



## Questioning Atheism<sup>1</sup>

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*written for K&K*

**M**y thinking in the last few months has been dominated by the project we're involved in here – this new issue of, Kritika, and I'm happy to tell you that the response that we've had so far from different scholars has been very positive. Now, I may disappoint at least Samka,<sup>2</sup> - maybe you too, because I'm not going to talk too much about the new atheists, I mean the four of them who are, by now, great media figures, and most people probably know their positions, but I will try to summarize them.

I think the titles of their books are indicative: *Breaking the Spell* by Dennett, *The God Delusion* by Dawkins, *God Is Not Great* by Hitchens and *The End of Faith* by Harris. Now, of these people, Dennett is a very serious philosopher, and a very serious cognitive scientist. Harris is a neurophysiologist with philosophical training. Dawkins is a giant figure in the science of genetics. You may have come across his earlier book, *The Selfish Gene*. Hitchens is a brilliant journalist, basically. Let me just very quickly state their position and - I must say, that not all their

critics are right. I, myself, am ambivalent about them. My objections to them are really very strongly motivated by philosophical considerations and these philosophical considerations share a great deal with Taylor's, who was my professor many years ago.

There are some very simple, almost trivial, arguments the new atheists make against religious belief. For example, they criticize the Bible for its very warped chronology, the view that the earth was created five thousand years ago. They object to the view that there's some kind of a divine intervention in nature, that God is somehow a divine intervener. They want to emphasize that the natural world and human life is the result of an incredible vast number of chance occurrences. Naturally, Darwin plays an important part in what they have to say. They go so far as to state that Darwin refuted religion. In short, for them, science and perhaps more specifically, neuroscience, is capable, or will eventually be capable of explaining all of questions we could raise about morality. Their most often repeated criticism is

<sup>1</sup> This text is a modified version of a lecture Egyed gave at BISLA in March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Abraham, Editor in Chief and Publisher of Kritika & Kontext.

that religious belief is irrational because it is not based on evidence. I'm going to leave my comments on them at this for now. I will come back to them later. In the question period you may also want to revisit some of these issues.

Now I want to turn to Taylor, whose philosophical position is a very interesting one, and I think it has a very important role in the way in which he defends his Christian faith<sup>3</sup>. As my little abstract states, one of Taylor's main objections against the new atheist is that, while what they say may have refuted an old conception of religion; they may have really discredited a whole series of arguments that Christians have had, and still may have, for the existence of God, they are right. In other words, Taylor would agree with them that as far as natural phenomena are concerned, a scientific explanation is adequate and exhaustive. The problem that he has with them, and that I have with them, is their unwarranted leap from this position - an extremely important position - to the conclusion that, reasons has completely annihilated all grounds for having religious faith.

So, let me say a few words about the philosophical content of Taylor's views. As my abstract indicates, he wants to discredit the concept of belief that these new atheists operate with. He wants to discredit the epistemology, the theory of knowledge, on which they rely. And in this he is not the first. I think that the epistemology, ontology, of the new atheist might be classified as an orthodox positivist, an orthodox representationalist, epis-

temology, whereby we have a conception that beliefs about facts are true mainly on the basis of their correspondence with these facts. It was disparagingly referred to when I was a student as the "Fido"- Fido conception of epistemology.

Taylor, as I said, was not the first to challenge this position. There was Heidegger whose phenomenological outlook has heavily influenced most of Taylor's writings. But also, even in the so called "analytic" tradition there were those who pointed the way to a new way of thinking about knowledge and belief. One can think of Karl Popper, who, already in the nineteen thirties, challenged the neutrality of observational statements. He maintained that our statements about the world are "theory-laden". This position was further elaborated by Thomas Kuhn, another philosopher (beside Heidegger) to whom Taylor makes a number of references. Thomas Kuhn, who was a great historian and philosopher of science, believed that science in its normal period, what he called "normal science", is an activity that is controlled by a paradigm. In other words, what we say about facts in the world is always shaped and determined by the context, by the global context that we operate in<sup>4</sup>.

According to Kuhn scientific revolutions occur when there are radical paradigm shifts. And, paradigm shifts occurs when normal science begins to run into problems it cannot solve. These may, then, turn into a crisis, and eventually this leads to the collapse of a paradigm. And if the scientific community is fortunate enough,

<sup>3</sup> In this lecture I focus on Taylor's last book: *A Secular Age*.

<sup>4</sup> Kuhn restricted his conception of normal science and paradigm shifts to science. He is, as he says, interested only in the phenomenology of science. However, with only small modifications, his ideas can be extended to the phenomenology of religion as well.

there is an alternate paradigm which was up till then discredited, and is then, with the decline of the dominant paradigm, can point the way to a new one. The interesting point about this, and I think this relates to Taylor's position, is that paradigms are incommensurable, which is to say that you cannot really translate, term by term, expressions of one paradigm into another. So there is a radical incommensurability between them, but all paradigms have, according to Kuhn, their historical integrity, which is to say that it is very misguided to criticize piecemeal, one by one, items of a previous paradigm without taking into account the global context. Within that context, these claims, these items of belief, had their own integrity.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, to conclude my point about the first philosophical component of Taylor's book, I will simply say that, according to him - following in the footsteps of Heidegger and Kuhn - the issue is not really the confrontation of one item of belief with another item of belief, nor is it the confrontation of a discrete item of belief with evidence. Instead, one needs to look at the context, and beyond the scientific case, this context involves socially structured lived experiences.

Taylor's book is very long. It includes many pages discussing how the world of modernity evolved from what he calls "the enchanted world" – how it became secularized. The enchanted world is a world in which individuals live their experiences as

"porous" individuals. In other words, for such individuals, there is no sharp separation between how they conceive of themselves and the way they conceive of the world, the two penetrated one another. Taylor contrasts this enchanted world of porous individuals with the modern world of "buffered" individuals. In modernity, individuals are sealed off from their environment, and from one another: they are thrown upon themselves. This world of modernity, Taylor claims, grew out of the Christian world. In other words, it is a gradual process whereby certain internal edicts, constraints within Christianity, the insistence on discipline, the insistence, for example, on extending the confessional to the lay-members of society. The Reformation and, later Providential Deism played a crucial role in this process. These have all contributed to what he calls "the immanent frame" and that's the idea that I'd like to say a few words about.

The immanent frame, according to Taylor, is the frame that we all inhabit, Taylor, you, and I. It is the frame within which we can explain natural phenomena in terms of natural phenomena. Their embracing the immanent frame is the reason that the position of the new atheist is so plausible. And for that reason one should not be too hasty in dismissing them. What Taylor and many of their Christian critics complain about is making a fetish out of immanence. It is one thing, according to them, to admit that we inhabit this im-

<sup>5</sup> Critics of an older traditions, and I think it is fair to class the new atheist among them, tend to see the old in the context of the new. So, "objective", for them, is that which is in conformity with their (our!) currently held views.

<sup>6</sup> The form of immanence that Taylor opposes, he would identify with "exclusive" humanism or naturalism. He is not opposed to immanence in its more profound form. In fact, at one point in *A Secular Age* (p. 632) he recognizes that: "All this underscores how problematic are the distinctions, not only between internal and external transcendence, but even transcendence/immanence itself".



manent world where explanations do not require any appeal to external forces, but it is another thing to make immanence, especially in its reductive forms<sup>6</sup> a sacred article of belief.<sup>7</sup>

Now, of course, it's only if you make this into a sacred article of belief, that you could say that Darwin has refuted religion, or science has refuted religion. If you, quite legitimately, restrict science to the explanation, and examination, of natural phenomena, there's nothing wrong with that. The problem is when you want to extend it beyond its boundaries. And here is another item, a philosophical, epistemological item, of Taylor's background that I need to emphasize. Taylor is one of those philosophers who reject the reduction of human studies, the field of human investigation to natural science, so in a sense he's against what is, in philosophical words, called "naturalism". He does not believe that it is possible to give a full and adequate account of human phenomena in terms of natural scientific explanation.<sup>8</sup>

I think I agree with that. I think I agree, and a lot of philosophers, atheists, believers, agree that there is a huge gap between scientific description of who I am and my perception of myself – of who I am. Let me give you an example that I like. Suppose that neurophysiologists could one day arrive at a position where it would be absolutely, fully explainable, what is on

a person's mind. In other words, suppose that we have such a sophisticated apparatus, such a sophisticated knowledge of human physiology, that we could, observing an individual through this technology, through this knowledge, tell this individual exactly what is on his mind, and what he plans to do, what he wants to do next.

Ask yourself – suppose everyone had this knowledge, suppose even the person who is being looked at, the subject of this experiment has all the knowledge that the observers have. And it seems to me that if that subject had that complete knowledge that the others had, he could defeat any predictions about what he's about to do, because he can reflect on the knowledge that he has, and no one can determine what the next moment of decision or action would be. And I think this is relevant to this story because it means that there is an irreducible feature about human beings that we cannot account for simply through natural scientific explanations, and I think Kant was probably the first who alerted us to this.<sup>9</sup>

Kant was the first who said that it's possible that one day, we could have a full account of what it is to be a human being, a full account of what determines human behaviour. But I, as an acting agent, whether I believe that my actions are fully determined or not, as an acting agent, I could not act if I did not believe that I'm

<sup>7</sup> Another key aspect of this immanent frame, on the ethical level, is the belief that human flourishing is the ultimate goal of human existence.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, naturalism is the view that the human sciences can be reduced to the natural sciences. Naturalistic explanations are usually thought of as mechanistic explanations.

<sup>9</sup> The distinction one needs to make here is between "determinability" and "predictability". It is not clear whether Kant makes this distinction, but Bergson does. All my actions are determined, but I can know this only after the fact, once my decision has already been made; which, then, counts as one of the determining factors. In other words, I will have known (if I have sufficient information), after I have made my decision, what conditions determined my action. But, at the moment of acting I act freely.

free. So even if, theoretically, I may not be free, as an agent, as an active agent, I have to assume that I'm free. Now, I think that this is the thin edge of the wedge against the argument of full Naturalism, and I think that this argument also raises a serious doubt about the possibility of having a full account of what human agency is in purely naturalistic, scientific terms. This is Taylor's position and I tend to agree with that position.

Things get a little bit difficult with Taylor's account when he examines what it means to embrace the immanent frame. (The immanent frame, to repeat, is that which can account for nature in terms of nature.) His explanation for the decline of religion relies on the massive probability of this immanent frame: the power this immanent frame has over our thinking, our view of the world. Still, he believes that within this immanent frame, we can distinguish between two possibilities: one in which individuals choose to remain closed within this realm of immanence, and the other in which individuals make some kind of appeal to some form of transcendence.

So, Taylor defines religion as some sort of appeal to some form of transcendence that is felt to be necessary even by some of those who inhabit the immanent frame. But, in Taylor's view, the transcendence that is felt is a transcendence that arises within our lived experiences but, at the same time, it also goes beyond them. Here, again, I could refer to Kant. Famously, Kant distinguishes between

the "transcendental" and the "transcendent". The first is the necessary presupposition of our experiencing the world as we do. The second is an illegitimate (but, for Kant, inevitable) objectification of this essential feature of human existence. And I think that this insight of Kant, mediated through Hegel, through Heidegger is a fundamental aspect of new theology. For this reason, you see, sometimes I think of the new atheist, the "four horsemen of the apocalypse", as those individuals who crash through open doors, individuals who are really arguing against straw men, because no one really, no one among serious Christian theologians accepts the world view that they attack.<sup>10</sup> Most contemporary theologians have abandoned the idea of God as some infinite transcendent object completely divorced from finite beings. In Heidegger's terms such a metaphysical view of the world would be an onto-theological world view. And when I say that I have difficulties with Taylor's account, it is because I am not clear about exactly where he stands on this question of "transcendence".

Nevertheless, if I had to decide I would say that Taylor is on Heidegger's side regarding this issue. I would do so not simply because of Taylor's own appeal to Heidegger when he criticizes the epistemology of belief, but also because of another aspect of Taylor's philosophical background: his Hegelianism. Hegel, very famously, criticized those conceptions of infinite God that saw it as totally separate from the finite world. Hegel's argument

<sup>10</sup> Two points need to be made in defense of the new atheists. First, they see themselves as attacking not the views of sophisticated new theologians but those believers who hold precisely that conception of God that I have dismissed above. Second, their virulent attacks on 'irrational' belief is motivated, largely, by political considerations. Their frequent references to, the American, Christian Right, and to Islamic terrorist leaves no doubt about that.

was very simple. If the infinite is totally other than the finite, than the infinite cannot be infinite because then it would be limited by the finite that is not of it, that is not part of it. So, when Taylor talks about transcendence, what he must mean by it is not some being out there over and above the world of imminence, but what is required by ones best account of who one is: the best explanation of lived experience.<sup>11</sup> So, on my interpretation, Taylor's conception of religious faith is very much centered on lived experience and not abstract principles. It is shaped by ones education, and by the encounters one has in life. So, I think he might agree with me that the arguments for the existence of God often heard in schools is tied to a conception of God which may have had plausibility in the Middle Ages, but today woefully inadequate, out of date.

Let me now say a few words about Taylor's views on what I call the "old atheists". There were atheists before Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, among them was Nietzsche and some people think that among them was Spinoza.<sup>12</sup> So the question then, that I want to raise is, what is Taylor's criticism of these old atheists? Atheist, in general, Taylor believes, are committed to what he calls: "the subtraction story". The subtraction story- and of course this relates directly to

what I just said about the new atheists - is a story which says that if you really take a close look at human beings, they are fundamentally rational, healthy rational beings. Of course, their mind was perverted, polluted by all this religion, and now through science and more enlightened thinking one could subtract all this added on pollution, being left with the pure natural human being who really doesn't need faith, doesn't have fear and doesn't need to hope. Some can do this comfortably, some can do this with serene resignation and some can do it rebelliously.

One interesting fact about Taylor's criticism of atheism is that while he thinks that the new atheists are somewhat smug, somewhat arrogant, somewhat superficial, people who crash through open doors, he takes Nietzsche and the kind of atheism that Nietzsche represents very seriously. He goes as far as to say that if Nietzsche's position were tenable, then the Christian faith would, indeed, be in serious trouble. This is so because the Nietzschean view, expressed by Nietzsche, and I think by a number of more recent thinkers such as Albert Camus, is that human existence is absurd. (Taylor spends some considerable time discussing Albert Camus in his book.) Human existence is absurd because humans are inevitably value-seeking, meaning-seeking beings

<sup>11</sup> Hegel's position on the Christian God is very complex. Still, I need to say a few words about it. First, he rejects Kant's distinction between an unknowable "real" world and a knowable world which is limited by our capacity to know and experience. So, for him what is real becomes that which our best knowledge, most adequate account of our (lived) experience "throws up" for us. This view of Hegel is made possible by his going beyond mere epistemology (theory of the solitary knowing subject) into the realm of culture and history. One way of putting this is to say that he "historicizes" ontology (the theory of being). Second, Hegel has a very sophisticated, but still philosophically abstract argument for the personhood of God. This is made plausible by his vitalist-culturalist ontology. Third, since for him reality is a dynamic historical process, he can defend an immanentist conception of God. And, since for him Christianity is a religion of love, he can say that it is the superior religion, philosophically, because the God of love is pure immanence.

<sup>12</sup> Because of his view that God was immanent to the finite world, some consider even Hegel an atheist.

who are confronted with a world that doesn't really give a hoot about them. The absurdity of human existence is that humans search – desperately - meanings that are unavailable to them in this silent and indifferent universe.

Now the response of Nietzscheans, and certainly this was the response of Camus, is the heroic stand in the face of this absurdity, and the heroic individual is the one that makes it a question of honour to respect life that really does not give us ultimate meaning, to respect our search for meaning, to respect our search for a better life, all along knowing that our attaining it is never absolutely guaranteed. Camus' position here is a little bit different from Nietzsche's because Camus believes in the value of "human flourishing", (this, again, is a term that Taylor uses.)

The search for human flourishing

means that we should strive for a good life, we should strive to improve our lives, but for Camus - and this was his main disagreement with Sartre - all we can hope for is periodic, provisional, victories. We can perhaps cooperate with others to gain some small piecemeal victories but what we cannot have is this global narrative – the communist, Sartrean, narrative. We can never have that. Now, I think that this is close to my own position, basically: this Nietzschean position. As I said, Taylor treats Nietzsche's and Camus's position respectfully, but I am still not entirely satisfied with his treatment.

But when I come to the last chapter of Taylor's book, which is entitled "Conversions", I begin to see why he is dissatisfied with even Camus's modified Nietzscheanism. The last chapter is where Taylor comes clean, where he gives the

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Ladislav Chudík, foto: Miro Nôta



full account of his own religious belief, and it is in this chapter he spends some time discussing Ivan Illich. Ivan Illich was a radical Catholic, at one point a priest, but who has distanced himself from the church because of his severe criticism of what he called “Christendom”. Christendom is condemned by Illich as an oppressive force, as a force that has really ruined Christianity and was very damaging to Christianity. Of course Illich, like some others I should mention, like Altizer, Vatimo or Caputo are controversial theologians. He places great emphasis on the parable of the Good Samaritan. And what is Illich’s view of the parable of the Good Samaritan? Very shortly, Illich’s view is that the Good Samaritan does not help out the suffering individual he encounters because of some kind of a moral obligation: the story of the Good Samaritan is

a story of absolute unconditional love and this, according to Illich is the message of Christianity. Christianity, on the one, hand urges the believer to get beyond mere human flourishing, the good life, but it also urges them to get beyond the law. For, following the law, following codes, strictly, slavishly, can be extremely oppressive and restrictive. By opposing the law – codes – Illich shows himself to be a revolutionary thinker: for him, the revolutionary message of Christianity is this absolute unfounded love of the other.

You don’t love someone for the qualities they have, for the good or bad properties they have. There is something that goes beyond that, agape, and the revolutionary aspect of this agape, this absolute love, the revolutionary aspect, and that’s where I find myself somewhat wanting and deficient, is that it invites us and calls



Fero Fenič, foto: Miro Nôta



us to love the other, even if the other is our enemy. To love the other even if according to rational description, this is a bad person, this is not a good person and that to me is an extremely hard thing to do - that I am certainly unable to do. And if I have any respect for Christians, it is not because they are able to do it all the time, but at least their Christianity might remind them that there is that kind of an absolute love, which might help them to eradicate hatred from their soul, even if it is a hatred of something awful and ugly.

There is a French philosopher, André Comte-Sponville who says something very interesting. He says love is not a moral virtue. All the moral virtues are virtues that somehow oblige us to do things a certain way, and he says that if we were powerful enough to love, and I think when he says "If we were powerful enough to love," he must mean that if we were able,

if we were capable of this absolute love, agape in its Taylorian, Christian version, "then we wouldn't need morality." And he says that we need morality, we need the law, and we need codes precisely because we are too weak to love. This, I think, is a wonderful formulation.

Now this is part of my answer to the question I raised, "What can I learn from the dialogue with progressive Christians?" In some way, this dialogue troubles me. Certainly my inability to have the kind of love that Christian love demands troubles me and I think it also troubles Christians, because I think that Christians, if they are honest enough they will admit that they don't have this kind of love all the time, that there are moments when they are incapable of giving this kind of love. But in their terminology, this is a form of abandonment. Still, they have at least a hope that such a love is possible, and of course,



Vincent Rosinec, foto: Miro Nôta

that hope is their belief in the infinite love of God.

And to me, this hope is a very helpful reality, if we understand reality as Hegel and Taylor understand it: as something that is required by a best account of who we are, and the best account of the way in which we live our experiences. This is what I learn existentially from a dialogue with Christianity. But I also learn something from it as a philosopher. As Samka said, my focus, my main references are Nietzsche and Spinoza, and some aspects of Nietzsche's philosophy – his doctrine of eternal return, of the Overman and of will to power – are troubling for me; also some aspects of Spinoza's philosophy – his conception of power, of God and of the intellectual love of God – are troubling for me. But I think it is healthy to be reminded that there are other ways of think-

ing about these profound philosophical questions.

So I think it is possible for an atheist to learn from a dialogue, a dialogue that is respectful, a dialogue that in the words of a very good philosopher, William Connolly, is a dialogue conducted with an agonistic respect. Agonistic respect means that you don't try to convince the other, you don't try to arrive at some neutral consensus. No, you hold on to the difference, you respect the differences but you try to enter into that difference and in making that attempt to enter into the other, the radically different from you, you might be alerted to the other in you, the radically different in you. This is the sort of the philosophical and existential message that I think dialogue with Christians can bring.

I think I'll stop with that.



*Ivan Hůšťava, foto: Miro Nôta*