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Taylor, Genealogy, History

by

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Honors Thesis

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“What returns, what finally comes home to me, is my own self.”

: Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

“Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and re-copied many times.”

: Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*

The genealogy disconcerts. In a number of ways perhaps. But the way I want examine to this is by comparing the genealogy of Charles Taylor to that of Michel Foucault. In particular, I want to compare their respective genealogies of the *self*. These are two different accounts of “where the self comes from” but they both aim at undermining our naïve answers to this question. But while both use the genealogy to undermine, I argue that where Foucault uses the genealogy to undermine and do away with the self entirely, in Taylor’s hands, the genealogy is used to undermine and underwrite our varied conceptions of the self. By complicating our story about the origins of the self, Taylor does not want to do away with it, but demonstrate the reasons we understand it in the various ways we do.

In section I, I proceed by demonstrating how Taylor takes up the genealogical task as laid down by Foucault. Then in section II, I present Foucault’s genealogy of the self and the problem it raises, namely, of how we can understand the self after recognizing that it has been constructed by forces other than our own. From here, in section III, I present Taylor’s genealogy as an expansion of Foucault’s project and, in section IV, conclude by arguing that Taylor’s offers a way beyond the problems faced by Foucault’s.

I

Taylor's chief aim in *A Secular Age* is to complicate what he calls "subtraction stories" about history. His historical investigation is focused on a seemingly simple question: how is it that we go from a state five hundred years ago where widespread unbelief in God is almost unconceivable, to a situation today where such belief is just one option among many, and a contested one at that? Taylor argues that most answers to this question come in the form of "subtraction stories," or:

...stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge. What emerges from this process—modernity or secularity—is to be understood in terms underlying features of human nature which were there all along, but had been impeded by what is now set aside.¹

The typical subtraction story of secularity is that the Christian God lost its influence because we slowly realized that we did not need to rely on superstition to explain the world. On this kind of account, broadly speaking, Christianity was weakened, or even "disproved," by something closer to the truth. Whether it was 'science,' 'enlightenment,' 'technology,' 'modernity,' or 'post-modernity,' many believe that the course of the past five hundred years or so involved shedding those unnecessary or incorrect beliefs in order to arrive where we are now. To state this view another way, where we were once confined to see the world a certain way, we now know better.

Tied up in the subtraction story about secularity is a subtraction story about the origins of the 'self.' The typical subtraction story of the self goes like this: where we used to be restrained by systems of domination that limited our autonomy, these chains were slowly loosened,

¹ Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. (London: Belknap Press, 2018), 22.

allowing us to now pursue our authentic selves. This is the view that, over time, we took steps to overcome limits placed on us from without, eventually terminating in the contemporary, fully-conscious self. For example, where humans in the past were forced to understand themselves in relation to the feudal lord or church whom they spent their entire lives serving, we have progressed enough economically and socially that we now have the freedom to be “who we really are.” To offer another example, we no longer view ourselves as susceptible to outside influences like spirits, demonic possession, and magic because we’re knowledgeable enough now to know they never existed in the first place. Altogether, we arrive at modernity with the shell of any “enchanted” notions about the self removed, leaving only the truth.

Taylor argues that our self-understandings are not just grounded in a sense of how history has unfolded but specifically in a ‘story’ about how this history has produced *us*. Thus it matters what kind of story we tell ourselves about how we got here. If we tell “subtraction stories” of history, we will believe that our ways of understanding, of both ourselves and the world, are perennial features of being human. But in order to counter these subtraction stories, Taylor cannot just present the historical “facts of the case,” so to speak. He must also offer a story, but his is a story that intends to complicate the simpler ones. In the same way Foucault says we need to tell “a history about the present,” Taylor argues, “To get straight where we are, we have to go back and tell the story properly. Our past is sedimented in our present, and we are doomed to misidentify ourselves, as long as we can’t do justice to where we come from.”²

Against these subtraction stories, Taylor’s thesis is that the rise of our modern notion of the self, and thus secularity, must be understood as “the fruit of new inventions.” In particular, his goal in turning to history is to articulate how our widespread, nearly unconscious, and

² Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. (New York: Vintage, 1995), 31.
Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 29.

unquestioned notions about the human predicament came about. Rather than subtraction, he aims to offer a history of “newly constructed self-understandings and related practices.”³ Central among these inventions, and the one I would like to focus on here, is the origin of our conception of selfhood. Taylor is interested in how we arrive at our notion of a ‘self,’ specifically one closed off enough from the “world” beyond it to ask the kinds of questions we do about what it means to have an authentic or true self. In what follows, I will highlight how Taylor combats this specific subtraction story about the self and the ramifications of his account of history has on our self-understanding.

Rather than disproving subtraction stories, Taylor wants to undermine them. His method of doing this is showing that they’re too simplistic to be fully adequate. He’s less concerned with showing they’re wrong, but more focused on how these historical self-understandings came about. In order to do this, he must tell a far more complicated story, one of accumulation, transformation, and contingency. His is a story about how the story we tell ourselves has changed over time.

This aim of undermining our simple self-understanding places Taylor squarely in the genealogical tradition, along with Nietzsche and, for the purposes of this discussion, Foucault. In particular, Taylor’s aim of combatting subtraction stories is reminiscent of Foucault’s own notion of the genealogical task.

In his essay, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*, Foucault argues that the purpose of the genealogy is to *overcome* what it seeks, namely, the “origins” of our values. If we think our values of, say, what is good/evil, are timeless and eternal, then their origin is assumed to be the value in its purest state, something akin to the Platonic form of the Good. But the genealogist

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 22.

aims to show how these values were *constructed* and thus, have no such origin. Foucault argues if we “listen to history,” we are supposed to find at the heart of our values “not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.”⁴ It was not the necessary path of truth, but the contingent decisions of so many individuals that shaped how we arrived at the present. As Foucault writes, “What is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.” Thus Foucault imagines the genealogist as a kind of doctor who aims at removing a tumor, the uncontrolled growth of an idea. By tracking the history of this construction, the genealogist is supposed to allow us to do away with it entirely.

As he writes:

The genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin, somewhat in the manner of the pious philosopher who needs a doctor to exorcise the shadow of his soul. He must be able to recognize the events of history, its jolts, its surprises, its unsteady victories and unpalatable defeats—the basis of all beginnings, atavisms, and heredities. Similarly, he must be able to diagnose the illnesses of the body, its conditions of weakness and strength, its breakdown and resistances, to be in a position to judge philosophical discourse. History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.⁵

Of the most important origins we need to do away with, Foucault argues, is the origin of the ‘self.’ Where we might have thought that our ‘self’ was grounded on something essential and metaphysical, like a soul, the genealogist reveals that this is merely an illusion, a result of historical contingency. Foucault declares, “The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity but to commit itself to its dissipation.”⁶ When we realize that

⁴ Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 142.

⁵ Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 145.

⁶ Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 162.

what we thought was ‘who we are’ is actually the result of *others*, we can dismiss any notion about our ‘true’ self entirely. As Foucault will argue, the “truth” about us is not our own.

By combatting subtraction stories, Taylor also wants to, in Foucault’s words, “teach us how to laugh at the solemnities of the origin.”⁷ In reality, we can see that our subtraction stories are really accounts about the origin. Those stories assume that our current self-understandings were there “from the beginning” and we are the product of a long shedding and liberating. This is the idea that supposedly arcane and confused notions were subjected to the necessary march of time, necessarily leading to us. Subtraction stories also assume that “words have kept their meaning.”⁸ They assume that the state things have reached today is the natural one because they were simply always there, buried beneath imperfect thinking. Thus, Taylor, like Foucault, wants to return to the history in order to undermine simple understandings of how we came to be who we are.

II

The results of Foucault’s genealogies, in particular, *Discipline and Punish*, are well-known but they bear recounting here. Most notably, in Foucault’s hands, the genealogy leads him to deny that the idea of the self is anything more than the workings of *power*. Foucault begins *Discipline and Punish* ostensibly searching for the origins of the modern prison. But he quickly reveals that tracing this story is going to require him to tell the story of the “modern soul” and how it comes about. Indeed, Foucault’s thesis is that the idea of a ‘self’ is the most deceiving and effective “technique of power.” This is what he means when he says:

⁷ Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 143.

⁸ Foucault, “Nietzsche,” 139.

The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A 'soul' inhabits him and brings him into existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.⁹

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault investigates how an evolving field of power relations produced the conditions for the possibility of knowledge about the self. In addition, he also investigates how an evolution in the field of knowledge about the self has worked to support forms of power relations. This reveals a "soul" caught in a field of power/knowledge, enmeshed in struggle, domination, and resistance. Thus it is not only that the man needs to be freed from prison, but that the "man" itself is the prison.

Foucault makes the argument by drawing a continuity between the days of torture under the sovereign and the modern power to punish. He claims that, though the days of sovereigns and public executions may seem far away, as something that we have left behind in our march of progress, such a power, and its mutual body of knowledge about man, never ceased to mark the body or punish the individual. Instead, the manner in which it did this, the effects of its relations, became more subtle as they shifted inward.

In the modern penal system, but more broadly, in what he calls "the carceral society," Foucault sees a similar interplay of knowledge and power as seen previously on the scaffolds. For Foucault, the "carceral" describes the utter connectedness between the modern prison and the larger system, as all aspects of this system, from the school to the military, are utilizing the same techniques of discipline. Thus, this whole of society has been built toward a common, legitimate power to punish and incarcerate, as well as a common body of knowledge about what is "normal" human behavior. The effect of modern power relations on bodies is less overt than it might have been under the sovereign, but its effect is far more measured and prolonged. By

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline*, 30.

precisely organizing the space they occupy and the routines they carry out, institutions across society, like the prison and the school, work towards the same end of making bodies docile and efficient, making them more machine-like. In doing so, a certain knowledge about a “self” is then produced. One of the central allegories for Foucault is found in his notion of “panopticism,” based on Bentham’s panopticon prison design, which describes the ultimate architectural metaphor of disciplinary mechanisms. In the panopticon, the prisoner, after being isolated and surveilled for long enough, begins to take over the task, and their “conscience” surveils themselves. The effect is, as Foucault describes, “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.”¹⁰ Always under the possibility of surveillance, we learn to surveil ourselves.

In taking up our genealogical search for the origins of the self, Foucault thinks we ultimately find, not the pure self, but systems of power dynamics which have created the self. But this unmasking of power is not enough to resist it. It actually reveals the apparent futility of attempting any kind of resistance. This is because the same investigation that reveals how knowledge, specifically of a self, is shaped by power, also reveals that all instances of “knowledge” about the self will be relative to a specific “regime of truth.” To try and liberate oneself from one regime, or one understanding of the self, is to fall into the workings of power. This is why he says we should give up on trying to learn anything “true” about ourselves outside of these forces:

We should abandon a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist only where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop only outside its injunctions, its demands and its interests. Perhaps we should abandon the belief that power makes mad and that, by the same token, the renunciation of power is one of the conditions of knowledge. We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline*, 201.

correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.¹¹

The result of the genealogy for Foucault is to undermine and do away with any notion of a “true self” entirely. In his analysis, not only is the existence of the self a form of control and punishment but as are any attempts to free oneself from such power. The self is only the panopticon of the body, the part of us that ensures we are being productive, efficient, and docile. Any attempts to “free” ourselves from this prison through so-called liberation are just going to lead us to another form of power, another strategy. This is because there can be no “truth outside of power,” anything we can “know” about ourselves will require a regime of truth to make that knowledge comprehensible. Give up one self-understanding for another and all you will have done is change teams, so to speak. But there is no way to “know who you are” outside of these forces of power/knowledge.

Foucault’s genealogy leaves us stuck in a labyrinth, where, as we seek a true self, we just keep running up against power and knowledge that is not our own. We do not get to step outside of it in order to investigate who we are and we cannot locate a true self outside of the influence of others. This, I suggest, is a state of paradox, or at least of *aporia*, where the only fitting response seems to be to fall quiet on the question of who we are.

This seems to me to be a problem. It’s not a problem for Foucault per se; this rejection of the self is the consistent response to a history told of power relations. But it might present a problem for us, those who do not recognize themselves in a prison or a labyrinth. Though we can see through the history how the idea of a self has been used to shape bodies into disciplined subjects, and though we may even be able to recognize how this process has played out within our own lives, this conclusion that our entire sense of self can be dismissed is a hard one to

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline*, 27.

accept. As people who *know* things about ourselves, and maybe even believe these truths to be more fundamental than many others, it does not seem like we can so easily make this move. Perhaps Foucault would say this just evidences the degree to which power has marked our body, that we still cling to our ‘selves’ in the manner of a content prisoner clinging to their cell bars. But if we find we cannot fall silent on the question of the self, we might ask the question: How can the search for the self go on after this challenge from Foucault? I argue that Taylor offers such a path forward. By offering a genealogy of the self that partially overlaps with Foucault, we will see how Taylor is able to offer an alternate account of the self that addresses these worries.

Writing when Foucault was still alive, Taylor put similar questions to Foucault. For Taylor, Foucault’s analysis of history seems to lead to a state of incoherency, where Foucault claims to unmask power while rejecting attempts for liberation or truth. Taylor questions Foucault’s apparent neutral, relativist stance on the self, seeing in it a sleight of hand. While agreeing they’re incisive, Taylor thinks Foucault’s analyses miss key features of being a historical subject. In particular, Taylor thinks Foucault’s story is too simple, that is to say it can be read as what he will later call a subtraction story. As Taylor says, “The reality of history is mixed and messy. The problem is that Foucault tidies it up too much, makes it into a series of hermetically sealed, monolithic truth-regimes.”¹² Foucault might be tracking something about how a certain view of the self comes about, but his genealogy fails to account for the aspects that don’t support it. Foucault’s claim that the rise of our modern notions about the self can be tied to power is plausible, but Taylor does not think we can so easily do away with them:

We have become certain things in Western civilization. Our humanitarianism, our notions of freedom—both personal independence and collective self-rule—have helped to define a political identity we share; and one that is rooted deeply in our more basic, seemingly infrapolitical understandings: of what it is to be an individual, of the person as a being with inner depths—all the feature that seem to us to be rock-bottom, almost biological

¹² Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” *Political Theory*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (May 1984): 179.

properties of human beings... we struggle over interpretation and weightings, but we cannot shrug them off. They *define* humanity, politics for us.¹³

As subjects, we are able to recognize that there are other self-understandings available than our own. And it is tempting when shown, as Foucault attempts to, that our own self-understanding originates in forces from without, to want to give this up. But Taylor points out that such a perspective, where we can observe all the different ways people understand themselves, around the world and throughout history, is a perspective only a historian (or genealogist) can take. But individuals cannot pick up and put down different understandings of the self. Before they even begin to ask about who they are, they *are* someone already. As he writes, "In short we have a *history*. We live in time not just self-enclosed in the present, but essentially related to a past that has helped define our identity, and a future that puts it again in question."¹⁴ While we do understand ourselves a certain way, Taylor's point is that this understanding remains unsettled. It remains a puzzle to solve and a question to be asked. I would like to now demonstrate how this line of thinking comes of age in Taylor's own genealogical work.

III

A Secular Age is Taylor's expansive account of the past five centuries in the West. It begins with a seemingly simple question: "why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God, in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only, easy, but even inescapable?"¹⁵ In attempting to answer this question, Taylor wants to offer, in effect, a genealogy of secularity. But in the same way that Foucault's genealogy of the modern prison

¹³ Taylor, "Foucault," 178.

¹⁴ Taylor, "Foucault," 180.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 25.

requires him to offer a genealogy of the self, Taylor cannot give his story of secularity without tracking the changes in what he calls *the conditions of belief*, crucial among these conditions being the change undergone in our naïve conception of the self. When Taylor says we live in a “secular age,” he means not just that belief in God has retreated since the time of the Reformation, but that we have (many) alternate possible self-understandings that have no need to make reference to God in a way that people living then did not. This is not because they did not “realize” they *could* see themselves the way we do, Taylor’s central argument is that these alternatives had not been created yet.

The primary change in the self that Taylor tracks is the long move from a porous, enchanted self to the modern idea of a disenchanted, buffered self. But importantly, Taylor argues that this modern self is not monolithic. Though he is tracking the development of our shared, naïve notion about the self, he tries to show that this is really the background for our wide range of more specific self-understandings. Within the rise of the buffered self, Taylor also tracks the forms of resistance that take shape as a reaction to the forces that brought it about. This is how his story aims to get us to our current predicament, where there are seemingly countless more specific self-understandings available to us, while, on the whole, there is a naïve or background sense of ‘self’ that seems to be shared by most. This makes Taylor’s story an increasingly complicated one. He wants to track the rise of the modern self while also tracking the development of the possibilities within it.

The naïve, background sense of self of which Taylor is tracking the development is the one that understands us as living in a world where the site of all possible thoughts, feelings, and meanings is in the *mind*. These minds are bounded; the thoughts, feelings are situated “within”. Furthermore, this space within is defined by the possibility of self-awareness and introspection.

But this space is even so “deep” that we may not even be aware of everything within.¹⁶ If this is indeed how we think of the self, then we might think that this can be attributed to our human nature, or our biology. Taylor, in offering a long, winding story about how our sense of self has come about, does not seek to do away with it. His genealogy, rather, aims at giving us a better understanding of why we *do* think of the self this way.

Taylor is careful to avoid offering a linear account of how the modern self comes about; to do this would be to offer his own version of a subtraction story. But in order to discuss his genealogy of the self, we have to narrow it down. To do this, I am going to pick out three versions of the self and the story about how they come about for Taylor. The first one is the ‘oldest’ and still most influential, the buffered, disenchanted self. The other two, what I call the romantic self and the heroic self, are two examples of self-understandings that Taylor argues come about as reactions to the first.

Taylor’s story begins with a look at the naïve self in the “enchanted” age. The average person around the year 1500, Taylor argues, lived in a world where the self is “porous,” where the boundary between ‘mind’ and ‘nature’ was less than clear. For the porous self, meanings already exist outside of us.¹⁷ In other words, Taylor says, “a clear line between physical and the moral wasn’t drawn.”¹⁸ This is a world where extra-human things and agencies can alter or shape our spiritual and emotional condition and our physical state. But these things don’t just exist “outside” the mind, they constitute us emotionally and spiritually. In the enchanted world, for example, we are always open to being affected by magic and aided by charged objects (like relics of the saints), or at risk of being invaded and harmed by demons and evil spirits.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 30.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 33.

¹⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 40.

The majority of *A Secular Age* is spent trying to retrace the steps from this enchanted, porous self to our disenchanted, buffered self. But crucially, it's not just that the world is slowly disenchanted, there's also a positive movement; there's a construction of new identities and self-understandings. It's not just that we lose enchantment, we needed to gain confidence in "our own powers of moral ordering."¹⁹

Taylor's argument is that the original drivers of disenchantment were actually the Christian élites who sought to bring everyone up to the same "wavelength" of religious practice. As he points out, emerging out of the Dark Ages in Europe, there is an uneasy hierarchical, or "two-tiered" equilibrium of religious practice. On the hand, there were the intensely devotional and renunciative vocations of missionaries, monks, and religious leaders. On the other, there was the rest of the busy population whose faith was defined less by their personal faith but by what they did, their practices, like annual festivals and ceremonies. In this two-tiered system, there was an uneasy equilibrium that simply accepted huge masses of people were never going to live up to the standards of perfection.²⁰

In their dissatisfaction with this hierarchy, Taylor says, religious élites drove what he calls the spirit of Reform. This is the movement which "which aimed to remake European society to meet the demands of the Gospel, and later of 'civilization.'"²¹ Though the movement was broad and multi-faceted, on the whole, it was a concerted effort to bring everyone up to the same speed religiously. Importantly, there is a focus on cultivating a more personal and inward relationship with Christ. Taylor argues that this idea of cultivating more intense, individual devotion is one of the biggest precursors to our own sense of inwardness. In this same spirit, the kinds of magic

¹⁹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 27.

²⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 62.

²¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 61.

previously present in the world, both good and bad, come to be seen as undermining the power of God, and so they're slowly done away with by Christians themselves, beginning to disenchant the world in the process. Taylor argues that this "drive to make over the whole society to higher standards," represents the earliest shape of our modern form of discipline. For Taylor, Luther and Calvin represent the culmination of this personal ethic, making the Protestant reformation in 1507 the "ultimate fruit" of the Reform spirit.²² The main thrust is that this spirit of Reform is ultimately individualizing and disciplinary.

This is where Taylor's genealogy starts to overlap with Foucault's. Specifically, Taylor points to "the rise of the disciplinary society" as the ultimate cause of the rise of our buffered notion of the self. Taylor's account of this period spans all the way from 1400 to 1800, but it can be too-briefly summarized as a period when all of society is slowly "brought up" to live by the elite notions of 'civility.'²³ Again, the way this unfolds is immensely complicated, but the overarching theme is that, emerging from the renaissance, 'civility' becomes the standard with which elites judged themselves and others; specifically, it's what separated them from the 'savages' in America or on the edges of Europe, in Ireland and Russia. But elites were also aware this standard wasn't being fulfilled perfectly at home either. Amidst growing populations and, along with it, rising disorder and potential instability, there's a motive to shape more and more of society towards civility. But, Taylor asks, what made elites think they *could* remake over society. His answer is, essentially, because they had already undertaken this process on themselves. It was the elites, Taylor says, which first had an idea of themselves as having a staunch "rational control" over themselves, or the ability to shape themselves into civilized individuals.²⁴ Because

²² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 77, 63.

²³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 101.

²⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 130.

they had taken steps to limit their desires and passions, élites developed even more fully their notions of inwardness. This contributes to the creation of the buffered self but also intensifies it. Importantly, this mission of civilizing the populace had tangible ends, it was disseminated in attempts to grow economies, populations, and militaries. As Taylor writes:

There is a complex causal story behind the fact that the ideal of civility develops an active, transformatory agenda. As time goes on, it is undoubtedly powered by the escalating demand for military, and hence fiscal power, and hence economic performance by industrious, educated, disciplined populations.²⁵

The overlap with Foucault's analysis is notable here. It's the spirit of Reform that drives the buffering, the rise of discipline, and thus individuality.²⁶ Taylor's point is that all of these processes interlink, they cannot stand on their own as discrete movements or projects. But the result is that the notion of the buffered self is inextricably tied up in these ends of discipline/control of élites.

The modern notion of a buffered and autonomous self is especially clear by the 17th century. For examples of this, Taylor points to Descartes, Kant, and almost every other philosopher from the period. But the buffered, autonomous view of the self also brings with it the rise of an ethic, an account of human flourishing. Building on what were almost exclusively the élite's forms of self-understanding, but specifically out of the philosophies of Grotius and Locke, Taylor says, the Modern Moral Order (MMO) is inaugurated. The MMO is characterized by its conception of society as one made up, fundamentally, of *individuals* that come together to form *societies*. This means that all goods and values towards which human action can be devoted are purely immanent ones. Where human flourishing used to be seen as the attainment of transcendent goods, like the love of God, the MMO account of human flourishing understands

²⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 107.

²⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 541.

that all individuals have the ability to seek the same immanent goods in their own life, like ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.’ Indeed, Taylor points to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights as the representative documents of the MMO. On the whole, in the MMO goods are made egalitarian, or leveled out. Along with this, the MMO further intensifies buffered views of the self:

The picture of society is that of individuals who come together to form a political entity, against a certain pre-existing moral background, and with certain ends in view. The moral background is one of natural rights; these people already have certain moral obligations towards each other. The ends sought are certain common benefits, of which security is the most important.²⁷

This gets us roughly to where we are now. The MMO, with its buffered views about the self and purely immanent, leveled goods, is a key feature of what Taylor calls our own ‘social imaginary.’ This describes the background, almost unquestioned beliefs that condition and enable our sociality. We, especially today, understand that society “starts with individuals, and conceives [itself] as established for their sake.”²⁸ Taylor argues that we now exist in a world that constantly presupposes and reinforces the disenchanting, buffered self.

But the rise of the disciplined, buffered self through the process of Reform, then civility, and the establishment of the MMO are only one part of the story, even if it is perhaps the “biggest” one. Although much of our background self-understanding comes out of this line, Taylor is also careful to track the sustained resistance against this whole movement. Though the buffered, disciplined self dominates, Taylor also highlights numerous “axes of resistance.”²⁹ Specifically, he argues, since its rise, the buffered, discipline self has also contributed to a felt sense that something has been *lost* in this understanding. Namely, any form of transcendence is

²⁷ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 159.

²⁸ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 170.

²⁹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 313.

largely missing, hard to come by, or unavailable for many of us. Though the self has become buffered, Taylor draws attention to all the attempts to strive for “more” in our self-understandings. Among these, the two I want to highlight are the romantic self and the heroic self.

Going back to at least 19th century, there has been a sustained romantic resistance to the conception of the self as buffered and disenchanting. This is the sense that we have lost touch with nature or with our bodies, and that powerful emotion and desire has been wrongly unseated as a foundation of truth. Taylor calls this the aspiration for “wholeness” or “fullness.”³⁰ What the romantic view of the self seeks is a return to the embodied experience, not the closed-off, calculating mind. As Taylor puts it, “The protest here is that the rational, disengaged agent is sacrificing something essential in realizing his ideals. What is sacrificed is often described as spontaneity or creativity, but it is even more frequently identified with our feelings, and our bodily existence.”³¹ The paradigmatic cases of the romantic self are the great romantic poets, like Schiller and Goethe, who thought that our formal and calculating thinking had dominated and suppressed the eternal and beautiful. Though it can be most-easily located in these specific examples, Taylor thinks that the draw towards a wholeness has played a crucial part in the self-understandings many have come to take on in the past two hundred years. The romantic self, which locates in its desire a “higher” meaning and strives after beauty, is also alive and well today. For example, Taylor thinks it shows up in the 1960s with the sexual revolution.³² But we can also see this version of the self in the many instances of a longing for wholeness, for “something more,” cropping up across the board, say, in our appreciation for poetry and art.

³⁰ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 615.

³¹ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 609.

³² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 616.

Another line of resistance to the buffered self, particularly important for our discussion of Foucault, is the heroic. The heroic sense of self is primarily frustrated with the “flattening” effect of modernity, meaning it also longs for something “more” but in a different manner. The heroic self revolts against the “leveling” of modernity’s egalitarianism, hoping to recover the great and the exceptional.³³ The heroic line of resistance can also be traced to at least the 19th century, and it is most obvious in what Taylor calls the “immanent counter-Enlightenment”, championed by Nietzsche: “It is the revolt from within unbelief, as it were, against the primacy of life. Not now in the name of something beyond, but really more just from a sense of being confined, diminished by the acknowledgement of this primacy.”³⁴ Taylor argues that this heroic understanding of the self has been extremely relevant in the past two centuries or so. Nietzsche, in using the genealogy to trace the roots of modern morality back to its Christian roots, wants to reject the MMO outright. This Nietzschean line of critique against the primacy of life, Taylor points out, is picked up by anti-humanist figures like Bataille, Deleuze, and Foucault. However, by the opposite side of this same coin, we can also see how a rejection of the MMO and the longing for a return to greatness contributed to the rise of fascism. Though the egalitarian mission of the MMO has advanced considerably since its beginnings, so too has the allure of “great individuals,” the ones who rise above the rest, shaping the world to their own will. This has been the case for some time in the aesthetic sense and the political one. It also helps explain the draw of Foucault and his genealogy. Foucault’s diagnosis and rejection of the (buffered) self as mere working of power stands out as a prominent example of the draw to something higher. By tracking how the self is formed by forces from beyond us, rejecting it offers Foucault the chance to go “beyond,” to create himself in his own image that rises above the mere ‘selves.’

³³ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 373.

³⁴ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 372.

I have tried to present Taylor's genealogy of the self as an account of how we arrive at the "spiritual shape of the present age," where we don't just have one idea about the self, but a plurality.³⁵ Taylor's genealogy illuminates the competing tensions at work with our range of self-understandings. Most broadly, we see ourselves within an immanent frame, where our meanings and values rest on the level of self-sufficient individuals. But, as Taylor has shown, there remain constant attempts to re-open this frame to more, to the transcendent. This is what he means when he says, "We are not necessarily as 'modern' as we think we are" (546). Though we get some meaningful portion of our self-understanding from centuries of disciplinary efforts, this same self is tied up in our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of the good. This is how we begin to understand the wide range of views about the self that people occupy today. It's not necessarily that these competing drives are acting on every single individual. To be sure, there are many for whom their sense of self is not a question. But it helps explain the dispersion of views. Every stance on the self, says Taylor, faces pressure from all sides; questions, doubts, and arguments that keep us "looking over our shoulder from time to time." As he says, "We live in a condition where we cannot help but be aware that there are a number of different construals, views which intelligent, reasonably undeluded people, of good will, can and do disagree on." This is to say that our sense of self always exists "in a context of doubt and uncertainty."³⁶

IV

It can now be seen how Taylor uses Foucault's method to overcome Foucault's result. The result of Foucault's genealogy is to say we should do away with the 'self'. For him, and for others, the self merely reflects the forces that have acted upon us from without. Taylor picks up

³⁵ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 539

³⁶ Taylor, *Secular Age*, 11.

on the same history, the long tradition of the self as a technique of control, an idea that comes from the élites above and disseminated for the strategic ends of furthering their power. But by broadening the story to look at the long tradition of resistance to this kind of self and the alternate understandings that have developed, Taylor demonstrates why the question will remain unsettled. We sense in ourselves that we have been shaped from without, and history supports this, as both Foucault and Taylor have shown. But we might also sense this isn't telling the full story, that there's not just something to reject about ourselves, but something to understand. This is the promise of Taylor's genealogy. If we turn to history, we can complicate our understanding of who we are. It can begin to teach us about how our own views came about while also teasing out the allure of the alternate options.

The story told by Taylor tracks the same kind of forces that have worked from without to shape us into self-disciplining selves. But, unlike Foucault, he does not think that this is all there is to the self. Taylor recognizes that there are enduring features of this self-understanding in modern life that will be unsatisfactory. In the buffered view, there's a sense that something greater is missing. This striving for more is why, Taylor says, the act of self-investigation will not cease. This is why the goal of his genealogy is not to bring an end to the idea of the self but to begin to articulate how we have come to understand ourselves in all the ways we have.

With his own genealogy, Taylor attempts to account for the draw towards the Foucauldian thesis, that the 'self' be rejected. There's not untruth to the claim that the self comes about in an immensely long and complicated process of shaping bodies to certain ends. But Taylor also shows how Foucault's critique makes sense in a historical context, as one of the more recent attempts to strive for something 'more' in an order that seems to work by foreclosing on such a possibility. But by placing Foucault back into history, by showing how his critique fits into a

longer tradition, Taylor also offers a way around Foucault's thesis. Foucault's rejection of the self is shown not to be the necessary result of any investigation whatsoever, but a particular one written in the time and context in which it was. It's not that Foucault's thesis needs to be rejected, but that by beginning to understand how it comes about and its appeal, we see how it remains one option among many. By doing this, Foucault's rejection of the self loses its potential to be the end of all self-investigation.

In effect, where Foucault uses the genealogy of the self to create a labyrinth, Taylor uses it to create a map. In turning to history, Taylor attempts to chart the landscape of all the different views about the self available to us today. With his genealogy, Taylor tries to show the different directions in which we are pushed and thus trace the story of how we might have come to understand ourselves the way we have. To extend the metaphor, on the "map" created by Taylor's genealogy lies Foucault's labyrinth, standing as just one position to occupy among others. Crucially, Taylor does not use the genealogy to reject all of these positions, including Foucault's, but by trying to offer an account of how they come about, he effectively supports them. He underwrites them by offering explanations for why thoughtful people have come to occupy such different positions and self-understandings. Just as a map is a simplified overview of a landscape, Taylor's genealogical map charts how history has produced a wide range of different views about the self. His map in *A Secular Age* can be read as an attempt to provide a more detailed view of the naïve understanding of the self we share. He uses the genealogy to bring into focus all the various positions, not reject one in favor of the other. Since we cannot account for all of history, we must tell stories about it. In turn, these stories shape our notions of who we are. The story Taylor offers is one of complication. The result of his genealogy is not for us to reject the self, but to be less sure of it.

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