact rather intractable. Put differently, Kavka can be seen as calling attention to the ambitious scope of Taylor's story. Taylor's purpose may be to find reconciliation in Western society's relation to religion. But do citizens of the North Atlantic world have *a* religion? Who is the "we"? Kavka's point, again, is that Taylor overlooks the Jews in his narrative. Or rather, he writes them into another category with inelegant concepts like that of "Judeo-Christian" traditions.

Taylor cannot but miss the Jews, it seems to Kavka, because the anthropological frame Taylor employs cannot accommodate, and would inevitably distort, the ways Jews reason practically and seek fulfillment. But his point is not only to explain an important gap in Taylor's history (indeed a troubling one given Taylor's aims). He also aims, in his brief but poignant retrieval of Maimonides's account of law, to present the advantages of the rabbinic approach to coping with the cultural conflicts in our day.

Kavka's central claim is that, for the Jew, God has always already mediated himself in law as received and interpreted by Jewish practices. Such law not only relates us to God, but also allows us to take part in God's will. "The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (Deut 30:14). In other words, the Jewish people together with their Scriptures and reading practices both discover God's presence in the world and incarnate that presence. God has shared himself in what is ordinary and close, law (revealed and human) and its interpretation.[21] According to this Jewish vision, one does not need to yearn after a good not yet realized (or a Geist not yet concretized!) to have properly religious vision, or to see the sacred in

---

[21] Interestingly, in their response to Taylor, Hauerwas and Coles have suggested that Taylor's use of the terms "immanence" and" transcendence" treats them as general categories, and thus lacking in "Christological discipline." "For Christians," they write, "immanence first and foremost names that God became man that we might participate in the very life of God…. [T]ranscendence first and foremost is the acknowledgement that death could not hold him." Hauerwas and Coles, "Long Live the Weeds," 350.

the world. God is present in law. We may struggle to interpret laws, but, Kavka suggests, such practical work is preferable, to constructing a new and reconciling common vision of human fullness.

Kavka draws on Maimonides's account of the relation among kinds of laws, especially among divine and human laws, to articulate his own account of how Jews are to reason practically in a secular age and in societies where they are a minority. For Maimonides, laws are to be distinguished by focusing on their effects on the person (or community) who obeys them. The whole center of gravity in a discussion about politics from a Maimonidean perspective shifts from the context, meaning, or "ground" of laws to what laws bring about. Now, it is certainly the case that Maimonides believed that the two main types of law—divine and human law—function to bring about different goods. He held to a hierarchy among the kinds of law, with revealed law at the top, and even seemed to belittle human laws as the "whim of the chief."[22] Nevertheless, at least as Kavka reads him, the focus of Maimonides on the effects of laws as what makes them divine leaves open to the Jew that a human law may unintentionally bring about the same effects as revealed law. Thus, the relation of kinds of law, so understood, leaves open the possibility of overlap among divine and human laws.

Further, there are, naturally, superior goods (i.e., full human perfection) that flow properly only from revealed law. Yet these goods are kept by Maimonides somewhat separate from politics, whose aims are or should be the goods of basic welfare. These latter goods, moreover, are thought by him to be necessary as conditions for pursuing the superior goods. This, for Kavka, changes the game from Taylor's. He writes,

> One of the things that conceptualizing the relationship between law and divinity in a Maimonidean manner implies—again, for us readers of Maimonides in a secular age—is that members of a polity can differ completely as to visions of the good life, or to a person's final aim, and still find consensus on social and political matters.[23]

It also represents hope for the culture wars:

> When the mediation of transcendence is described, as it is by Taylor, only in terms of the production of a frame in which members of a polity can make choices about the good life—choices that, as seen

---

[22] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 130
[23] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 130

earlier, will inevitably come into conflict with others' choices, pro-
ducing social instability—the possibility of consensus will recede into
the distance, and the *Kulturkampf* will perdure.[24]

In sum, Kavka provides both a persuasive explanation of why Tay-
lor overlooks the Jews in his grand narrative and challenges the an-
thropology that guides this narrative. Kavka accomplishes the former
when he shows how Taylor adopts Hegelian concepts that make reli-
gious difference appear problematic. With regard to the latter, Kavka's
example provides evidence that Taylor's theological anthropology,
structured as it is, cannot accommodate Judaism. He has therefore
shown that Taylor's theological anthropology does not have a unique
claim on the imagination of how to go on as religious persons in a
secular age.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY AND PRACTICAL REASON: ON CHARLES TAYLOR AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Beginning with what we can learn from Kavka's criticisms, this
final section explores how moral theologians ought to regard Taylor's
work in relation to their own. What might we learn from Kavka's
claim that rabbinic Judaism, *a la* his appropriation of Maimonides,
does not fit within Taylor's account of religion in our times? In diag-
nosing Taylor's omission of rabbinic Judaism from his narrative,
Kavka highlights (and challenges) Taylor's anthropological frame, be-
hind which he senses the presence of Hegel. Reading Taylor's *Hegel*
reinforces my impression that Kavka is right in intuiting that Taylor
remains captivated by Hegel's project in important ways.[25]

Taylor situates Hegel's project in what he takes to be the funda-
mental (philosophical) problem of his era. It is an anthropological
problem.[26] The birth of modern conceptions of the "subject" gives rise
to two competing views of freedom. There is the freedom of a sub-
ject's power to dominate (objectify) nature, and there is the freedom
of restored harmony between the self and nature. The self, then, lives
in the cross pressures of these two conceptions of freedom, and the
immanent-transcendent dialectic responds to this tension in the self.

---

[24] Kavka, "What is Immanent," 130. Kavka, in other words, is trying to avoid the
contentious way of framing cultural conflict that seems to flow from Taylor's frame,
such as the following, from *A Secular Age*:" In our religious lives we are responding
to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our iden-
tifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to
attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanists, and others that remain
within the immanent frame [of secularity, naturalism, and *Zweckrationalität*], are
therefore responding to that transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it" (768).
[25] Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1975).
[26] For a contextual account of the problem to which Hegel was responding, see Taylor,
Hegel, 1-50.

The problem that motivates Hegel is re-articulated by Taylor, but basically adopted as his own preoccupation. Yet this very problem, an anthropology so understood, is what generates the project of re-narrating the universal—i.e., the grand teleological arc that can be found in Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*.

To gain or reinforce a critical angle on Taylor in a way sensitized by our engagement with Kavka, we might contrast Taylor's Hegelian approach to different kind of narrative. I have in mind the narrative undertaken by Gerhard Lohfink in answer to the titular question of his book, *Does God Need the Church?*[27] It emerges in the course of the narrative that the story's author, in an ultimate sense, is God. But the identity of this God, who is revealed in the narrative, is such as to be inextricably intertwined with the created world and, in particular, the lives of a people in whom he is particularly invested. Indeed, God's story is importantly the same as that of the people called Israel, as Israel—for the formative portion of the narrative—is striving to become a *people*, in the sense of having a strong, common identity. This identity is ordered to the promise and call to be God's presence in the world. But the story is in large part a history of that community's failed attempts, or hypotheses, regarding the social form that would be fitting for them to adopt. This story of a people embodies the genre of a quest.[28] In the pattern of failure and new beginning, exile and return, which is renewed in a decisive way in the incarnation of the Son in Jesus Christ and in the launching of the journey of the church, God as the ultimate author is gradually revealed as forgiving and generous; to say that God is "almighty" means that God has "all the time in the world" to carry the story to its completion without compelling by force the people he has gathered as his family.[29]

Kavka's concern, as I understand it, is that Taylor's narrative of social identity is such that it papers over differences in its eagerness to arrive at commonality and recognition (amid the politics of identity). In so doing it displays a willingness to posit a "we" that presumes a reconciliation not (yet) achieved. I have drawn on Lohfink here to imply that this is not the kind of "we" posited within the story told through the Scripture and liturgies of the people of God. This "we" stands in the midst of a story where God is made known as the one who carries out his purposes at a pace his people can keep. The "we"

---

[27] Gerhard Lohfink's, *Does God Need the Church: Toward a Theology of the People of God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999).

[28] Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church,* 106-20. Lohfink draws on the Old Testament in its historical context to show that Israel's quest for a social form is inseparable from its identity as the people through whom God is uniquely present in the world. On the one hand, the biblical record may not conclusively name the form of God's people—for it is as much an account of their failed attempts to live as God's people, a kind of series of hypotheses being tested and found wanting (119).

[29] Lohfink*, Does God Need the Church*, 39-49.

of the people of God is thus schooled in a kind patience, a patience formed by the acknowledgment that God's end is both already and not yet. To say that this narrative is "universal," or aspires to be, is simply to say that the God of Israel is the God who created (and redeemed) all creation in love. But the language of "universal" is perhaps wisely dropped.

THE CHURCH'S NARRATIVE AND PRACTICAL REASON

Lohfink's narrative thus responds to Kavka's concern that Taylor's narrative presumes too much. Taylor's story is told from outside the practical life of a historical community. With this point made, what remains to be done is to spell out what all this implies about the disposition Christian ethicists ought to adopt toward Taylor. I will offer a proposal mainly by explaining the difference Lohfink's narrative makes for how moral theologians are to understand their task.

At the outset of this paper, I suggested that Taylor was a philosopher deeply concerned with practical reason. We moral theologians are likely to feel attracted to him for his great strides in defeating reductive accounts of human behavior, i.e., objectivist (naturalist) explanations. In addition, he has become recently more willing to write about theological matters, and in a way that puts in play his own religious experiences. Further, the focus on religion in *A Secular Age* leads ultimately to the question of how people of faith, Catholic Christians in particular, are to understand their position and possibilities in a secularized social world. For all these reasons, Taylor therefore seems like he would be a good dialogue partner for moral theologians.

But citing Steinfels, I also drew attention to how his recommendations with regard to how to go on were lacking in traction. His examples of modern religious persons include people of extraordinary talents, and in discussing them his focus regards their unique itineraries of faith with little attention to their participation in local churches.

What's more, with Kavka, I pointed out that Taylor's anthropological approach is correlative with a narrative that subsumes religious difference, presuming a "we" that is not (yet) realized. Drawing on Lohfink, I intimated that Taylor's form of narration overlooks everyday Christians in the same way it does Jews. I therefore conclude that Taylor represents a temptation to moral theologians. He is not quite the friend we may have taken him to be, and therefore we should engage him cautiously.

Why I think Taylor may lead us to distort our basic task as moral theologians can be spelled out by further explicating how his narrative contrasts with Lohfink's. The "we" that functions in relation to the narrative displayed in Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age*—his "big books"—is one that, I will now claim, stands "outside" the unfolding of the story itself. By contrast, the "we" of Lohfink's

story, the people of God, stands "inside" the story. That is to say, it is the story of an incarnate God.

A natural challenge to my claim would ask whether Taylor's "we" is really outside of the unfolding events of his narrative, especially when he himself is present in the culminating characterization of what it may mean to be religious in our times. Further, the objection could be understandably raised that, unlike what is implied in Hegel's system, Taylor recognizes the basic contingency in the narrative of our search for the good.

The defense of my claim, and my articulation of how the task of the moral theologian differs from what Taylor's narrative might lead us to expect, comes with returning to my introductory description of Taylor as a practical reasoner. To begin with, Taylor certainly raises the question, "What is the nature of the good?" However, his thinking does not engage the more practical question, "What ought X to do?" We might say that his thinking is more akin to the theoretical reasoning of *synderesis*[30] than to practical reasoning *per se*.[31] It is the mark of practical reasoning that it terminates in an action.

As Herbert McCabe has pointed out, it is human for the end which we intend to be held before us by the intellect, and this is the function of *synderesis*, but the virtue of practical reason, *prudentia*, is fundamentally concerned with how well we bring a will for the good into the life of action here and now.[32] While *synderesis* provides the terms or first principles within which such reasoning is carried out, practical deliberation is not *about* these terms or principles but about a possible way forward in action.

Interpreting Aquinas, McCabe goes on to say that *prudentia*, or "good sense," depends more determinatively on the activity of the bodily senses than the mind. For unlike the relatively straightforward steps of theoretical logic, to do practical reasoning well requires taking into account to a wide array of particulars, and what is crucial is the perception of these. For this, our senses need to be in good shape and

---

[30] Whether it is proper to attribute *synderesis* to theoretical reason rather than practical reason is a matter I think to be arguable. I have gone with "theoretical" here to emphasize that Taylor's discussion of practical reason focuses more on the way reason illuminates the field of action than on discerning steps that lead to a realization of the good end.

[31] I owe this insight to my colleague Brad Kallenberg at the University of Dayton.

[32] I am here drawing on what I have learned about Aquinas from Herbert McCabe. Elucidating Aquinas on these matters, McCabe writes, "The intellectual grasp of the aim as aim (not attraction to it and intention of it, which is the actualization of will, but the understanding of it) is *synderesis*." Herbert McCabe, "Aquinas on Good Sense," *New Blackfriars* 67, 796 (Oct 1986): 426.

well-tuned. The grasping of the salient particular is ultimately done by a bodily gesture such as pointing at it.[33]

I use this distinction to draw attention to the fact that there is a kind of theoretical reasoning involved in morality, but it is far from the whole of what moral reasoning requires. We need a certain illumination of the field, but we need also the ability to reason well as we carry an intention into action in concrete circumstances. I believe Taylor remains at this speculative level, and this is telling. It correlates well with the conclusion I drew from my reading of Kavka that Taylor's narrative is told from the "outside."

Adopting something like Lohfink's narrative and attempting to identify with the "we" of the people of God, the moral theologian reasons practically from "the inside." My point is that for those whose narratives place them on the "inside," practical reasoning will be more like what McCabe, following Aquinas, describes it to be. This practical reasoning will be more akin to finding our way through a world of multifarious particulars with our ultimate end neither fully apparent nor totally opaque. Here practical reasoning is all about how to go on in these concrete circumstances, to make the next move. My aim is to suggest that moral theologians ought to see their task as helping ourselves and other Christians to carry out such reasoning well. Not unlike Kavka's Jewish reasoners who look for signs of God's incarnation in civil laws and seek to revise such laws when they find no such signs, the moral theologian seeks a way forward in light of what God has done and promises to do. This reasoning embodies an eschatological patience, which recognizes that our deliberations and actions, while consequential, need not bear the burden to ultimately determine their own meanings. Ⓜ'

---

[33] McCabe, "Aquinas on Good Sense," 429-30. We may comment here that this rendition of practical reasoning, drawing on McCabe's discussion of Aquinas's *prudentia*, implies a bodily formation if it is to be done well. Thus, Hauerwas and Coles have challenged Taylor's portrait of Gerard Manley Hopkins as a modern convert on the grounds that he disassociates Hopkins's poetic imagination from his liturgical life. While Taylor praises poets like Hopkins for enlarging our capacities of being, he does not attend to the way Hopkins's poetry is shaped by life of daily prayer and worship. The narrow conception of language implied here runs against the grain of Taylor's better insights. This, in my terms, is evidence that Taylor's account of the possibilities for being religious in our day is shaped by his Hegelian anthropology. Hauerwas and Coles, "Long Live the Weeds," 352.