This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:

Does history matter? Charles Taylor on the transcendental validity of social imaginaries

Reference:

Vanheeswijck Guido.- Does history matter? Charles Taylor on the transcendental validity of social imaginaries
History and theory: studies in the philosophy of history - ISSN 0018-2656 - 54:1(2015), p. 69-85
Full text (Publishers DOI): <http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1111/HITH.10741>
To cite this reference: <http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1234410151162165141>

Does History Matter?

Charles Taylor on The Transcendental Validity of Social Imaginaries

Guido Vanheeswijck

University Antwerp

Prinsstraat 13,

2000 Antwerp

Belgium (Europe)

guy.vanheeswijck@uantwerpen.be

8.643 words (including notes, abstracts, keywords)

Since its appearance in 2007, Charles Taylor's monumental book *A Secular Age*¹ has received much attention. A gamut of reviews², a series of conferences³, special issues of journals⁴ have been devoted to his interpretation of the rise of Western secularity. Whether admiring or critical of tone, the wealth of discussion testifies that this book has broader implications than only the specific relation between a religious and a secular age. One of the central issues in all these discussions is the role of history in philosophical argumentation, in particular with regard to normative positions on the possible role of religion in contemporary Western society. Applied to Taylor's work, many critics observe a methodological flaw in that there is an alleged discrepancy between his historical approach on the one hand and his defense of fullness in terms of openness to transcendence on the other.⁵ Since his 'faith-

¹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), hereafter SA.

² Charles Larmore, "How Much Can We Stand?", *The New Republic* (April 9, 2008), Martin Jay, 'Faith-Based History', *History and Theory*, Vol. 48 (February, 2009), 76-84; Hent de Vries, "The Deep Conditions of Secularity", *Modern Theology*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (July, 2010), 382-403; Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth century. Charles Taylor and the Problem of Historicism", *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (2012), 171-192; Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's 'A Secular Age'", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 69, No. 4 (Oct., 2008), 647-673; an analogous position is defended in Peter E. Gordon, "Must the Sacred be Transcendent?" *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (April, 2011), 126-139; Jonathan Sheehan, "When was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age," in M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen & C. Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 217-242.

³ M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen & C. Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press)

⁴ *Modern Theology*, July 2010; *Inquiry*, April 2011

⁵ Martin Jay, "Faith-Based History", 82; Hent de Vries, "The Deep Conditions of Secularity", 400-1; Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century", 181-183; Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 673; Jonathan Sheehan, "When was Disenchantment", 230

based history' is unwittingly apologetic, it is not only "hard to judge in strictly historical terms"⁶, but it also proves that "when it comes to the most ultimate affairs history may not matter at all".⁷

In particular, critics saw strains and tensions between Taylor's historical focus on the defining role of the immanent frame as a modern social imaginary on the one hand and his defense of the everlasting and thus a-historical possibility of believing in a transcendent God on the other. Therefore, many of them claimed that Taylor's approach got caught in a bind and eventually stumbled into an aporia. This paper challenges this verdict by exposing the misunderstanding underneath that interpretation of the role of history in Taylor's narrative. In order to disambiguate the relation between history and philosophy in Taylor's approach, I will raise three questions. First, what is the precise relation between history and ontology, taking into account the ontological status and validity of what Taylor calls social imaginaries? Second, why does 'fullness' get a universal status in his historical narrative? Third, is Taylor's position tenable that the contemporary experience of living within 'an immanent frame' as a social imaginary allows for an openness to transcendence?

Thereby, I will focus mainly upon Peter Gordon's position, as elaborated in two recent articles⁸, because they provide an excellent and balanced presentation of the quintessence of the main objections raised by many critics to Taylor's account of historical explanation in relation to the (ontological) status of the transcendent.⁹ More than with other critics, Gordon (and Woodford)'s explicit focus on the genealogy of Taylor's notion of social imaginaries and on its ontological status helps us to see the complexity of Taylor's position in

⁶ Martin Jay, "Faith-Based History", 82

⁷ Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 673

⁸ Abbreviated as Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor's "A Secular Age""; Peter E. Gordon, "Must the Sacred be Transcendent?". An analogous position, be it from a different stance, is taken by Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century: Charles Taylor and the Problem of Historicism".

⁹ See the articles selected under footnote 2

general and to cope with the threefold question how “a modern ontology of immanence permits transcendence to shine through?”¹⁰

In order to answer the first question, I will compare Peter E. Gordon’s interpretation of the status and the validity of social imaginaries with Taylor’s position, as developed in his article ‘The Validity of Transcendental Arguments’ and, on the basis of that comparison, distinguish two definitions of ontology (section 1 and 2). Subsequently, I try, in answer to the second question, to make it clear that precisely Taylor’s emphasis on the historical character of social imaginaries and on their ‘relaxed’ ontological anchorage allows for his claim that ‘fullness’ might have a trans-historical character (section 3). Finally, in answer to the third question, I would like to show that Taylor’s defense of the possibility of an ‘openness to transcendence’ - as a specific mode of fullness – is not couched in ‘onto-theological’ terms, as suggested by his critics, but that it is the very outcome of taking into account the current historical situation (section 4).

I. Social Imaginaries: ontological or not?

The notion of social imaginaries is one of the central concepts in *A Secular Age*. Taylor defines them as incorporating

a sense of the normal expectations that we have of each other; the kind of common understanding which enables us to carry out the collective practices which make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice. This understanding is both factual and ‘normative’; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what mis-steps would invalidate the practice. (SA, 172)

In his penetrating and thought-provoking article, Peter E. Gordon rightly emphasizes the central role of social imaginaries as part of a background or framework of tacit belief within

¹⁰ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 669

which people make sense of their experiences in Taylor's writings.¹¹ Gordon focuses upon three characteristics of this idea of a background. First, it is borrowed from the *phenomenological* tradition (Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Polanyi, Dreyfus) and from Wittgenstein. In contrast to Anglo-Saxon logical empiricism, the phenomenological tradition highlights the transcendental role of a social imaginary "which *makes possible* (italics mine) common practices, and a widely shared sense of legitimacy". (SA, 172) A second characteristic of this phenomenological idea of a background is that it is handed over to us *historically*. Finally, it has an *ontological* status:

A background is not fixed by God or reason, it is culturally and temporarily finite, a shared but limited horizon of assumptions. But it is nonetheless authoritative within certain historical limits, and it determines what can show up as significant or what counts as possible for any given culture and epoch. Heidegger had this historical-ontological function in mind when he wrote that 'metaphysics grounds an age'.¹²

This debt from the phenomenological tradition is most evident, according to Gordon, when the specific notion of 'social imaginary' is introduced.¹³ In other words, he sees social imaginaries as having a historical and an ontological status and as being operative on a transcendental level.

In different passages in his writings, Charles Taylor has located 'social imaginaries' not only in the phenomenological and Wittgensteinian tradition, but in the Kantian tradition as well. In particular, he has been clarifying the difference between an 'Intellectual Theory' and his own 'Reform Master Narrative' on secularization by identifying the role of social imaginaries to that of the Kantian transcendental schemes. When a theory penetrates and transforms the social imaginary,

¹¹ Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 658; cf. Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century", 179

¹² Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 657-658; cf. Peter Woodford, *ibid.*, 181

¹³ Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 658

this process isn't just one-sided; a theory making over a social imaginary. The theory in coming to make sense of the action is "glossed", as it were, given a particular shape as the context of these practices. Rather like Kant's notion of an abstract category becoming "schematized" when it is applied to reality in space and time, the theory is schematized in the dense sphere of common practice.¹⁴

Now, since transcendental schemes are schematized categories, it is clear that they operate on the same transcendental level as the Kantian categories and that they are equally the product of transcendental argumentation. Although Taylor implicitly refers to the central role of transcendental reasoning in his major writings in a haphazard way, it was only in an earlier article, *The Validity of Transcendental Arguments*, that he explicitly raised the question regarding their status.¹⁵ In answer to that question, Taylor, like Gordon, situates them in the phenomenological (and Kantian) tradition, highlights their revisable, hence historical character but, unlike his critics, *rejects* their ontological status. Due to their very transcendental nature, they have no ontological status: "[...] since they are grounded in the nature of experience, there remains an ultimate, ontological question they can't foreclose".¹⁶

Actually, Taylor's claim about the status of transcendental arguments is both Kantian and anti-Kantian. The anti-Kantian claim pertains to the a-historical status of the framework of categories: "it may seem clear that experience must have an object and must be coherent. But it is not at all clear that this coherence must be that of the applicability of the categories, and even less clear that the particular categories as Kant formulates them are the ones indispensably applicable. We can easily feel that Kant's attempt to formulate the boundary conditions of experience was infected by certain philosophical doctrines of his time, and that

¹⁴ SA, 176

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, "The Validity of Transcendental Arguments." In Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 20-33. Originally appeared in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. London, 1978-79.

¹⁶ Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 33

the nature of this necessary coherence should be characterized quite differently.”¹⁷ In other words, for Taylor categories do not have a universal or timeless status, but they are liable to historical transformation. This historical interpretation of transcendental categories is, of course, indebted to the phenomenological tradition but foremost, in the case of Taylor, to the influence of the proponents of the Romantic philosophy of language like Hamann, Herder and Humboldt.¹⁸

The Kantian claim is that transcendental arguments “prove something quite strong about the subject of experience and the subject’s place in the world; and yet since they are grounded in the nature of experience, there remains an ultimate, ontological question they can’t foreclose – for Kant, that of the things in themselves; for the thesis of embodied agency, the basic explanatory language of human behavior.”¹⁹ Put differently, the strength of transcendental arguments is that they start from subjective human experience and then move to their conclusions by showing that the conditions stated in the conclusions are indispensable to the concerning subject’s experience. As an illustration of this procedure, Taylor borrows his examples not only from the Kantian but from the phenomenological tradition as well: “Thus the applicability of the categories is alleged to be indispensable to the kind of coherence necessary for experience; or the sense of ourselves as embodied agents is indispensable to our perceptual field’s having an up-down orientation.”²⁰ As such, they are entitled to enjoying a kind of apodictic certainty or self-evidence and establishing a stronger claim than merely describing human experience due to the strength of their regressive a priori argumentative chain of necessary conditions. They show “the form that any account must take which invokes our own self-understanding. And this is decisive for the greater part of

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments”, 33

¹⁸ Cf. Charles Taylor “Retrieving Realism”, in Joseph K. Schear (ed.), *Mind, Reason and Being-in-the World. The McDowell-Dreyfus debate* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013), 61-90, in particular 82-87. See also Charles Taylor, “Preface”, in Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), ix.

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 33

²⁰ Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 27

anthropology, politics, sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, in short, virtually the entire range of the human sciences as we know them.”²¹

However, since transcendental arguments are anchored in human experience, it must be clear as well that the ultimate, ontological questions lie beyond their scope. Again, Taylor borrows his examples from the Kantian and the phenomenological tradition to illustrate the inherent limitations of transcendental philosophy as far as ontological claims are concerned. He refers to the famous word of Kant that “his arguments established nothing about things as they are in themselves, but only about the world as we experience it”²²; and he claims that Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of embodied agency, taken as an ontological thesis, would be exceeding the scope of his argument: “What is shown is that our thought, our experience, and in general our function as subjects must be described as essentially the thought or experience of embodied agents. This says something about the nature of our life as subjects. [...] But this doesn’t assure us that we can’t give an account of what underlies this experience and thought in, say, reductive neurophysiological terms. [...] For the possibility remains open that what we are in our own self-awareness may be in important ways misleading; a deeper level explanation of the functioning of human beings might be based on quite other principles.”²³

But one question remains. If it is true that Taylor denies an ontological status to social imaginaries, why then did he use the term ‘moral ontology’ already in *Sources of the Self* and why did he define on the opening pages of *A Secular Age* the implicit background of human experience in Heideggerian terms as ‘pre-ontology’?²⁴

II. Two definitions of ontology

²¹ Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 27

²² Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 26

²³ Charles Taylor, *ibid.*, 26

²⁴ SA, 3

According to Gordon, there is a surprising perplexity and even inconsistency in *A Secular Age* which derives from the ontological validity of social imaginaries: if to be modern means to live within the social imaginary of an immanent frame, as Taylor claims, how then will some of us remain capable to be open to an experience of religious transcendence?

“The difficulty here derives from the concept of a background itself, according to which our very experience of what there is was said to be premised upon a shared framework of tacit or taken-for-granted beliefs. *The background is what gives us our ontology* (italics mine). And Taylor’s narrative was meant to demonstrate that the background changed over time: the background of traditional society permitted God to show up in a complicated way as both transcendent to our world yet also immanent within it. [...] But on Taylor’s account the background understanding of the modern world is different, since it is one that tells us that what there is will show up as immanent. How, then, does a modern ontology of immanence permit transcendence to shine through?²⁵

Taylor’s only way around this difficulty is, according to Gordon (and Woodford), to relax the ontological status of the background. Since our background has drastically changed over time and since a transformation in the background, due to its ontological status, implies a transformation in the sorts of entities that can show up, the logical (and ontological) conclusion would be that also the ontological reality of God would disappear. But clearly, Taylor does not wish to make the last step into the logic of his historical ontology. Actually, he is deemed by his critics as unable to choose between the two horns of a dilemma. Either his claim that, as far as the sacred or transcendence is concerned, their reality remains unchanged is seen as an utter violation of a genuine phenomenological approach.²⁶ Or the

²⁵ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 669; cf. Peter Woodford, “Specters of the Nineteenth Century”, 183

²⁶ Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 671: “What is confusing here is that to find out whether the experience counts as transcendence or not, it is apparently necessary to go beyond the experience itself (a violation of phenomenological method).”

denial of his historical ontology would jettison the defining characteristic of his philosophical approach.²⁷

Gordon's and Woodford's conclusion is clear. Taylor's defense of experiencing genuinely religious transcendence in an 'immanent frame' is paradoxical and inconsistent: it is indebted to a full-blown historical ontology and at the same time averse from expanding its scope to cover all aspects of reality. By resisting ontological historicism in the face of his spiritual vision, Taylor falls prey to an 'irresolvable aporia', the consequence of which is a complete failure to verify his ambition to unite history and philosophy²⁸:

This resistance, one could say, marks the limit-point of a pluralistic ontology, beyond which a traditional monotheist cannot pass if he wishes to retain his faith. Taylor holds instead to the hard nugget of conviction that God is *still there*, and that He is still what He has always been, even if His appearance is now, perhaps, more rare and more miraculous. The striking conclusion of this brilliant yet perplexing history is that when it comes to the most ultimate matters history may not matter at all.²⁹

In my view, that conclusion derives from a mistaken reading of Taylor's interpretation of ontology. Admittedly, the terms 'moral ontology' or 'pre-ontology' often used by Taylor, may give rise to confusion. But that confusion can be dispelled by distinguishing two definitions of the term 'ontology'. Woodford rightly refers to the double usage of that term by claiming that when Taylor emphasizes the role of 'moral ontologies' in *Sources of the Self*, "ontology does not refer to the basic furniture of mind-independent reality or being, but to the basic sense value that orients one's notion of what is qualitatively good, worth striving for."³⁰ Put differently, Taylor's 'moral ontology' refers to the way the world is experienced in a given historical period, not to the world as it is in itself.

²⁷ Peter Woodford, "Specters of the Nineteenth Century", 189

²⁸ Peter Woodford, *ibid.*, 189

²⁹ Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 673

³⁰ Peter Woodford, *ibid.*, 180 footnote 14

Against the background of this distinction, it is highly surprising that Gordon lays out a 'Heideggerian proposal' to amend Taylor's view of the role of social imaginaries:

[...] any properly historical ontology must attend to the way that every epoch furnishes only a partial glimpse of what there is. Indeed, on Heidegger's view there just is *no ultimate or single way the world is*; rather reality shows itself over time in multiple ways, and each way we have construed reality has brought certain themes into the light while leaving others in darkness. It is a further and even more crucial feature of the Heideggerian story that our descriptive language does not always match up with the phenomena themselves. The Heideggerian view permits us to acknowledge that in any given epoch, the sendings of Being are not total and they still permit rival or marginal understandings to shine through.³¹

When Taylor claims that social imaginaries make *explicit* the implicit way we experience our world in a given epoch, thereby in principle foreclosing the ability of any social imaginary to give a definite answer to ontological questions, he is in fact repeating what Gordon has laid out in his so-called Heideggerian proposal. In other words, for Taylor there is no historical social imaginary whatsoever that can furnish a total view of what there is.

Whereas the Heideggerian terms 'historical ontology' and 'pre-ontology', used by Gordon and Taylor, refer to the way the world is experienced in a given historical period, the Kantian term 'ontology' refers to the world as it is in itself. Given the different significance of the term 'ontology' in both cases, it should be clear that Taylor does not have to relax the ontological primacy of the background, as Gordon and Woodford suggest, in order to defend the possibility of an experience of genuinely religious transcendence. By contrast, Taylor's very point of departure, analogous to Heidegger's, is that social imaginaries cannot but have a

³¹ Peter E. Gordon, "Must the Sacred be Transcendent?", 133

‘relaxed’ ontology, since they depict only the way we experience the world, never the things as they are in themselves.³²

In contrast with Gordon’s interpretation, Taylor’s very emphasis on the historical and relaxed ontological character (in the Heideggerian sense) of social imaginaries permits him to claim in principle that, although the historical experience of transcendence is dependent on the historical transformations of social imaginaries, the very ontological object (in the Kantian sense) of that experience might remain intact as a trans-historical reality. But before clarifying this central issue between Taylor and his critics, I would like to focus my attention upon the preliminary question whether even on the level of human experience, there may be attitudes or experiences that have a trans-historical character.

III. The Human Universal of Fullness

In order to answer this question, a distinction must be made between social imaginaries (or schematized categories) which as descriptions of the way we experience our world are inherently historical on one hand and category terms which designate a universal form of human experience as e.g. ‘fullness’ on the other. Let me give an example of a social imaginary that is definitely historical: the ‘Great Chain of Being’. Undoubtedly, there was an era when it was used as a description of the world as it is. Now, we know that such a description did not match up with the phenomena themselves and that we have to consider

³² As far as I know, Taylor has never used the term ‘relaxed ontology’. He has sometimes made use of the term ‘weak ontology’, referring to Stephen White who has coined this term. Like White, Taylor claims that all fundamental conceptions of the self, other, and world are at the same time contestable and unavoidable for an adequately reflective life. But, although he agrees to White’s ‘weak’ approach to ontology, he prefers a change in nomenclature: “My term ‘philosophical anthropology’ is meant to cover much the same matters as White does with ‘ontology’: it tries to define certain fundamental features about human beings, their place in nature, their defining capacities (language is obviously central to these), and their powerful or basic motivations, goals, needs, and aspirations”. See Charles Taylor, “The ‘Weak Ontology’ Thesis”, *The Hedgehog Review*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (Summer 2005), 35-42 (quote from p.35). For a clear exposition of the difference between Vattimo’s “weak thinking” and White’s (and Taylor’s) “weak ontology”, see Stephen K. White, “Violence, Weak Ontology, and Late-Modernity”, *Political Theory*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (2009), 808-816

the ‘Great Chain of Being’ as a social imaginary, depicting the way the world was experienced in a bygone period. Does that also apply to the concept of fullness, another central concept in *A Secular Age*?

It is noteworthy to see that Taylor in an *Apologia pro Libro Suo* explicitly underlines that the term ‘fullness’ does not denote a historical ‘social imaginary’, but that it refers to a human universal:

Fullness is not a category fundamental to *cognition* in the Kantian sense, [...] but to human life in its mutual intelligibility. The argument that I’m putting forward is this: all human beings make something like this kind of distinction, and it’s very important to me to have, if not this word, this, as it were, general category, because I think that part of what ‘s involved in understanding other positions is understanding their notion of fullness. [...] So I think it was a very, very useful idea to try to introduce this notion of general facet or dimension of the human condition where people strive for – have a sense of – what really, fully, authentically, living would be, and to feel that they either aren’t there or they are there, or they ‘re getting there, or they’re losing it, or they’d like to get there, and so on. This is something that plays a role in people’s lives.³³

Furthermore, because Taylor is fully aware that the term ‘fullness’ has often led to ‘more misunderstanding than communication’, he emphasizes that ‘fullness’ is not a theological but an anthropological claim. Although he confesses that in his personal experience, fullness is related to “an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond” (SA, 638), Taylor insists on making it clear at all pains that this confession is neither meant as a human universal nor as the definite conclusion of *A Secular Age*:

If the book has a desired perlocutionary effect, it is rather this: I think what we badly need is a conversation between a host of different positions, religious, nonreligious, antireligious, humanistic, antihumanistic, and so on, in which we eschew mutual caricatures and try to understand what

³³ Charles Taylor, “Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo”, in: M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen & C. Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 317

“fullness” means for the other. What makes me impatient are the positions that are put forward as conversation-stoppers.³⁴

Given this elucidation of the generic role of the term ‘fullness’, we are able to provide a more balanced answer to Gordon’s question, already mentioned above: if to be modern means to live within the social imaginary of an immanent frame, as Taylor claims, how then will some of us remain capable to be open to an experience of religious transcendence? Taylor’s longing for and belief in transcendence is no more than his very personal way to capture the human universal of fullness. This implies that fullness can have a completely different meaning for other people, including their rejection of belief in transcendence.³⁵ Hence, by contrast to Gordon’s conclusion that “when it comes to the most ultimate matters, history may not matter at all”, it is Taylor’s claim that, due to the very historicity of all kinds of social imaginaries, all choices remain open in the never-ending human search for fullness, including both the choice for belief in vertical transcendence by people living in a secular age and its rejection.

Against this background, Gordon’s portrayal of Taylor’s position that “if one denies transcendence the result will be anti-humanist excrescences such as Fascism and Bolshevism, symptoms of a fascination with violence unchecked by any moral ends”³⁶ is not fully correct. It is based upon the following paraphrasing and partial quoting of Taylor’s position: “Rather, even granting its sometimes benevolent intentions, the *denial* (italics by Gordon) of transcendence is ‘bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual breakdown of all moral standards. First, secular humanism, and then eventually its pieties and values come under challenge. And in the end nihilism’”.³⁷

³⁴ Charles Taylor, “Afterword: Apologia pro Libro Suo”, 318. See for a detailed elaboration of the concept ‘fullness’: SA, 4-14

³⁵ cf. SA, 7-10

³⁶ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 666

³⁷ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 666

Actually, Gordon's omission of the opening sentences of this paragraph boils down to a distortion of its content. A full quotation of Taylor's paragraph, on the contrary, exposes his nuanced and balanced attitude regarding possible consequences of the disappearing openness to transcendence:

From the religious perspective, the problem is the opposite. There is a too quick and slick explanation right to hand. (italics mine) The denial of transcendence is bound to lead to a crumbling and eventual breakdown of all moral standards. First, secular humanism, and then eventually its pieties and values come under challenge. And in the end nihilism.³⁸

Moreover, the significance of Taylor's phrase '*From the religious perspective, [...] there is a too quick and slick explanation right to hand*' (omitted by Gordon) is re-inforced by the opening sentence of the next paragraph:

I am not saying that there is no insight at all in this account. *But it leaves too much unexplained* (italics mine)³⁹.

What is left unexplained by the religious perspective is that, according to Taylor, contemporary Western society has to cope with a specific struggle on the ideological terrain, i.e. not a struggle between believers and unbelievers, but a three-cornered, even four-cornered battle: there are secular or exclusive humanists (Enlightenment position), there are neo-Nietzscheans (counter-Enlightenment position) and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life. And within that third group, a distinction has to be made between conservative believers who reject modernity and secular humanism as a complete mistake and believers in transcendence who acknowledge certain aspects of modernity as a gain. The latter position is basically Taylor's.

Hence, Taylor's position is much more nuanced than is suggested here by Gordon. Gordon blames Taylor for seeing anti-humanism as "the cruel culmination of the exclusive humanist perspective" and for his failure "to acknowledge rival accounts of political anti-

³⁸ SA, 638. I am grateful to Michiel Bellon who made me attentive to this discrepancy between Gordon's quote and Taylor's original text.

³⁹ SA, 638

humanism”⁴⁰. He reminds him of the decisive role of the modernist spirit of political theology and the lively power of genuine religion in anti-humanist movements of Fascism and Bolshevism. But he seems to forget that Taylor, by framing the current map of the ideological terrain as a four-cornered battle, is highly sensitive to the fact that political anti-humanism has indeed often been intricately intertwined with religious sources. In Taylor’s perspective, anti-humanist threats can come from an intensified tradition of humanist self-assertion and from certain traditions of religion alike. Fully admitting that “most historical religion remains only imperfectly oriented to the beyond” (SA, 639), he is as sensitive to the possible dangers of religious convictions as to those of exclusive humanism.

And when Gordon blames Taylor for not recognizing that “exclusive humanism may sometimes nourish not the arrogance of Nietzschean self-assertion but rather a deeper sense of human vulnerability. [...] Naturalism has its own humility”⁴¹, he seems to forget that Taylor precisely acknowledges the fragility and vulnerability of the exclusive humanist stance. Even more, Taylor explicitly raises the question how we will manage to live up to the always higher demands for solidarity and benevolence on people made by an exclusive humanist stance.

Hence, both Gordon and Taylor address the fragility of the human condition. The only difference between both authors is that in answer to their shared question, Taylor believes that an appeal to a transcendent source of unconditional agapeic love beyond the ideal of human flourishing may help us to live up to the high demands for solidarity:

Now, it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans. I think it is, but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means, in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has *something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, most value in these times* (italics mine).⁴²

IV. Transcendence: ontological or onto-theological?

⁴⁰ Peter Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 666

⁴¹ Peter Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 667

⁴² Charles Taylor “A Catholic Modernity?” in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 186

Yet, as indicated, there remains one final objection made by Gordon (and others). If it may be granted that an experience of religious transcendence – as a particular embodiment of fullness - is even possible today, what is then the ontological object of that experience? Might that object – God? - remain intact as a trans-historical reality, as Taylor seems to suggest? Or is it rather to be seen as derived from the basic onto-theological model of the modern west, as is suggested by Gordon (and Woodford), and is it, therefore, no more than a historical manifestation of the sacred?⁴³ Here, we do no longer discuss on the transcendental level of longing for transcendence as a human experience; now the ontological reality of transcendence itself is at stake.

According to Gordon, it is clear that the ontological distinction between transcendence and immanence is a historically situated distinction, inaugurated in the Axial period. Of course, Gordon knows that Taylor is aware of the historical genesis of this distinction. In *A Secular Age* Taylor appeals to a definition of religion in terms of this distinction as “tailor-made for our culture. This may be seen as parochial, incestuous, navel-gazing, but I would argue that this is a wise move, since we are trying to understand changes in a culture for which this distinction has become foundational”.⁴⁴ But Gordon, who quotes this very passage and even italicizes the words ‘a culture for which this distinction has become foundational’⁴⁵, criticizes Taylor for still insisting on this definition as the only foundational for Western culture. The Axial phenomenon of transcendence seems to serve, in spite of its apparent historical origin, as a trans-historical criterion for modeling the sacred and the Axial distinction transcendence/immanence as a foundational model of the sacred. Making a funny pun, Gordon calls this distinction not ‘tailor-made’ but ‘Taylor-made’.

⁴³ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 672; Gordon has elaborated on the role of the notion of ‘onto-theology: see Peter E. Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?”, 133-134

⁴⁴ SA, 16

⁴⁵ Peter E. Gordon, “Must the Sacred be Transcendent?”, 131

Starting from the idea “that the Axial revolution was an historical event, from which it seems to follow that there were in fact other modalities of non-Axial religion that either pre-existed, or were contemporaneous with, the inaugural moment of Axial transcendence [...] of construing the sacred that our post-Axial notion does not adequately capture”⁴⁶, Gordon concludes that the Axial distinction transcendence/immanence cannot serve as the only foundational model of the sacred. On top of that, he describes the Axial phenomenon of transcendence in Heideggerian terms as ‘onto-theology’: “The basic onto-theological groundwork of the modern West reinforces our typical understanding of sacred experience according to a *duplex* metaphysical-normative map of the world as divided into immanent and transcendent spheres. But according to the Heideggerian proposal, we should not construe this duplex model as the trans-historical *truth* about the nature of the sacred. Rather we should at least admit the possibility that the language of transcendence may have partially distorted or concealed other ways the sacred might show up.”⁴⁷ Hence, Taylor’s trans-historical use of the Axial distinction (and its onto-theological groundwork) is basically untenable.

On my view, a meticulous reading of Taylor’s position shows that he does not construe the Axial distinction as a trans-historical given. On the contrary, he emphasizes that the Axial distinction transcendence/immanence is a historical distinction “constructed or redefined in the very process of modernity and secularization”.⁴⁸ Despite its historical origin, however, Taylor is convinced that this distinction can serve in the context of his research. Why? What he is trying to do in *A Secular Age*, is to understand a gamut of changes which have arisen, not in all religions, but in the religious experience of one particular civilization, that is the civilization of the modern West, whose principal roots lie in what is called “Latin

⁴⁶ Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 129

⁴⁷ Peter E. Gordon, *ibid.*, 133-4

⁴⁸ SA, 16

Christendom.”⁴⁹ In the transition from Latin Christendom to the modern West, a titanic shift in background has taken place from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as “beyond” human life, to a civilization in which this construal is challenged by a majority which places it “within” human life:

The great invention of the West was that of an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, and whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent creator beyond it. This notion of the “immanent” involved denying – or at least isolating and problematizing – any form of interpenetration between the things of Nature, on one hand, and the “supernatural” on the other, be this understood in terms of the one transcendent God, or of Gods or spirits, or magic forces, or whatever.⁵⁰

Put differently, because the particular characteristic of modern Western civilization – its belief in the immanent frame – is dependent on the very Axial distinction between transcendence and immanence, Taylor concludes that a reading of the evolution of western culture in terms of this distinction may serve his purposes. Hence, the Axial distinction is not foundational for all cultures; it is especially useful in the context of Western civilization.

Within the context of Western civilization, Taylor lays much emphasis on the historical contingencies of its evolution and, consequently, on the unpredictability of its outcome. On his view, the particular character of Western culture is not the outcome of an irreversible logical process, but the historical result of a change in background understanding. His claim, therefore, is that secular modernity cannot be understood in terms of underlying features of human nature which were there all along but had been impeded by religious factors, as for instance Marcel Gauchet believes⁵¹, but “that Western modernity, including its secularity, is

⁴⁹ SA, 15, 21

⁵⁰ SA, 15-16

⁵¹ See Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*. Translated by Oscar Burge, Foreword by Charles Taylor (New French Thought), (Princeton: N.J., Princeton, University Press, 1997).

the fruit of new inventions, newly constructed self-understandings and related practices, and can't be explained in terms of perennial features of human life".⁵² Therefore, even in an age which is predominantly secular and in which belief in an immanent frame is the default position, different attitudes towards transcendence remain possible: from utter rejection over forms of immanent or internal transcendence to belief in God. Precisely because of the explicitly historical character of all human-made social imaginaries, which is irreducible to a single logical dynamic, Taylor takes an overtly pluralist stance regarding the different ways of embodying the human universal of fullness.

Hamlet without the Prince?

Gordon, however, presents another reading of Taylor's attitude towards transcendence, which he defines as non-historicist and non-pluralist. Referring to Taylor's preface to the English translation of Gauchet's book, he concludes that "what is genuinely sacred for Taylor can only be transcendent and can only be God. Anything else, he suggests would be 'like Hamlet without the Prince'".⁵³ Because I do not think this conclusion fully correct, I will quote Taylor's passage in question at full length and subsequently locate it on different levels in the discussion between Gauchet and Taylor:

Can the evolution [from pure religion to the exit from religion] be accounted for simply in terms of the structural tensions of 'religion'? If so, then the explanatory primacy of these structures would indeed be vindicated. Faith would be merely 'a dependent variable', flotsam on the sea of a postreligious age. But perhaps these mutations can only be explained by supposing that something

Gordon presents Gauchet's historical approach to religion as an alternative to Taylor's. Cf. Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 672-3

⁵² SA, 22

⁵³ Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 673

like what they relate to – God, Nirvana – really exists. In that case, a purely cultural account of religion would be like Hamlet without the Prince.⁵⁴

The expression ‘Hamlet without the Prince’ first and foremost refers to a dissent of opinion between the two authors regarding the *motive* initiating mutations within the history of religion. Whereas Gauchet in *The Disenchantment of the World* is highlighting the role of structural tensions, inherent in the dynamics of transcendence, as explanatory of these mutations, Taylor’s claim is that mutations in faith are better explained by “supposing that something like what they relate to – God, Nirvana – really exists.”

For anyone acquainted with his earlier writings, Taylor’s critical note, addressed to Gauchet, was not unexpected. Already in *Sources of the Self*, he had argued that the process of historical explanation implies two distinctive questions. The first question is a ‘structural’ one, looking for the role of diachronic causation. When raising that question, we want to know “what were the precipitating conditions, and this leads us to some statement of the features peculiar to Western civilization in [e.g.] the early modern period which made it the case that this particular shift occurred here.”⁵⁵ But there is a second question as well, an ‘interpretive’ one. Raising that question involves questions as: what draws people to something? What gives them their spiritual power? What are their visions of good involved?

All these questions ask for an interpretation “which will show why people found (or find) [a cultural phenomenon like e.g. a particular religion] convincing/inspiring/moving, which will identify what can be called the ‘idées-forces’ it contains. This can, up to a point, be explored independently of the question of diachronic causation. We can say: in this and this consists the power of the idea/identity/moral vision, however it was brought to be history. But of course these two orders of question can’t be entirely separated. [...] To understand

⁵⁴ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, Foreword by Charles Taylor, xiv-xv.

⁵⁵ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 202. (Henceforth: SS)

wherein the force of certain ideas consists is to know something relevant how they come to be central to a society in history".⁵⁶

Hence, Taylor believes that, although there is a lot to Gauchet's structural analysis, such account never makes an interpretive analysis, focusing upon the underlying motives and the search for significance of the agents, superfluous. Therefore, in order to fully understand Taylor's position in this discussion, we must take into account its intimate relation to his definition of faith. He defines faith in the strong sense by a double criterion:

the belief in a transcendent reality, on the one hand and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other.⁵⁷

This definition is connected with Taylor's interpretation of the role of Axial religions. Like Gauchet, Taylor refers to the 'ontological deepening' of transcendence that took place in the Axial period. But unlike Gauchet, he explicitly mentions the *ethical* change or 'deepening' of the relationship between humans and the divine. That change is double. Whereas the gods in primitive religion often adopt an ambivalent stance towards humans, the higher powers of the axial religions unambiguously support human welfare and foster human flourishing. And whereas human fulfillment in the pre-axial religions was connected to merely human flourishing, the axial religions inaugurate the conception of a higher good or deeper meaning beyond the prerequisites of flourishing (health, welfare). This deeper good sometimes even thwarts the 'lower' ones, requiring an ethical transformation of the person.⁵⁸

Therefore, the mutation from a pre-axial to an Axial religion is, according to Taylor, basically due to a change in ethical attitude which is intimately related to a belief in the

⁵⁶ SS, 203. These are quotations from Chapter 12, "A Digression of Historical Explanation" from SS, 199-207, in my view a chapter that is obligatory reading for anyone who intends to take a stance pertaining to Taylor's view of historical explanation in particular and the role of history in general.

⁵⁷ SA, 510. Quoted in Peter E. Gordon, "Must the Sacred be Transcendent?", 130

⁵⁸ See Charles Taylor, "What was the Axial Revolution?" in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2011), 367-379

unconditional benevolence of God toward humans. But even if the religious background of this ethical experience is clarified, two final questions raised by Gordon still remain to be answered. Does this change in ethical attitude necessarily imply the ontological existence of God? And must belief in God be equated with what Heidegger (and Gordon) defines as the onto-theological model?

In order to answer the first question, I have to return to the earlier made distinction between a transcendental and an ontological level. It is undoubtedly so that for Taylor on the transcendental level anchored in human experience, belief in the genuine existence of a benevolent God plays a decisive role in the transition from pre-axial to Axial religion. In his perspective, conversion to Christianity – to select one example – is strongly related to the belief in Jesus as the genuine embodiment of God's benevolence toward all humans. Only in this transcendental perspective of human experience, a believer may find it inconceivable to abandon his faith. But finding the possibility of his own disbelief inconceivable does not exclude that on the ontological (in the Kantian sense) level situated beyond the scope of human experience, the possibility remains open that what a Christian believer experiences might be misleading.⁵⁹

Due to the disappearance of classic cosmological and metaphysical frameworks - the 'social imaginaries' of yore (as e.g. The Great Chain of Being, Divine History, the Metaphysical Absolute) – we are bereft from a generally agreed language to give an account of reality underlying human experiences. Hermeneutical and phenomenological philosophy

⁵⁹ See for a discussion on this very topic: Peter E. Gordon, "The Place of the Sacred", 655; M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen & C. Calhoun, "Editor's Introduction" in: M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen & C. Calhoun (eds.), *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 6; Ch. Taylor, "Retrieving Realism", 76: "[...] we will always be thinking within frameworks which are vulnerable to potential challenges and revisions. Our confidence in these at any one time reflects our sense that by operating within them we are in contact with reality. This confidence may (we can say, almost certainly will) turn out to be misplaced in some as yet unpredictable respects. But never totally, because we will only be able to cope with these errors within an amended framework. Within the frameworks, we of course cope with issues by giving reasons, invoking criteria. We frame representations about which we ask whether they really apply. We treat our beliefs, theories, as over against reality, to be related to it. But all this goes on within a larger context of presumed contact with reality. The presumption can be erroneous, but never totally."

are no longer able to take resort to a mere (philosophical and theological) repetition of the metaphysical and Christian tradition, wherefore they are invited to search for a form of language “that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believers and unbelievers alike, most value in these times”.⁶⁰ In that light, Taylor has underlined time and again – from *Sources of the Self* over *Ethics of Authenticity* to *A Secular Age* – the importance of finding ‘subtler languages’. At the same time, however, he has always emphasized the ‘relaxed’ ontological and even fragile status of these subtler languages pertaining to the domain of transcendence:

What is crucial to the new “subtler” languages of post-Romantic poets [...] was that they permit a kind of suspension or indeterminacy of ontological commitments. [...] In other words, it is in the very nature of this modern poetics, where the semantics of its language is constructed, as it were, within the poetic work itself, to allow for an ontological indeterminacy. The language can be taken in more than one sense, ranging from the fullest ontological commitment to the transcendent to the most subjective, human-, even language-centred.⁶¹

Taylor’s rejection of onto-theology

The answer to the second question is related to the ‘relaxed’ and fragile/weak ontological status of subtler languages as well. As far as I know, Taylor never used the term onto-

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?” in Charles Taylor, *Dilemmas and Connections. Selected Essays* (Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 186

⁶¹ SA, 757. The issue of the ontological status of ‘subtler languages’ regarding ethical values and religious beliefs is already from the start of paramount importance in Taylor’s work. See Charles Taylor, “Ontology”, *Philosophy*, 34 (129), 1959, 141: “[...] What [do] we mean by the statement that ontological questions are ‘unanswerable’. We might sum up the foregoing paragraphs in this way: no-one can say ‘Man is...’ in a philosophical tone of voice, and finish up with anything but a platitude or a bit of nonsense. But this is over simple. The nonsense in question is only nonsense from the standpoint of ordinary language or the languages of science. It is itself part of a language stratum of its own, which we can learn, as we have the others, and it may enable us to see and understand things about human beings that we wouldn’t otherwise. But when we stand back for a moment, we can see the contingency of this language. There may be others which will teach us more. Our metaphysical craving for the *real* language remains unsatiated.”; Charles Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology”, *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 100, No. 6 (June, 2003), 320: “The really interesting question [...] is whether the ethic that all of us share, naturalists and antinaturalists alike, say, the affirmation of universal human rights, with their sense that human beings are unconditionally worthy of respect, can consort with the evolutionary naturalism that finds such higher goods ‘queer.’ Certainly, the vast majority of our naturalist colleagues believe so. But others [...] seem to have the opposite intuition. Here, on the brink of the really interesting question, I have to break off, partly through lack of time; and partly because the conceptual means at my disposal are still too crude to explore this in an illuminating fashion.”

theology to designate his own position. Searching for the deeper/higher reality of transcendence, he neither harks back to the traditional Christian terminology nor envisages the possibility of rehabilitating ‘classic ontology’ or ‘onto-theological metaphysics’. Taylor’s aim is to elaborate a ‘moral ontology’ which he defines as a tentative search for an “objective order through personal resonance”. In subtler words, he is in search of what it might mean that

our being in the image of God is also our standing among others in the stream of love, which is that facet of God’s life we try to grasp, *very inadequately* (italics mine), in speaking of the Trinity⁶²

Without doubt, Taylor acknowledges the Heideggerian word that man can neither pray to the onto-theological God, nor fall to his knees in awe before the *causa sui*, nor dance and play music. In order to capture something of the ever receding mystery of the ‘historical God’⁶³, we have to leave behind the terminology of onto-theological tradition and invent new and subtler languages so as to give expression to the cross-pressures and fragility we all, believers and unbelievers alike, experience in the Jamesian open space, “where the winds blow, where one can feel the pull in both directions.”⁶⁴

In his effort to counter not only the dominance of the immanent frame but the influence of ‘onto-theological metaphysics’ as well, Taylor would surely endorse Gordon’s (and Gauchet’s) claim that “the ‘onto-theological’ experience of sacred transcendence is a symptom of disenchantment, not a refuge from it”.⁶⁵ Taylor is as much sensitive to the historical and biased character of the onto-theological interpretation as Gordon would wish him to be. In particular, he is extremely sensitive to tensions inherent in the concept of transcendence that show up from the Axial period onwards. Since Taylor considers the Axial

⁶² Charles Taylor, “A Catholic Modernity?”, 185

⁶³ I borrow this term from Leszek Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988)

⁶⁴ SA, 592

⁶⁵ Peter E. Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred”, 672

age as the fledgling beginning of what he defines as the broad movement of ‘Reform’ which has not only been disenchanting, disciplining and homogenizing life and society but has also been ‘excarnating’ our relation to transcendence, it might not be surprising that he is pleading for a new-found balance between pre-axial and post-axial elements.

In contrast to Gauchet (and Gordon), however, Taylor does not view the historical evolution of religion necessarily as a progressive exit out of religion, in keeping with the pattern of an underlying logic. Following Robert Bellah’s insight that “nothing is ever lost”, he offers no place for unproblematic breaks with a religious past. Instead, Bellah’s slogan is used by Taylor to prevent us from falling into the trap of claiming fully to break with a so-called problematic past. Such a claim would “blind us to the ways in which we are repeating some of its horrors in our own way.”⁶⁶ Put differently, it is Taylor’s deeply held conviction that even when it comes to the most ultimate matters, we cannot simply leave behind our historical past.

V. Conclusion

Opposite to Gordon’s verdict that for Taylor history does not matter at all when it comes to the issue of transcendence, my final claim is that Taylor defends a much more nuanced and in some respects even diametrically opposed position. Actually, Gordon’s very suggestion that a modern ontology in principle excludes the possible existence of transcendence, entails that in his own approach “when it comes to the most ultimate matters, history may not matter at all”. Taylor’s account of the role of social imaginaries and in particular of the currently dominating imaginary of an ‘immanent frame’, however, tries to do justice both to their

⁶⁶ SA, 772

compelling and revisable nature on the transcendental level and to their indeterminacy on the ontological one.

Of course, Taylor as a Christian, as a 'critical Catholic', feels related to a really existing transcendence. But telling the story of his own belief was not the main purpose of *A Secular Age*. So, one does not have to agree with Taylor's personal preference for "an ineradicable bent to respond to something beyond" in order to acknowledge that his approach in SA is not perplexing, confusing or inconsistent. Taylor does neither set aside the historical impact of the Axial revolution nor defend its basic onto-theological groundwork, as Gordon suggests. The only claim he makes is that, due to the historical and relaxed ontological status (in the Heideggerian sense) of social imaginaries, even the dominant social imaginary of an immanent frame may allow for the possibility of the ontological (in the Kantian sense) existence of something beyond, which he tentatively tries to capture in fragile, subtler languages.

Summary

Since its appearance in 2007, Charles Taylor's monumental book *A Secular Age* has received much attention. One of the central issues in the discussions around Taylor's book is the role of history in philosophical argumentation, in particular with regard to normative positions on the ultimate affairs. Many critics observe a methodological flaw in that there is an alleged discrepancy between Taylor's historical approach on the one hand and his defense of fullness in terms of openness to transcendence on the other. Since his 'faith-based history' is unwittingly apologetic, it is not only "hard to judge in strictly historical terms", but it also proves that "when it comes to the most ultimate affairs history may not matter at all".

This paper challenges this verdict by exposing the misunderstanding underneath this interpretation of the role of history in Taylor's narrative. In order to disambiguate the relation between history and philosophy in Taylor's approach, I will raise three questions. First, what is the precise relation between history and ontology, taking into account the ontological validity of what Taylor calls social imaginaries? Second, why does 'fullness' get a universal status in his historical narrative? Third, is Taylor's position tenable that the contemporary experience of living within 'an immanent frame' allows for an openness to transcendence?

In order to answer these questions, I will first compare Peter Gordon's interpretation of the status of social imaginaries with Taylor's position and, on the basis of that comparison, distinguish two definitions of ontology (section 1 and 2). Subsequently, I try to make it clear that precisely Taylor's emphasis on the historical character of social imaginaries and on their 'relaxed' ontological anchorage allows for his claim that 'fullness' might have a trans-historical character (section 3). Finally, I would like to show that Taylor's defense of the possibility of an 'openness to transcendence' - as a specific mode of fullness - is not couched in 'onto-theological' terms, as suggested by his critics, but that it is the very outcome of taking into account the current historical situation (section 4).

Keywords

History, historicism, Axial period, ontology, onto-theology, social imaginaries, Charles Taylor, Peter Gordon