

May 2016

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Recommended Citation

Justin, Daniel P. (2016) "Educating for Justice in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor on the Moral Roots of Identity and Belief," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol5/iss1/5>

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Educating for Justice in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor on the Moral Roots of Identity and Belief

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Abstract

More than forty years after the Society of Jesus first articulated an inextricable link between the service of faith and the promotion of justice, a growing challenge today for Jesuit colleges and universities is to demonstrate what (if anything) faith adds to the struggle for human dignity and rights. Charles Taylor offers one of the most expansive views of our secular age, arguing that the cultural shifts are moral in nature. Ultimately, our secular age is one in which we are able to imagine human fullness and flourishing with no reference to the transcendent. This article employs the moral framework that Taylor develops in *Sources of the Self* as an interpretive lens for *A Secular Age* and identifies new challenges and opportunities for justice education embedded within our contemporary context. Ultimately, sustaining our moral and social commitments is difficult (if not impossible) without engaging our deeper moral and spiritual sources.

Introduction

2015 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Society of Jesus' 32nd General Congregation, whose fourth decree articulated the mission today in terms of an inextricable link between the service of faith and the promotion of justice.¹ This document amplified a profound shift in the mission of Jesuit higher education that began a year earlier with Pedro Arrupe's call for colleges and universities that form men (and women) for others.² In the years since, this declaration has remained a radical challenge not just for Jesuits but also for the institutions sponsored by the Society. There have been important developments and commentaries in the years since. In particular, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach's demand twenty-five years later that the measure of any Jesuit institution is who the students become, and he called for "a well-educated solidarity...[that] is learned through 'contact' rather than 'concepts.'"³

The radical character of the fourth decree persists, but the context has shifted in recent years. Undoubtedly, there are still many that hold on to privatized or other-worldly notions of faith for whom the demands of justice remain (at best) secondary concerns. Yet increasingly, communicating to our students the necessity of working for justice is not our principal challenge; it's helping them to recognize what committed faith adds to these labors. As recent Pew studies

demonstrate, religiously unaffiliated "nones" are on the rise and now constitute 36% of college-aged emerging adults.⁴ At the same time, they are the most politically progressive and tolerant generational cohort in the country.⁵ For many students, a commitment to the promotion of justice is easy, at least in theory. The question is why the service of faith is a necessary corollary.

Formulating an institutional response to this emerging trend begins by properly understanding our contemporary context. Few recent texts have contributed more to our understanding of this new secular milieu than Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*.⁶ Crucially, Taylor shifts the entire inquiry from the more readily apparent declines in the public influence or private practice of religion, examining instead the contemporary conditions of belief. How is it, he asks, that whereas non-belief was virtually impossible 500 years ago, we have come to a point today in which theistic belief is recognized as but one of many life options – and frequently one of the more difficult? Getting to this point was a creative achievement of modernity. Secularism is not what is left once science had disproved our old mythologies and superstitions. Far from a pre-determined or inevitable stage in western history, the secularization narrative Taylor offers is in his words a "zig-zag account...full of unintended consequences."⁷ Indeed, many of cultural shifts that Taylor identifies were Christian in origin.

Taylor's insights (and indeed his framing of the entire question) have prompted a flurry of responses in the form of conferences, symposia, and edited volumes. They also earned the author the Templeton Prize in 2007. Not every commentator accepts his take on our secular age, but his text is necessary reading for anyone who wishes to be a part of the ongoing conversation. My hope for this essay is not principally to offer a synopsis of the historical transitions outlined in *A Secular Age*, however.⁸ Rather, I wish to highlight the ways in which, from Taylor's perspective, the growing commitment to justice and declining rates of religious participation find a common source in our moral imaginations. I will further argue that if Taylor's read on our contemporary situation is correct, opportunities for sustained contact with the poor and marginalized through experiential education and service-learning programs must be a central to Jesuit higher education's ongoing commitment to the indissoluble link between justice and faith.

I will do so by suggesting an interpretive lens through which we may best understand the driving forces behind modern secularism – a lens that Taylor develops in his earlier work. According to the author, secularity is not the gradual and inevitable eclipse of religion by the forces of science and instrumental rationality. Rather, it is the result of modern shifts in our moral imagination: how we envision ourselves, our world, and the good life. Stated plainly: our secular age is one in which it is possible to imagine and pursue human flourishing in ways that require no reference to the transcendent. This becomes clear when we read *A Secular Age* through Taylor's earlier texts, particularly *Sources of the Self*.⁹ Such a perspective places the ethical at the center of today's theological enterprise, and presents unique challenges and opportunities for those engaged in peace and justice education at Jesuit colleges and universities. After sketching the framework of moral identity that Taylor develops in *Sources of the Self*, I hope to offer insights for how educators, particularly through service-learning, can inform and assist students as they negotiate authentic expressions of their identity and beliefs.

Mapping Our Moral Identities: Life Goods, Hypergoods, and Constitutive Goods

The task that Taylor assigns himself in *Sources of the Self* is immense. In this work he seeks to discern and trace the emergence of the modern self: how we have come to understand and locate ourselves in the world in the particular ways that we do today. Our identity as modern individuals, our radical reflexivity, and our individualized quest to make meaning of our lives is a unique phenomenon in western history. While there are many facets contributing to this vision of self, Taylor advances a primarily moral framework sustaining our sense of identity. The modern "sources of the self" are more ethical than ontological.

Taylor's conviction is that our identity and how we envision the world are inescapably linked to our values and our conception of the good. Taylor grounds his proposal in our common experience of what he terms "strong evaluations" of "life goods", which "involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged."¹⁰ Within his definition of these strong evaluations are several important components that contribute to his notion of the self, and ultimately, of secularization. First, it is necessary to recognize that not all choices are genuine strong evaluations. Our preferences for musical acts or ice cream flavors are exactly that: preferences. While we may feel passionately about these opinions, we nevertheless recognize them as such. We do not hold others accountable for failing to share our tastes in such matters regardless of how much we may disagree.

Strong evaluations, on the other hand, are those moral intuitions that are perceived to have grounding in external or objective criteria. They are recognitions of goods that are beyond us and that attract us to them. More than the questions of duty and transgression that typically fall under the auspices of morality, these are judgments about what it is that makes life meaningful or fulfilling: our families, careers, and passions. In many of our more foundational choices, we do indeed believe

that some values or ways of being are superior to others. We view particular ways of living or acting in the world as more praiseworthy than others. Similarly, our disagreement with the choices of others extends beyond opinion and preference. This disapproval is not limited to situations of oppression or injustice. One may live a quiet and solitary life in which she has done no real harm to others or transgressed any serious moral injunction; yet, to declare her life meaningless is to hold her accountable to a standard beyond personal preference (and to issue a particularly grave condemnation in our contemporary age). Thus, these evaluations have both a descriptive and prescriptive role. We evaluate objects and actions as we perceive them, but also discern what goods are worthy of pursuit.

According to Taylor, we make such evaluations on a regular basis, both about others and ourselves. Often, however, the roots or foundations of these judgments remain largely unarticulated. We experience them as moral instincts or gut reactions. Our moral sensibilities are outraged when we witness blatant acts of oppression or neglect, and likewise we experience a sense of wonder and humble awe when witnessing a life of heroic virtue. For naturalists and sociobiologists, common adversaries in Taylor's writings, the seemingly instinctual response is evidence of irrational subjectivism with no ontological basis. Our articulated justifications for these judgments are considered, "so much froth, nonsense from a bygone age."¹¹ Ironically, this refusal to acknowledge the ontological becomes an ontology of its own for the naturalist, but this is getting ahead of the story.

When we articulate our selfhood, it is these life goods that give us our sense of the values and priorities that make us who we are. We map our identity in terms of where we stand relative to those objects we treasure. Our significant relationships, creative self-expression, and participation in meaningful projects give us a sense of moral location, and we would be lost without these landmarks. Such strong evaluations compose the moral frameworks that give meaning to our lives and endeavors. Far from static, these judgments fluctuate in both content and significance. Moreover, we perceive ourselves as growing closer to or farther from particular goods

over the course of our lifetime. As we strive toward these sources of meaning, we are also aware that we risk failing in our endeavor.¹²

When forced to explain or justify our moral judgments, or when we encounter a conflict of goods in our lived experience, we draw on deeper values and higher orders of worth. Behind our appraisals of particular actions and modes of being, there are more foundational goods that order strong evaluations and establish a hierarchy of commitments. Our appreciation for countless particular goods coalesces around ideals such as justice, honor, or self-expression. "Hypergoods" such as these provide the vantage point from which life goods are "weighed, judged, decided about."¹³ When we formulate an articulation of the good life, our starting point is these hypergoods. Similarly, societal debates and culture wars frequently occur along the fault lines of competing hypergoods, and hence competing moralities. Even when there is an agreement about some set of goods, their proper ordering can be source of division (honoring patriotism versus universal human rights, for example).

Taylor believes that societies can reject and transcend inadequate hypergoods, as evidenced by Plato's assault on Greek warrior ethic, but remnants will nevertheless remain. In a pluralistic society such as ours, we must not only account for the fragments of past ethical systems, but must also negotiate the multiple living traditions that remain active and vibrant. Such deliberations are not accomplished through abstraction, but by directly appealing to the moral intuitions of agents. Echoing Alasdair MacIntyre, moral deliberation about the proper ordering of hypergoods occurs in conversations among rival traditions.¹⁴ An interlocutor must demonstrate why attachment to one particular set of goods over another facilitates a more meaningful human life: "You will only convince me by changing my reading of my moral experience, and in particular my reading of my life story, of the transitions I have lived through – or perhaps refused to live through."¹⁵ Systematic abstraction and universal declarations may be appealing, but they are a distortion of the actual ways that individuals engage in practical reasoning. Conversion begins with learning to retell our stories.

Naming the goods that motivate our lives is a central concern for Taylor. Without such articulation, life remains unexamined; moral conversations and deliberations are impossible. When one must give further account of even these hypergoods that inform our vision of a meaningful life, we will in turn articulate their ultimate source: our “constitutive good.”¹⁶ This is more than yet another layer of evaluations; rather, it is the source of all life goods, and the font of goodness itself. Plato’s ideal of the Good is a helpful point of departure for investigating Taylor’s scheme.¹⁷ Wisdom, for Plato, is rooted in a vision of and love for the rational ordering of the cosmos. In other words, the Good for Plato has both a moral and an ontological dimension; it is a perception of how things are and an affective desiring for that reality. The Good is “constitutive,” to use Taylor’s vocabulary, because it is the source for all subsequent goods and values, and for reality itself. Further, it is love for this Good that empowers us to act morally in the world. The Good, for Plato, is both the source and the goal of the moral life.

Taylor does not pigeonhole all other traditions into Plato’s framework, but he does perceive a similar dynamic at work in other mature moral theories. In each, there is a strong relationship between the world as such and the goods that ought to be pursued. Thus, for example, even materialistic Marxists proclaim an ontology that envisions history as an inevitable progression toward liberation. So too, secular ecologists today have their own perception of the world and our proper place in it. For Christians, particularly as inheritors of Augustine’s Platonism, God is the constitutive good. God is the source of the rational ordering of the cosmos – the way things are. Similarly, through prayer and closer affiliation with the divine, we are empowered to act morally within this cosmos, thus bringing us closer to God’s reign. The constitutive good, therefore, is a closed circle, defining our comprehension of reality and our vision of the *telos*. Through modernity, it is not so much that this general moral framework has changed, but rather its content has. The life goods and constitutive goods that we define and value are now secular and immanent.

Before exploring this evolution, however, it is necessary to consider Taylor’s link between the good and identity in greater detail. Who we are and what we value are entirely intertwined in Taylor’s work, so much so that he never treats one without addressing the other. Thus the progression presented here is artificial, though nevertheless helpful in understanding Taylor’s project. Identity begins with the strong evaluations that we make. This needs no elaborate defense, but should rather be readily apparent. When asked to describe ourselves or give an account of our lives, we necessarily make judgments about what merit mentioning and what does not. We decide which relationships and activities are more central to our self-understanding and which are peripheral. It is who we are as a mother, artist, or citizen that shapes the core of our character. These roles are not merely descriptive, but value-laden.

This link between the good and identity continues through Taylor’s hypergoods. Even beyond our judgments and the roles that we play, our uniqueness is rooted in the overarching goods that order our lives: belief in concepts such as fidelity or service. Ultimately, our identities are grounded in our constitutive good. The source of our strength and goal of our efforts is the defining characteristic of our identity. These are not static realities, however. As we have already seen, our ordering and judgments about the good can change over time. What was once the overriding goal of our lives can be exposed as a false idol or simply decline when we are drawn to higher values. Our roles change and different aspects of our identity come to the fore.

Critically for Taylor, as self-interpreting animals our identity is evaluated in terms of how we measure against the goods that we value. Whether we believe ourselves to be moral or not, these hypergoods and the constitutive good provide the dimensions for our self-evaluation. We define our existence not merely by what we value, but by the degree to which we are approaching or regressing from these ideals. The narrative of our lives is the journey toward or away from our ultimate values. Our self-worth is rooted in our evaluation of how we are doing:

Whereas I naturally want to be well placed in relation to all and any of the goods I recognize and to be moving towards rather than away from them, my direction in relation to this good has a crucial importance. Just because my orientation to it is essential to my identity, so the recognition that my life is turned away from it, or can never approach it, would be devastating and insufferable... Symmetrically, the assurance that I am turned towards this good gives me a sense of wholeness, of fullness [*siz*] of being as a person or self, that nothing else can.¹⁸

This centrality of self-interpretation puts Taylor at odds with deterministic theories that explain behavior with no reference to identity.¹⁹ It is not simply the cultural or economic context in which we find ourselves that shapes our self-understanding. Rather, it is how we articulate the narrative of our striving. Yet, this self-interpretation should not be confused with absolute autonomy. We seek to make meaning out of the stories of our lives, but the tools with which we work are largely provided by our historical and cultural context. When Taylor speaks of the moral frameworks or horizons (he uses the two interchangeably) that shape our identity, he recognizes that we are never more than co-authors of these structures: "People may see their identity as defined partly by some moral or spiritual commitment, say as a Catholic, or an anarchist... What they are saying by this is not just that they are strongly attached to this spiritual view or background; rather it is that this provides the frame within which they can determine where they stand on questions of what is good, or worthwhile, or admirable, or of value."²⁰

Taylor describes these frameworks as inescapable, with two implications. First, he holds that it is impossible to ever step out of a framework completely. While one set of goods may give way to another, escaping the dynamic itself is impossible. To do so would be to abandon precisely what makes us human (i.e., self-interpreting animals).²¹ To be without a framework is to suffer a crisis of identity, to lose one's location in the world. Yet, these frames are likewise inescapable in the sense that they are constantly being handed on and formed by our

larger social network and culture. Who we are begins with what narratives and practices have shaped our values. As Ruth Abbey observes, "When all the features of an individual's self-interpretation are aggregated this might amount to something unique, but this interpretation always points beyond the individual to the wider society and culture to which she belongs. This is because the array of linguistic, intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic resources available for interpreting oneself are furnished by one's culture."²² We can only make do with the tools and resources we have been given, though they may be limited and fallible. Our culture may both guide and deceive us. Though we can critically engage these sources, we only do so from a rival perspective.

Identity, Belief, and Fullness in a Secular Age

Taylor's account of our secular age is rooted in the gradual shifting of the moral frameworks and social imaginaries that constitute our sense of self and world. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor identifies three shifts in our moral imagination that profoundly influence the modern understanding of the self. The first is a growing appreciation for the inner depths of self: the Cartesian mind disengages from an embodied existence and later, with wonder and awe, we begin to perceive the limitless and mysterious abyss within each one of us. Plumbing and expressing these inner depths becomes a modern moral imperative. Second, and largely through the contributions of the Reformation, our modern period has witnessed the abolition of higher and lower callings in life. Ordinary life and the focus on daily routines of production and reproduction emerge as moral ideal. It is no longer what we do that matters, but the spirit with which we do it. Or, as the Puritans aptly summarize, "God loveth adverbs." The third modern shift is toward nature as a moral source. We find empowerment by accessing the forces of nature in the world and ourselves. Yet by this time, nature (both externally and within) becomes viewed as entirely disenchanting and mechanistic, a closed system with no ongoing contact with the divine.

Over time, our modern sense of self was formed through the allure, challenge, and reactions against these new moral sources. It is not difficult to perceive the influence this new understanding of

inner depths, ordinary life, and nature has had on our moral identities. They remain central to our articulations of the good life. We can also begin to recognize the effects this moral vision has had on our sense of the transcendent. This is a vision of human flourishing that has little need of, and little room for, a personal God.

Shifting our attention to *A Secular Age*, Taylor synthesizes and expands this moral framework as he develops his notion of fullness, an idea that he introduces in the following way:

Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place... life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition... of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness.²³

Like Taylor's concept of constitutive goods, these moments of fullness orient our identity. We understand ourselves in terms of how we relate to them, even if they are only imagined or experienced as an absence or loss of something we once knew. Our daily routines find a deeper meaning when we believe that we are slowly progressing toward some vision of flourishing.

This notion of fullness largely encapsulates how Taylor frames his notion of constitutive goods in *Sources of the Self*. There is a similar dynamic of something beyond us both drawing us in and sending us forward. It is not only a moment of heightened awareness, but an ideal around which we structure our lives. When we are removed or withdrawing away from this good, we know that something is amiss. In the Christian tradition, whose constitutive good is God, genuine fullness, the ultimate *telos* of human life, is always beyond our temporal lives and finite possibilities. Indeed, it may even demand that we sacrifice a degree of flourishing on Earth, a proposal that strikes the

secular humanist as anti-human and self-destructive. This sense of a transcendent fullness forms a bare, pragmatic definition of religion for Taylor, at least within western civilization.²⁴ Because Taylor is not concerned with institutional religion in the public sphere or as a set of practices, this "cowardly" definition of religion allows Taylor to hone in on the crux of disbelief in our contemporary society.

Defining religion as a vision of fullness found in the transcendent establishes a series of binaries by which Taylor outlines the contours of contemporary secularism. Against the transcendent, the secularist embraces a notion of fullness that is grounded entirely within the immanent. In a similar manner, Taylor draws a distinction between finding one's moral source from within or without.²⁵ As he identified in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor holds that the modern identity finds wonder and mystery within his or her own depths of self. Our moral strength and direction comes from our inner hidden nature. As it became increasingly possible to envision flourishing with no referent to transcendent realities, theistic belief became superfluous and optional. Hence Taylor's thesis:

I would like to claim that the coming of modern secularity in my sense has been coterminous with the rise of a society in which for the first time in history a purely self-sufficient humanism came to be a widely available option. I mean by this a humanism accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing. Of no previous society was this true.²⁶

The story of secularism is the story of the emergence of an entirely immanent vision of human flourishing. The great irony that Taylor identifies is the degree to which this shift was driven by Christian motivations.

Taylor explores many of the attempts to navigate this new pluralistic arena, particularly from positions of unbelief. Once again, to consider each of these channels is beyond the scope of this paper. A few general insights, however, set the stage for considering the implications of and

response to Taylor's project from the perspective of Jesuit higher education. As previously mentioned, Taylor resists any secularism narrative in which science gradually disproves religious superstition. The naturalist position requires unfounded presuppositions of their own, and any functional life must include some leaps of faith. Further, it is possible to abandon certain images of God that have proven unreliable without jettisoning faith all together. Taylor believes that significant experiences and phenomena have the capacity to be spun in either direction. Those who believe will find evidence for their belief, while those who resist find ample proof of their own position. Our secular age is not a story of subtraction, and renewed belief will not be the product of intellectual proofs and deductive reasoning alone.

Still, Taylor presses his case further. While he does not offer a substantive apologetic for theistic belief, he does raise several questions concerning the limits of exclusive humanism. Our times and context have produced several cross-pressures and dilemmas. Taylor openly wonders whether a closed moral framework provides sufficient depth of meaning to navigate our contemporary situation. When we encounter new life, death, suffering, or any number of other momentous events, does exclusive humanism have the spiritual resources necessary to help us discern meaning? Does it have the moral depth we need to sustain the life of benevolence we moderns prize? Our need for meaning and moral orientation has not abated, but the resources at hand have dwindled. Taylor affirms, "The issue about meaning is a central preoccupation of our age, and its threatened lack fragilizes all the narratives of modernity by which we live."²⁷

This is where the work of Jesuit education rightfully begins. The drive for meaning remains, and in many ways has intensified in modern times. The great luxury of living in an enchanted age is that meaning was provided for you; it was woven into the fabric of the cosmos. Now, not only are there several fragmented systems of meaning from which to choose, each individual is expected to piece together and express an entirely unique self. We draw on the social imaginaries that surround us, but are forbidden from admitting any authority

beyond our internal intuition. Not even theistic believers are free from these tensions.

Taylor summarizes many of these insights in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, declaring that authenticity has become for westerners the ultimate good and virtue – the hypergood of contemporary western society.²⁸ This much, to Taylor, is unavoidable. Yet, against the "booster" and "knocker" arguing over the proper place of authenticity in society, Taylor suggests that the more fruitful discussion concerns *what type* of authenticity we seek:

What we ought to be doing is fighting over the meaning of authenticity, and from the standpoint developed here, we ought to be trying to persuade people that self-fulfilment [*sic*], so far from excluding unconditional relationships and moral demands beyond the self, actually requires these in some form. The struggle ought not be *over* authenticity, for or against, but *about* it, defining its proper meaning. We ought to be trying to lift the culture back up, closer to its motivating ideal.²⁹

The search for authentic fullness is a common struggle across contemporary moral frameworks. Jesuit education has the opportunity to meet people in this quest and help them to develop a vocabulary that reinterprets their lives in more meaningful ways.³⁰ Regardless of religious affiliation, there is merit in challenging anyone to be more articulate about the goods that shape their identity. Indeed, Taylor's *Sources of the Self* offers a blueprint for engaging others on not just faith, but broader questions of how we imagine human flourishing. Rather than a broadside inquiry into one's constitutive good, the conversation can begin around any number of strong evaluations. For Taylor it is these strong evaluations begin to form our identity by distinguishing those elements that are of greater importance. Conversations around life goods can in turn lead to deeper sharing about the hypergoods and constitutive good of one's life. Jesuit education could begin not with a broadside attack on science and secularism, but by simply inquiring what it is that another values and desires.

Taylor concludes *A Secular Age* by speculating how one can break free from the immanent frame and

open his or her horizon to the transcendent. To Taylor, this amounts to a conversion in the deepest sense of the term. He highlights several individuals who discovered something beyond the immanent frame; or more accurately, were pulled from it. This suggests that in the end, the work is beyond human efforts. Nevertheless, there is a clear path forward for engaging believers and unbelievers alike. It would be impossible to revert to earlier times, and Taylor refuses to discount the good that modernity has brought forth. The critical question is not how to escape or overcome our secular age, but rather, how to cultivate meaningful lives within it. This is a task that we all share. Our success or failure will largely depend on how we understand and frame the issue. Secularism is not merely a question about what exists, but what we value; and what we value determines who we are. We must engage in sincere conversations about how we imagine authentic flourishing and how it is realized in our lives.

Fostering Magnanimity and a Ruined Life

It is here that I believe the sociologist Christian Smith, most famous for identifying the *de facto* faith of contemporary adolescents as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, becomes an interesting conversation partner with Taylor. Smith's book *Lost in Transition* identifies key challenges facing college-aged emerging adults today.³¹ The first and apparently fundamental problem in Smith's perspective is the moral drift, confusion, and inarticulacy that he and his collaborators identified in their interviews. When challenged to describe a situation that required a difficult discernment of right or wrong, or to articulate their moral code, most participants were unable to provide any clear response. Moreover, though they affirmed that some actions and behaviors are always wrong, participants could not identify what it was that made them so. The emerging adults that Smith interviewed struggled to name their sources of morality, relying instead on trust in their moral intuitions and gut reactions.

What Smith sees as a foundational challenge for emerging adults is not such a dire situation from Taylor's perspective. For Taylor, it is natural for our moral evaluations and frameworks to exist in an inarticulate and unreflective way. Most young

adults dwell within social worlds in which these basic assumptions are seldom challenged or engaged; an insight that developmental psychologists have recognized for decades. While they do not have the readily accessible propositions that a catechism once provided, it is unlikely that early twenty-year-olds were ever able to articulate the sort of moral sophistication Smith seems to expect.

A far more compelling portrayal of the contemporary obstacles to belief (at least from Taylor's perspective) appears in Smith's following discussion on consumerism. Though it was not his primary concern, the questions that are asked in this chapter are quite revealing through the lens of identity and the good. In interviews, Smith and colleagues ask participants to describe the goals and aspirations toward which they strive: what they picture as the good life. What is surprising about most responses is their banality. Few participants offered any desires beyond a comfortable existence: "A family, a nice car, nice house, my own practice, be happy, stuff like that."³² The exceptional few hope for extravagant wealth or fame, but most are content with simply enough to comfortably survive and provide for loved ones. What their responses lacked was any vision of a larger purpose to existence. In both the social and spiritual realms, participants could not imagine a vision of fullness or flourishing beyond unproblematic subsistence. Nor were there any great causes for which it was worth sacrificing their own well-being.

This places any discussion of moral and spiritual belief in a new light. Regardless of what theological convictions emerging adults profess, the truth is that most imagine a life in which little is asked of God, and little is required in return – a sort of functional secularism. The visions of the good life that animate our students are greatly impoverished. It is not simply that they are failing to envisage the fullness of the reign of God; their imaginations do not extend beyond their own domestic tranquility. We are witnessing, to use Taylor's categories, the triumph of ordinary life.

Nevertheless, emerging adults have not lost their esteem for universal compassion and human rights. Their social media timelines are filled with articles, videos, and petitions rallying for or against

any number of pressing social concerns. Indeed, their rejection of organized religion is often articulated in opposition to what they perceive as hypocrisy and intolerance rampant within the institution. Yet most prefer that their social engagement remain at a safe distance – never willing to risk too much to realize their ideals. The degree to which “slacktivism” should be celebrated or lamented remains an active debate, and cannot be resolved here. But the trend itself is very telling. We want to see the end of violence and poverty but don’t want it to get in the way of us enjoying a night out with friends now and a secure life in the future.

This tension between functional secularism and limitless social concern provides a unique lens through which to view justice education at Jesuit colleges and universities. Most often, moral commitments are treated as secondary to ontological claims. It is assumed that only after theoretical principles are established can we begin to discuss their practical consequences. Yet Taylor’s insights suggest just the reverse. It is our moral experiences – our struggles to articulate and realize our moral ideals – that lead us to investigate deeper ontological beliefs. Establishing the theoretical possibility or likelihood of a personal deity does little to engage the more fundamental questions of selfhood. As long as students comfortably remain in the functional secularism that Christian Smith seems to identify, in which human flourishing requires no contact with the transcendent, any investigation into the content of faith will remain an abstract curiosity with little impact on one’s lived identity. What can educating for justice offer in such a situation?

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle offers a brief discussion on the virtue of magnanimity – greatness of soul.³³ Aquinas subsequently develops this virtue through a Christian lens.³⁴ Magnanimity provides an apt description of what is missing in the moral imagination of many today: the belief that one is capable and worthy of great things. Education for justice at its best does not rely solely on outrage at suffering or cold calculations of fairness; rather it enlivens one’s sense of worth and potential. It presents a vision of human flourishing that is open to experiences of both community and transcendence. It engages and forces us to articulate (in Taylor’s categories) the

strong evaluations and constitutive goods that form our identity. By studying the lives of moral exemplars, students examine their own commitments and the sources that sustain them. Experiential service-learning programs pull us out of our daily routines and offer a glimpse of human fullness that goes beyond quiet productivity and consumption. Without indoctrination, educating for justice has the potential to break through our individualistic and secular frames.³⁵

I would like to offer an example from my past work with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. Decades ago, Jack Morris, the Jesuit frequently credited with founding the organization, would throw his hands up in mock disgust whenever he would learn of a volunteer abandoning past aspirations for a successful corporate career so that she could dedicate herself to serving her neighbor. “Ah!” he would lament, “another one, ruined for life!” This phrase soon captured the imaginations of others engaged in the work and became JVC’s unofficial motto. Still today, potential volunteers are drawn by this sense of becoming ruined – the uneasy awareness that there is more to life than what we are usually promised. It has become its own vision of fullness.

Yet it is only after months of struggling to realize the ideals expressed in JVC’s four values of community, spirituality, simplicity, and justice that volunteers begin to acknowledge that their own efforts are not enough to sustain their work; that they need to engage some moral and spiritual source beyond themselves. For some this means a return to the traditions and devotions of their youth, while others seek new paths and practices that better fit their values and needs. Theistic belief has never been a requirement for Jesuit volunteers, just the willingness to explore and question. Proselytism has never been the goal, though a sort of conversion inevitably occurs. The experience of striving to realize our highest ideals and aspirations, and repeatedly falling short, forces us to acknowledge and engage our moral sources in a way that theoretical conversation alone never could.

This is the power and promise of service-learning and educating for justice. The Catholic social tradition carries with it a vision of the person in society and in creation that resonates with even

the most closed and secular modern frameworks. In so doing, it invites students to recognize and name their own vision of fullness – as well as the moral sources that animate and sustain it. It fosters a greatness of soul – the belief that we are capable and worthy of more in life. Between learning about the tradition and being formed in the identity (between *docere* and *tradere*), there is a host of ways in which students can learn from the church's social tradition and articulate their own vision of fullness in conversation with it.

Educating a Justice That Does Faith

How, specifically, might Taylor's insights inform justice education on Jesuit campuses? To return to the moral framework that he articulates in *Sources of the Self*, it begins with engaging the life goods and strong evaluations to which our students are already committed. While they may profess a staunch relativism, they make decisions each day about what constitutes a meaningful and flourishing human life. Indeed even this relativism is rooted in moral ideals of tolerance, diversity, and authenticity. One need not immediately launch into an investigation of students' religious identity or faith commitments. Rather, following Ignatius's maxim of entering through their door, we might begin to engage students by simply inquiring where their passions lie, and what aspects of their life constitute their sense of self. This may be as simple as their extracurricular activities or the social and political issues about which they are concerned. It is often these simple conversations that expand to the most profound ones. From basic life goods the dialogue might eventually expand to how a student manages conflicts between goals and commitments or prioritizes life goals.

Deepening conversations may aim toward the hypergoods that orient a student's sense of self: how do they weigh the multiple demands on their time and energy? What priorities do they want to cultivate during their studies and beyond? Students often need help in naming and articulating these foundational ideals, yet are relieved to at least have these tensions acknowledged. Once they are named, the conversation can turn toward what it takes to sustain their higher values over a lifetime. This might include a community of support and

practices of renewal that empower the student to continue the journey. While the conversation may never lead to committed religious faith, it does tap into the student's deepest moral and spiritual sources. Of course, a conversation like this takes time and develops slowly (if at all).

There are many ways that service-learning and experiential education can aid this process. It is often far too easy for students to remain comfortably in familiar surroundings (the infamous "campus bubble") and never test their moral commitments and buffered selves. Lighting the spark of magnanimity often requires a direct and personal encounter. Concerns about the merits of short-term volunteer and immersion experiences are nothing new. In 1968 Ivan Illich proclaimed "to hell with good intentions" and implored would-be volunteers to opt out of "mission-vacations" that could only do more harm than good.³⁶ Whether immersion programs are worth the resources they require remains an active debate.³⁷ There is also a growing body of literature questioning traditional models of service-learning courses and highlighting the ways in which student volunteers can be a greater burden than benefit to local nonprofit agencies.³⁸ As a mechanism for delivering newly painted walls to impoverished populations, short-term volunteering is indeed inefficient at best. Yet there remains no comparable way to offer students glimpses of a fullness that surpasses their moral imagination. It is this fullness rooted in solidarity that invites students to more deeply reflect on their own goals and narratives.

What students are to do with the highs that they experience through these encounters is not always thoughtfully developed. While we promise ourselves that we will never forget those we encounter and the lessons we learn, we inevitably do. Often, students resolve to replicate the experience by taking more trips or seeking even more extreme frontiers. A more promising avenue is trying to translate these heightened experiences into sustained moral commitments – work that is exceedingly more difficult. This is where a justice that does faith takes root.

As a hypothetical, it is easy to believe that we can sustain and act upon our moral commitments; and we indeed may – for a while. Yet the full weight of

our moral ideals is only realized when we begin to experience the struggles, setbacks, and failures that accompany any march toward justice. A week-long immersion experience rarely leaves us ruined for life, no matter how much we may feel it at the time. Even semester-long service-learning courses are not always enough to challenge students to tap into their moral and spiritual reserves. I have taught courses in which school breaks and snow days piled up to the point that students begin saying goodbye before they ever truly felt settled. While I do not deny the benefits of these courses, I am convinced that engaging the deeper roots of a student's identity takes more time than we are usually allowed.

Over the past two years I have had the good fortune to teach sections of Boston College's PULSE: Person and Social Responsibility. In this year-long, twelve credit hour course, students satisfy their core philosophical and theological requirements while volunteering ten to twelve hours per week with a local nonprofit agency. This program remains the finest example that I have encountered in practice or literature. The high demand that it places on students is essential to its success (and, it is worth noting, only seems to add to its appeal). Within the first few days of fall semester I warn my students that there will inevitably come a time in which it will get tough and they'll be ready to quit. Yet, it is usually not until February or March that this dire prediction comes to pass. Only after their friends have lost all interest in their service, a New England winter has knocked out public transportation, and they realize that their best efforts have made almost no difference in the lives of those they serve do students begin to ask if they truly have what it takes to remain committed to their lofty ideals.

It is at this moment that two deeply interrelated conversations can begin in earnest. The first concerns the social and spiritual resources that empower them in their work: when do they feel burnout and how do they respond? How do they renew themselves to continue in the struggle? Is there a community from which they draw support? The second conversation looks ahead, inviting vocational discernment about how the needs and struggles they witness intersect with their own passions, talents, and goals. It has been my experience that feelings of accomplishment are

inversely related to the amount of time spent in service. It is easy to congratulate ourselves for a week of intensive service. The longer students struggle and fail to make a difference at their partnering agencies, the more deeply they realize that a commitment to justice will require their entire lives.

If, as they soon discover, a year of service does not save the world, what will? It is easy to slip into despair at these moments, but there is an alternative. From Taylor's perspective, we make meaning of our lives through the stories we tell about the goods and Good toward which we strive. Purely speculative reasoning about the good life or the existence of a good God may help to sharpen our arguments, but it rarely taps into these core narratives. Yet once an authentic encounter with the Other activates these values, students soon recognize that their entire lives are at stake. For Taylor, the question of identity is one of orientation, not arrival. Fullness is only experienced in glimpses, and reassurance is found not in the knowledge that we have accomplished our goal, but simply that we are on a meaningful path. As students reimagine themselves as women and men who walk and struggle in solidarity, success is defined by simply remaining on the path. On a journey so perilous, we soon discover that we cannot walk alone.

Conclusion

This perspective and dynamic casts the link between the service of faith and the promotion of justice in a new light. Forty years ago, the 32nd General Congregation challenged all of us to recognize the demands of justice that are implicit in our faith commitments. Increasingly today the direction has shifted. Justice, not faith, is the natural point of departure. Our students continue to negotiate their identities in conversation with those goods that they find valuable and worthwhile. These include the values of universal solidarity and human dignity that are essential to our modern moral order. Yet sustained action on these ideals is impossible without drawing upon our deeper moral and spiritual resources.

Our students will only realize this for themselves when they are given the opportunities to put their social principles into action. As long as our moral

debates take place within the safe confines of the classroom or message board, they will never engage one's deeper sources of meaning and value. Justice and peace education is not a secondary theological activity. It is not up to the scripture scholars and systematicians to articulate a theological vision that justice educators translate in concrete social contexts and political actions. Rather, it is by struggling to find the words to make sense of our experiences of fullness that we are compelled to engage our theological traditions. If we have no sense of this fullness, we will have little need of theological language.

It is likely a revelation to very few that theological education today, particularly justice and peace education, does more than teach moral principles and intellectual speculation. More frequently, it invites students to bring concrete experiences into conversation with their own values and moral traditions – to engage in the work of practical theology. Learning to articulate and investigate our moral ideals in conversation with concrete social realities serves an essential dimension of every human life. Still today in our secular age, these questions of meaning and identity remain inescapable – even when our vision of fullness begins to look a lot like a ruined life. ☩

Notes

¹ *Documents of the 31st and 32nd General Congregations of the Society of Jesus* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 411.

² Pedro Arrupe, "Men for Others: Education for Social Justice and Social Action Today," Conference Address, Tenth International Congress of Jesuit Alumni of Europe in Valencia, Spain, July 1973: <http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/men-for-others.html>.

³ Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., "The Service of Faith and Promotion of Justice in American Jesuit Higher Education," in *A Jesuit Education Reader*, ed. George W. Traub, S.J. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008), 155.

⁴ Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at America's Rapidly Growing Religious 'Nones,'" *Pew Research Center*, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/13/a-closer-look-at-americas-rapidly-growing-religious-nones/>.

⁵ 1615 L. Street et al., "Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change," *Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project*, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2010/02/24/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change/>.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁸ For those seeking a concise summary of Taylor's, James K. A. Smith offers an excellent resource: James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² The influence of MacIntyre's image of narrative quest is apparent here, and readily acknowledged by Taylor. See: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 219. For a helpful overview of the convergences and disagreements between the two authors, see: Arto Laitinen, "Baffling Criticism of an Ill-Equipped Theory: An Intervention in the Exchange Between MacIntyre and Taylor," in *Communitarianism and Citizenship*, ed. Emiliios A Christodoulidis (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), 192–207.

¹³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 63.

¹⁴ Although the similarities between Taylor's work and Alasdair MacIntyre's is readily apparent, the plurality of higher goods is a central point of contention between the two authors. In his review of *Sources of the Self*, MacIntyre critiques Taylor for failing to provide a sufficient schema for navigating this multiplicity with a unified sense of self.

¹⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 73.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 56.

²⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

²² Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 66.

²³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 5.

²⁴ Ibid., 15.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 18.

²⁷ Ibid., 718.

²⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁹ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, 72–73, emphasis original.

³⁰ Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 61.

³¹ Christian Smith et al., *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011).

³² Ibid., 93.

³³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1123a35-1124a13.

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae, q. 129.

³⁵ For a robust exploration of the underlying moral and psychological dynamics of service-learning, see: Roger Bergman, *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

³⁶ Ivan Illich, “To Hell with Good Intentions,” in *Combining Service and Learning: A Resource Book for Community and Public Service, Volume 1*, ed. Jane C. Kendall and Associates (Raleigh, NC: National Society for Experiential Education, 1990), 314–20.

³⁷ Joann Van Engen, “The Cost of Short-Term Missions,” *Catapult Magazine* 4, no. 21 (November 18, 2005), <https://www.catapultmagazine.com/global-eyes/article/cost-of-short-term-missions>.

³⁸ Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster, eds., *Problematizing Service-Learning: Critical Reflections for Development and Action* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2010); Trae Stewart and Nicole Webster, eds., *Exploring Cultural Dynamics and Tensions Within Service-Learning* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011); Randy Stoecker and Elizabeth A. Tryon, *The Unheard Voices: Community Organizations and Service Learning* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009); David D Blouin and Evelyn M Perry, “Whom Does Service Learning Really Serve? Community-Based Organizations’ Perspectives on Service Learning,” *Teaching Sociology* 37, no. 2 (2009): 120–35.