

CHAPTER EIGHT

Enfleshment and the Time of Ethics

Taylor and Illich on the Parable of the Good Samaritan

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The law is like a ponderous speaker who cannot say everything in spite of all his efforts, but love is the fulfillment.

— Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*

Charles Taylor is a gifted storyteller. His elegant master narratives both thrill and frustrate scholars, sometimes at the same time. Provocative tales of disenchantment as a predicament of modern secularity are important examples of philosophical history that—alongside canonical texts in sociological theory—have been massively influential in the academic study of religion. Consider, for example, the influence of figures as diverse as Weber, Durkheim, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Habermas, MacIntyre, and Milbank. Taylor’s stories are capacious, implicating all readers in “cross pressure” rather than winner-take-all tournaments. Tacking between the

analytical and historical, they reach deep into pre-articulate horizons that give shape to multiple cultures. Taylor describes the “background” against which certain questions can arise and others rest forever silent, the space in which particular experiences become possible and others remain inconceivable. His narratives trade in imaginaries more than theories, practices more than doctrines, conditions of belief rather than beliefs themselves. He adopts a kind of existential genealogy that narrates “how our sense of things, our cosmic imaginary, in other words, our whole background understanding and feel of the world has been transformed.”¹ Taylor’s ambitious scope invites skepticism from wary historians, anthropologists, and theologians, who look on as he races through specialist territory with (often admitted) speed and generality. Rejoinders are also heard from those who find themselves too simply caricatured or feel absent from Taylor’s narrative. Nevertheless, his contested reception seems to speak to a recurring desire for such stories.

No longer naïve theists or atheists, modern Westerners, Taylor confesses, “can’t help understanding ourselves in these terms.”² Our context breeds stories of origins, transformations, and possible futures. Of course, religious traditions have their own stories to tell, and at least one interpreter has invoked the parable of the prodigal son to describe Taylor’s ambivalent account of modernity. In response to *A Catholic Modernity?*, historian George Marsden suggests that “Taylor’s main argument can be seen as a proposal for Christianity to reach out to its prodigal offspring (recognizing, of course, that Christianity was not modernity’s only progenitor).”³ He praises Taylor’s balanced approach between extremes, especially in “recognizing the valuable achievements of modernity and using them as the points of contact for presenting the gospel.”⁴ In this evenhandedness, however, one can detect an ambivalence that is a prominent disposition in Taylor’s philosophy. Despite the presence of a theological undertow, his vagueness encourages speculation and appropriation by different theological movements seeking a new recruit. Taylor’s ambivalence is closely related to his irenic and conversational style, but also flows from his substantive commitment to dialogical pluralism as antidote to polarization. It fuels his rejection of “the straight path account of modern secularity” in favor of “a zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences” (SA, 95). This posture of gains and losses sets him apart from many other story-

tellers, especially within religious ethics, where heated disputes about rights, virtues, and moral ontology are prominent. His theological humanism resists more familiar narratives of progress or decline, ones that roughly end up compelling a choice between religion and modernity.

In contrast to these linear and decisive narratives, Taylor's *Sources of the Self* set out to diagnose the "unique combination of greatness and danger, of *grandeur et misère*, which characterizes the modern age."⁵ *A Catholic Modernity?* found that "in modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, of an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel."⁶ Now, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor continues his effort to complicate secularization stories by describing how the West was transformed from a "society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (SA, 3). But, again, this is no story of doom and gloom. In fact, by praising the "practical primacy of life" in secular humanism, Taylor suggests that "there is some truth in the self-narrative of the Enlightenment. . . . [W]e might even be tempted to say that modern unbelief is providential, but that might be too provocative a way of putting it" (SA, 637). Throughout his career, and in each of these writings, Taylor has aimed not to "score points" but to identify the "range of questions around the moral sources which must sustain our rather massive professed commitments in benevolence and justice."⁷ Here we find a Dialectic of Christianity as much as a Dialectic of Enlightenment. It is these commitments, and the way they operate in Taylor's story, that will be the focus of this essay.

STORIES AND PARABLES

Before turning to our specific interests, it is important to recognize the ambivalence some critics have had about Taylor's ambivalence. When Marsden writes that Taylor's narrative resembles the parable of the prodigal son, he illuminates the complexity of the relationship between Christianity and modernity, and the uncertain possibilities for reconciliation. The story of the prodigal, which depicts a moment of charitable reunion, a welcoming embrace on the son's return home, necessarily involves critique of the

son who strayed away: “The prodigal’s principles are deeply flawed and dangerous, not least of all to the prodigal, who has been living high on borrowed moral and intellectual capital much longer than anyone has a right to expect.”⁸ To be sure, Taylor’s rebuke of nostalgia rejects any presumption that the son can simply return to the hearth and the family can once again be whole. And yet, Calvinist Marsden expresses anxiety that the Catholic Taylor “tiptoes” around particular Christian commitments in his professional work.⁹ If modernity criticism tends to employ a “rhetoric of excess,” Taylor’s genre tends toward a rhetoric of qualification.¹⁰ He is apologetic for his apologetic. For Marsden, modernity is the prodigal. One might push Taylor in this direction by using his admission that modernity “needs to be saved from its most unconditional supporters.”¹¹ But, if the image is apt, suspicious readers may rightly wonder which characters or traditions are implicitly cast by Taylor as the prodigal, the elder brother, or indeed, the merciful father. He is promiscuous in his criticism of different spiritual visions as much as exclusive humanism, and his open-ended vision of reconciliation perpetuates this ambiguity. But this rhetoric and his critique of dogmatism can obscure the underlying claim that a sense of fullness requires something like a theistic construal of transcendence. By our lights, Taylor’s lament about a cramped moral universe and stifled spirit becomes more palpable as his writings develop, and this may be connected to his greater willingness to engage constructive religious thought as he recounts “the world we have lost, one in which spiritual forces impinge on porous agents” (SA, 61).¹²

This essay focuses on another famous parable as a route into tracing Taylor’s religious conception of “fullness” beyond human flourishing. It is a rare biblical passage that Taylor explicitly interprets: the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37). Recall the power of the parable’s surprising message of a Samaritan—a representative enemy of the Jewish people—showing mercy on a wounded man who had fallen among robbers. In addition to the story’s emphasis on the fundamental relation between the love of God and the love of neighbor, early Christians often interpreted the parable as an allegory of Christ’s gracious healing of wounded (sinful) humanity. But, like the prodigal son, the story has fraught moral dimensions of its own, given a long history of Christian anti-Judaism. Christian exegetes and preachers, confident in their generosity, also have

employed the parable in stereotyping Jews as prideful “lawyers” or hypocritical “priests and Levites.” Both explicitly and implicitly, the parable became a convenient story for Christian “supersessionism,” which pits a New Covenant (of love) with a universal Church over against an Old Covenant (of law) with a particular Israel. This history also shapes the experience of modernity, especially this side of Luther’s reading of Paul and Protestant constructions of the concept of religion. It is predicated on readings of a love “beyond the law” and a universal community that replaces the narrow particularity of Jewish election. Scholars continue to debate the actual practices of Christian care for strangers in light of the parable’s apparent impartiality as well as the scrambling of notions of identity in response to the radical teachings of Jesus. Disputes remain within the Christian tradition about charity’s relation to justice, the scope of Christian beneficence, and the bearing of works of mercy on salvation. But for those who welcome the parable’s implications about who counts as “neighbor” and its emphasis on a compassion that transcends boundaries, this complicated heritage often goes unrecognized.

We do not claim Taylor’s exegesis as the hidden key to unlock the mysteries of his theology, his story of moral sources, or even as a single hermeneutical guide to his manifold writings. Given the prolific commentary on Taylor and religion, however, it is striking that little has been said about his reading of the parable as a window into persistent themes in his work. We focus on his long-standing concern with the rise of benevolence in relation to the eclipse of transcendence within the immanent frame. According to Taylor, modern practical charity arises within Enlightenment moralities, which suppress their roots in Christianity and the strong moral sources that were once lodged in the “old enchanted cosmos” (*SA*, 63). In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor described this “moral earnestness of benevolent determination” as “one of the central beliefs of modern Western culture: we all should work to improve the human condition, relieve suffering, overcome poverty, increase prosperity, augment human welfare.”¹³ He returns to and expands upon this theme in *A Secular Age*. The “Reform Master Narrative” describes its continued acceleration and intensification. Taylor’s gloss on the parable of the Good Samaritan illuminates reasons for his ambivalence in relation to this aspect of modernity and also reveals more constructive content than has been previously recognized. To accomplish

these goals, this essay reads Taylor with and against the iconoclastic Catholic philosopher Ivan Illich (1926–2002). Taylor has claimed Illich as a compatriot and attests to his influence in reading modern secularity as “neither the fulfillment nor the antithesis of Christianity, but its *perversion*.”¹⁴ Illich and Taylor agree that modern ethics has distorted the message of the Good Samaritan by reducing its prescriptions to a code. They assert that the parable must be understood as an event, an occurrence in time, in flesh, and in love. This essay focuses on the spatial and temporal dimensions of ethics and the roles of contingency and spontaneity, as well as proximity and place, which are transformed in the modern reception of the parable. The examination bears upon both the interpretation of Taylor and his interpretation of modernity.

TAYLOR WITH AND AGAINST ILLICH
ON THE GOOD SAMARITAN

A common assumption of recent American “culture wars” is that theists pride themselves on the basis of morality, while atheism justifies itself on account of its rationality. But a major thesis in Taylor’s recent tome is that the disenchantment of modern secularism actually justifies itself, in large part, on its ethical status. Indeed, the status and conception of morality in modern secularity is a significant result of changes within the long history of reform in Latin Christendom. Unlike stories that highlight the emergence of natural sciences as an epistemic challenge to religious traditions, *A Secular Age* displays the continuity between Christianity and secularism, tracing the transformation of the Christian church’s proselytizing work to save the world into the secular project of civilizing the world. The mission to lead populations to salvation was transfigured into the attempt to spread prosperity and progress around the globe. In the secularization of this effort, the ends and means of this “civilizing” have been altered, and while in certain ways this has resulted in greater tolerance and openness, Taylor asks whether in some ways this might have involved certain losses and given rise to new dangers. To explore this question, Taylor turns to Illich.

Taylor and Illich share the perspective that modernity can be understood, to a great extent, as the remodeling of strenuous Christian efforts to

cultivate religious and moral purity. Both draw on the parable of the Good Samaritan as an example of the appropriation of Christian ethics into secular moral thought and political practice. This parable has been known for its expansion of the realm of love and is frequently used as a way to think about forms of benevolence, charity, and duties toward strangers. As a story originally involving a transcendent orientation becomes incorporated into the immanent frame, however, significant changes take place. For Illich, these changes are neither beneficial nor even benign. Despite its parade as an expansive ethic, the disciplined and organized character of the modern moral order has ended up as a parody of the parable.

For Illich and Taylor, the charity of the Good Samaritan, like the Incarnation, is a moment of a radical in-breaking of God into the human order.¹⁵ It inaugurates the possibility for new relationships and new opportunities to experience God. Agape is “the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power” (SA, 20), and the parable shows how “the enfleshment of God extends outward, through such new links as the Samaritan makes with the Jew, into a network, which we call the Church” (SA, 739). But in each case, this “network of agape” happens at a particular place and time and in the interaction of particular felt bodies (SA, 158). It signals a “way of being,” not a “set of universal rules” (SA, 738). For Illich, and presumably for Taylor, the fleshly action of the Samaritan “prolongs the Incarnation” as participation in the life of the Trinity through the Son (RNF, 207).

Here, without denying ethical import, Taylor and Illich revive a daring spiritual reading of the parable at some distance from the historical-critical method of modern biblical scholarship and the exclusively moralistic interpretation of secularists. But their spiritual reading does not take its cue from the creative fascination of patristic theology with finding the whole of salvation history in a single pericope.¹⁶ Early church fathers typically read the parable back into the drama of Jesus as the Samaritan healing the wounds of sin by being closer to humanity than the law or the prophets; Taylor and Illich read the parable as a continuing speech-act for the lives of its hearers. Their target, it seems, is not the abstraction of Christological allegory per se. It is the familiar reading of the story as moral example in the contemporary world. In the effort to garner lessons from the parable, to adopt its message and generalize it for universal action guidance, spatial

aspects of the parable are privileged to the exclusion of its temporal performance. The notion that all people should be helped when in need, that our duties are not confined to our family, community, or ethnicity, has been attractive to modern thinkers seeking to widen the realm of justice.¹⁷ Modernity clings to this expansive aspect of the parable. But without transcendence or something like biblical eschatology, salvation is transformed into a theodicy of a technocratic regime of progress. Illich will argue, with Taylor in accord, that the message of the parable cannot be understood in isolation from its spatial and temporal coordinates, which make it a spontaneous and enfleshed occurrence, an event that cannot be codified or generalized into a rule. Many have noted that the celebrated status of this adaptable parable speaks to its relevance for the modern world in its supposed promotion of individual virtue for a society of strangers, bare humanity.¹⁸ But Taylor and Illich note something more pernicious in the modern affinity for the lawyer's question. With codification, the specter of modern anxiety emerges. The freedom of love becomes the conscience of obligation, the criminalization of sin, and the institutionalization of hospitality as service.

A secularized version presents the parable as if it were a response to a question such as "To whom do I have duties?" But the conversation leading up to Jesus's telling of the story initially had quite a different concern in mind. A man came to Jesus and asked, "What must I do to have eternal life?" This man was concerned not about his civic duties, but about salvation and the "abundant life" (John 10:10) that interests Taylor. For many modern readers, Jesus starts with a stock answer and turns the question back to him: "What does the law say?" The man answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself." But this man, in a moment of insight, realized the vagueness of that prescription. So he pressed Jesus further: "But who is my neighbor?"

The surprising parable was not the expected answer to this man's question. It makes a desire for God embodied in relationships on Earth; it expands the sphere of neighborhood beyond the borders of one's community; and it reemphasizes the Hebrew Bible's indication that at the heart of ethics is a commandment to love.¹⁹ Given that the parable was offered, however, not in relation to questions about the welfare state or utility, but in regards to eternal beatitude, extrapolating its meaning for a social or

political ethic involves a decontextualization that significantly affects its interpretation.²⁰ Severing the fleshly response from the celestial aspiration of the question results in a divide between the immanent and the transcendent, the chasm the parable promises to bridge.

But eternity, divinity, love, and bodies have always been complicated terms for ethical thought. Interpreting the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself, to love the stranger lying on the side of the road, has particularly made the question of love an issue of ongoing contestation. In cutting agape off from its transcendent source and bringing it into the immanent frame, this interpretation transforms the love of God in a drive to make the world into a kinder and more civilized place. On one hand, this had led to a radical expansion of benevolence. As Taylor writes, "Our age makes higher demands of solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before. Never before have people been asked to stretch out so far, and so consistently, so systematically, so as a matter of course, to the stranger outside the gates" (SA, 695). But on the other hand, that benevolence has taken on a distorted character as it has sought stability in the establishment of laws and codes: it has been "excarnated," yet another manifestation of disengaged reason.

Throughout *A Secular Age* Taylor acknowledges the temptation to conceive of modern secularization as a kind of subtraction story—that, in freeing ourselves from previous metaphysical and religious notions, we can finally encounter the truth of nature and humanity. Indeed, this was the way in which many Enlightenment thinkers conceived of their project. Taking themselves to be uncovering natural drives and motivations, they developed naturalistic and psychological explanations for a notion of universal benevolence. Altruism, they claimed, was a human drive that had little to do with God or grace. The moral psychological explanation asserted that "we are motivated to act for the good of our fellow human beings. We are endowed with a specific bent in this direction" (SA, 246). Taylor makes the point, however, that in the changing notions of love, time, bodies, and space, modernity does not reveal a substratum of truths that had been obscured by religion, but rather gives birth to significantly new content, constructing a whole new conception of humanity and the world. The rise of modern benevolence did not come from the subtraction of God, but rather indicates the trace of grace in a whole new form.

In the immanent frame, the dignity of all human life becomes a spur for the modern notion of obligation to strangers, a kind of human solidarity that should take precedence over community affiliations. But according to Taylor and Illich, the Christian idea takes its starting place elsewhere. The assertion that any stranger might be your neighbor does not arise out of recognition of universal solidarity, uncovering a primal unity. Rather, agape can exist because God exists; agape can become a force in social contexts because of the free act of human beings who choose to recognize the presence of God. Without this transcendent source, however, the modern imperative to work toward the good of one's fellow human beings begins to change in character. In the secularized, codified version of charity toward the neighbor, both the ends toward which the aid of the Good Samaritan was originally intended and the means by which that aid is dispensed are reconfigured. A fetishized duty emerges to promote human flourishing, a flourishing marked by a secular and material character, with "no reference to something higher which humans should reverence or love or acknowledge" (SA, 245).

What is illuminating in the story Illich and Taylor tell is that the rise of secularism does not lead to a diminished concern for the poor and those in need. Contemporary atheism claims to be more tolerant, more efficient, and more successful in promoting the general welfare, as it strives to eliminate violence and establish a perpetual peace. Concern for the helpless becomes the responsibility of the community at large, and institutions are built to deal with the poor and homeless. However, a new, more immanent and diffuse, crusade emerges: the "rage for order." In this order, the orientation toward poverty and pain shifts. Whereas, in the Middle Ages, the poor were an unapologetic opportunity for sanctification, for to help a stranger was to help Christ, in the modern period, the poor become problems to manage. According to Illich and Taylor, the rise of poor laws and later developments in the reform of charity link the process of providing work and aid to confinement in institutions, judgments about who is worthy, and the evaluation of the poor as morally inferior.²¹ For Illich, this is a detrimental occurrence. With the "institutionalization of neighborliness," Christians lose habituation in the practice of loving their neighbor, and hospitality is degraded to caregiving institutions (*RNF*, 57). When a homeless shelter is built down the road, Christians put away the candle and extra

mattress that they had always kept ready for the stranger who might appear, in need of a bed for the night. Now, when the Christian opens her door to a knock, she gestures in the direction of the hostel down the street and washes her hands of the need to engage personally with the visitor in need.

For Taylor and Illich, the broadening and secularizing of the imperative to help the stranger has led to at least two disfigurations of the parable. The first is the equation of ethics with norms. The parable is a story about freedom: the fact that one can establish a personal relationship with a wounded “stranger” because one desires to do so, because of God’s love and goodness. It relies on a “skein of relations which link particular, unique, enfleshed people to each other, rather than a grouping of people together on the grounds of their sharing some important property” (SA, 739). An ethical system that resorts only to “oughts” and rules for behavior fundamentally overlooks this freedom, which is at the heart of the Samaritan’s approach to the man on the road. But in an attempt to ensure that all desires are met and needs succored, modern secular humanism begins to administer aid in cold and depersonalized ways. Indeed, Taylor notes, modern ethics is obsessed with creating prescriptions for behavior, codes of conduct, whether moral or legal, in the bureaucratic world of humanitarianism, business, or politics.

When helping one’s neighbor turns into a requirement that is ordered by a particular code, agape recedes from view. Taylor turns to Illich for the insight that “the code can rapidly become a crutch for our feelings of moral superiority” (SA, 743). Illich goes a step beyond Taylor in his articulation of the development of a sense of “responsibility” as cover for something that is actually insidious. According to Illich, offering a Christian variant on Nietzsche and Foucault, modern attention to the neighbor and stranger is inextricable from a drive to fashion the world in our own image. The sense of responsibility, motivated by pity or duty, becomes the flip side of a coin whose reverse is a will to power. The obligation-driven will assumes a right to take control of the lives of others, to construct the world according to its own wishes.

How, exactly, is this modern expression of responsibility and benevolence different from the Samaritan’s love of his neighbor? The transformation can be identified in the shift from narrative to principle. Stories are generally characterized by the fact that they take place at a particular

place and time. They involve specific people in determinate situations. The reception of the parable, however, has involved uprooting and shuffling its temporal and spatial components. Certain elements have been adopted, others forgotten. Secular humanism has rallied around one aspect of the parable, which we can define as a spatial orientation: its expansive momentum, which breaks through a narrow ethics confined to one's own ethnos, group, or community, and broadens the scope of possible ethical relationships. However, this appropriation overlooks other elements of the parable that are critical in preserving its meaning in a Christian context, a meaning that Taylor and Illich agree may need to be restored if we are to find a way out of the currently reigning depersonalized systems of help/power.

If the universal reach of the new ethical command is one spatial aspect of the parable, another spatial component is its carnal, enfleshed occurrence, as a relationship that emerges between specific bodies in a specific place. In Christian theology, the parable of the Good Samaritan is inextricable from the Incarnation and the Eucharist, and in each of these three moments, what is emphasized is the enfleshment of God, the fact that God takes on a human body, a physical form. The Christian conception of the body, as Taylor writes, marks a departure from a Greek dualism between physical and spiritual. The Incarnation fundamentally baptizes the body. If the body/spirit dualism remains present at all, Taylor notes, it is subordinate to a more central concern that, drawing on Peter Brown, he calls "the direction of the heart" (SA, 276). The good life is no longer about getting beyond the physical, for God himself has entered into it. Ascetic practices are meant not to transcend the body, but to help reorient the loves and purify the thoughts. Christianity, therefore, offers an ethic that seeks not to shun the physicality of our world, but rather to embrace it. Thus, for Illich and Taylor, the story of the Samaritan is not simply the story of the *expansion* of love; it is also a story about the tangibility of love, real bodies taking up real space.

In the attempt to secularize agape in the modern institutions of benevolence, care has been disembodied. The poor and sick are pushed away, out of sight, to be attended to by professional, paid caretakers with plastic-gloved hands. The body becomes an object, a site upon which to work, whose operations must be calculated and measured. Illich laments the disconnection we feel from our own bodies, how we look to experts and

doctors for knowledge of ourselves. But this is not solely the fault of secularism. Illich marks out several significant moments when Christianity began its departure from the embodied ethic that was inaugurated in the life of Christ. They fit Taylor's story about shifts in background that create opportunities for new spaces of questions and, in this case, a new orientation to the body. This movement can be exemplified, Illich writes, in the story of the medieval monk, Berengarius, who became skeptical about the relationship between the Eucharist and the Body of Christ. For almost a thousand years, believers had accepted the notion that the bread and wine were body and blood, when suddenly this became a scandal. How could this be so? The church then turned to Aristotle and developed explanations regarding categories, substances, and accidents, to explain away the body that Christ asked his church to share in.

The relationship to the body expressed in the parable, in the Incarnation, and in the Eucharist has thus been transformed to obscure the ways in which the body can be the *source of love*, and the ways in which it can be the *object of care*. The institutionalization and rationalization of aid have displaced the role of affect, feeling, and empathy as sources of care. Experts analyze how to distribute aid most efficiently as medical students study their textbooks, and meanwhile the sense is lost in which one can be "moved in the bowels by compassion" (SA, 115; cf. SA, 741). Care becomes excarnated work and aid established as an industry. But the way in which the body is the object of care has also been transformed. In the realm of immanence, with no other end in sight, material well-being signifies the entirety of human flourishing, making pain and suffering the primary evils to avoid. But, for Illich, this is a distortion of what it means to be mortal. Suffering is a part of human life, one that Christ chooses to share in with us in the Passion.

Talal Asad has devoted attention to this aspect of modernity, which makes its goal the abolishment of pain and the augmentation of pleasure. In his work on the topic, he points toward the relationship between pain and agency.²² A modern agent is one who is capable of avoiding pain; only someone passive would endure discomfort. But as Asad emphasizes, suffering has played an important role in many religious traditions. The embrace of pain has been an important source of agency. Going a step further, we can say that the story of the Samaritan sheds another ray of light on the

topic of suffering. The frailty of our bodies and the occasions of our suffering are opportunities for others to show concern. They are the moments at which a relationship is created between two passersby who would otherwise never connect. Suffering, though never to be courted or desired, can nevertheless enable community.

Illich displayed this personally in his lifetime. As David Cayley tells it, Illich chose to live with the great pain of a tumor rather than be seen by a doctor and treated for possible cancer. He preferred to bear his pain rather than enter into the game of risk calculation that modern medicine recommends, a calculation he saw as central in the disembodiment of modern society. Instead, Illich recommended an “art of suffering” and treated his pain as a gift that enabled him to be constantly aware of the vulnerability and neediness of our bodily state. In fact, according to Illich, to overlook the bodily aspect of the parable is the greatest perversion: “Take away the fleshy, bodily, carnal, dense, humoral experience of the self, and therefore of the Thou, from the story of the Samaritan and you have a nice liberal fantasy, which is something horrible. You have the basis on which one might feel responsible for bombing the neighbor for his own good. This use of power is what I call the *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* [the corruption of the best is the worst]” (*RNF*, 207).

While Taylor accords with the critique of disembodiment, he does not follow Illich to his conclusions about suffering. In *Sources of the Self*, Taylor highlights the fact that the Enlightenment and the Romantic era have left us with a moral framework in which we seek to reduce poverty, promote prosperity, and relieve suffering.²³ And if these aims have been problematized by their divorce from fuller accounts of the human good, they are still the better legacies of this heritage. Taylor acknowledges, in *A Secular Age*, that that meaning of suffering remains a dilemma, and that it may be particularly important for Christians to hold onto the transformative meaning that Christ’s passion gives to suffering: “Crucifixion cannot be sidelined as merely a regrettable by-product of a valuable career of teaching” (*SA*, 651). But he demarcates his perspective on the issue when he writes, “Perhaps there is something deeply wrong with all hermeneutics of suffering as divine. Perhaps we are wrong to seek meaning here” (*SA*, 653). In his divergence from Illich and a more traditional Christian perspective on the sanctity of suffering, we can see an example of Taylor’s hope for a

kind of bricolage of modern ethics. There can be no wholesale return to a premodern form of life. But neither is the character of modernity inevitably determined. As Taylor repeatedly emphasizes, modern secularism is not a subtraction story: it is the product of a dialectical process that involves collective innovation. The rejection of suffering may be a positive remnant of Enlightenment thought that should remain constitutive of our modern ethical orientation. But its consolidation into a code-based institutionalization may need to be reinvigorated by the transcendent source of agape. He articulates his hope that this divine love may still be available to us, “but only to the extent that we open ourselves to God, which means in fact, overstepping the limits set in theory by exclusive humanisms. If one does believe that, then one has something very important to say to modern times, something that addresses the fragility of what all of us, believer and unbeliever alike, most value in these times” (SA, 703).

THE GOOD SAMARITAN AND THE TIME OF ETHICS

Taylor differs from Illich, then, in his greater ambivalence about and openness to modernity. He seeks to create an account of Western modernity that acknowledges what is “good, even great, in it, and of what is less good, even dangerous and destructive” (*RNF*, xiii). He is more willing than Illich to admire the achievement of an exclusive humanism as its own original spiritual vision that “can be inspired and empowered to beneficence by an impartial view of things” (SA, 255; cf. 572). But he agrees with Illich that important aspects of Christian ethics, depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan, have been overshadowed. At this point, we have looked at some of the spatial and embodied aspects of a Christian ethic. But, as Taylor notes, it was not until Newtonian science that space and time were separated into distinct entities. The enfleshment of Christ, the incarnation and the birth of the body of the church, also give history and narrative a central place in Christianity. Earthly time is oriented by its relation to God’s time, a God who enters in and orders that time toward himself, who begins a new calendar that takes the Incarnation as its starting point. An understanding of time is therefore inextricably bound up with humanity’s experience of itself. Taylor’s thoughts on time develop in his previous

works as he lingers with Heidegger on Dasein's temporality and MacIntyre on the importance of narrative. In *A Secular Age*, we get another treatment of the topic. And, when paired with the parable of the Good Samaritan, and particularly Illich's emphasis on contingency, we have an illuminating explication of the ethics of time.

According to Taylor, prior to the Enlightenment, ordinary time could not be understood without reference to higher times. Higher times structure a community's orientation to the things it holds important, draw its focus onto certain moments and periods, and in some cases, direct the community teleologically toward a set of ends. Taylor writes that, for our medieval predecessors, secular time was a kind of horizontal dimension that was shaped and "warped" by vertical dimensions: "The flow of secular time occurs in a multiplex vertical context, so that everything relates to more than one kind of time" (SA, 57).

In the ancient and medieval world, these higher times came in several kinds, including multiple notions of eternity. The Platonic conception imagined the eternal as the realm of the forms, the fixed and unchanging. What existed in time was less real, in a sense, than that which was eternal. In Christianity, however, a new notion of eternity develops. "Secular," worldly time is validated by God's entry into it. But there remains a higher time toward which secular time is oriented. Taylor draws on Augustine for this articulation of a *gathered* time in which all creation and eternity, past, present, and future, comes together in an instant in which we can participate in the life of God (SA, 57).

The modern emphasis on science has opened up a gap between space and time and their transformation into mathematical quantities to be dissected and calculated. Once again, this is not a subtraction story. Time has not been shorn of its false significance and exposed for what it truly is. Rather, this process, bound up with the rigorous spirit of Reform, has created a very new experience of time. With the introduction of modern science, time can become a tool of measurement, where each second is identical and exchangeable for any other second.

In *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Taylor makes the point that this notion of time was crucial for the development of modern secularism. But in *A Secular Age*, resisting temptations to oversimplify, Taylor displays ambivalence about a narrative that depicts modernity as characterized entirely by the "homogenous, empty time" Walter Benjamin so artfully describes.

Modernity is still marked by kairoitic time—we still have festivals and celebrations that remind us of our origins, and we still tell ourselves stories and narratives that shape our identities. Indeed, on Benjamin's account as well, empty time is characteristic of bourgeois temporality. Bourgeois time contrasts with the time of revolutions, which “blast open the continuum of history,” as well as the present of the historical materialist, which is “not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop,” and is “shot through with chips of messianic time.”²⁴ Foucault's notions of “heterotopias” and “heterochronies” have also emphasized the fact that modernity continues to be inflected by diverse notions of time. Nevertheless, for Taylor, there is the overwhelming sense that even these different speeds and experiences of time are cut off from an outside, from a transcendent source. They circulate purely within the immanent frame. And despite some degree of heterogeneity, one particular kind of time has, indeed, become hegemonic.

While refraining from the assertion that naturalized scientific time is the *only* form of time that characterizes modernity, it is nevertheless a highly influential one. Taylor writes that more than any other aspect of modernity, this new notion of time makes up much of the “iron cage” in which we live. As Philip Goodchild argues, time and money have come to share a similar structure; each began as a neutral instrument to measure other values, but slowly took on value in itself. Time has become a resource to be saved or spent, an abstract unit to be counted and calculated. It becomes interchangeable with money where the two values are measured against each other. And ultimately, time *is* money and should not be wasted.

As time takes on a life of its own, it inflects all other situations as a tool of evaluation, an oppressive ticking clock against which everything else is forcibly measured. Any given experience becomes subject to a cost-benefit analysis, judged according to the amount of time it will take. While time is at first something we measure and control, it increasingly becomes something that measures and controls us. As Goodchild notes, “If God is dead, *he is replaced by time and money*, not man.”²⁵

This has vast importance for ethics. As time takes on a totalizing character, other modes of experience are eclipsed. The multiple notions of time in premodern periods enabled the rupturing of experience, a kind of complementarity to the everyday. A significant part of modernity, according

to Taylor, is a loss of this contrast, the notion that everyday life needs to be balanced by “the principle that contradicts it” (SA, 51). Premodern periods retained room for an “anti-structure”: carnivals, celebrations, and fantastical festivities that temporarily suspended the dominant structure, allowing for moments of transgression and release. These did not necessarily challenge the overarching structure, but rather provided respite from its strictures, for an evening, some hours, the duration of a dream. Social hierarchies and the bounds of what is acceptable would be temporarily suspended, conveying a subtle reminder of their transient and arbitrary nature. The relationships of master and slave that characterized daily life were revealed to be temporary and temporal relationships, limited to a specific moment in earthly time, not necessarily congruent with a divine perspective.

In a modernity severed from transcendence and higher times, however, what exists in time is all that is real. Modern morality must be equally totalizing. Given the absence of recourse to a complementary existence, perfection must be sought in a code here and now, which will be dependable, certain, and authorized to reign without limits. The flattening of time into a single register corresponds with the reduction of ethics to a code, for in such an ordered world, each moment can be evaluated, each second judged. This calculated and measured world leaves no room for relationships that do not fit the prescribed specifications. In contrast, the parable of the Good Samaritan slices through this notion of a timely ethics. Suddenly, the code is called into question with the chance arrival of God or the neighbor, the Event.

When ethics becomes a system to follow and time its encasement, “the ideal is to master it, to extend the web of control so that contingency is reduced to a minimum” (SA, 742). But as Taylor notes, there can be no planning around that man lying on the side of the road. There can be no calculation about the time required to provide help. Central to this event is its contingency. Taylor writes that the answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” is simply “the one you happen across, stumble across, who is wounded there in the road” (SA, 742). Accident and contingency are the venue of love. In a world that is planned to the minute, where busy people rush down the sidewalks or speed by in their cars, there is little time to notice a stranger in need, except perhaps to stare.

As Illich tells it, contingency is a concept of specifically Christian origin. While Aristotle acknowledged the fact of luck, of fortune or misfortune, which applied in the world under the moon, the Greeks had no sense that the very existence of the world was a contingent occurrence. With Christianity, however, the world is suddenly and simply gift, entirely dependent on the grace of God. Illich writes, “contingency expresses the state of being of a world which has been created from nothing, is destined to disappear and is upheld in its existence by one thing, and one thing only: divine will” (*RNF*, 65). For Illich, in contrast to a more modern sense that provides each of us with a *raison d’être* or, alternatively, leaves us wondering about our purpose and sliding into nihilistic, existential angst, a sense of our contingent existence entirely transforms the set of concepts, feelings, intuitions, and actions that characterize our relationships to ourselves and others. Illich writes that to linger over the fact of our creation and dependence upon God, “to contemplate such a universe was to cultivate a sense of contingency, a sense of having received as a free gift one’s own existence and the existence of everything which God has invented and brought forth” (*RNF*, 74). Not only the creation of the world, but even the relationship between man and God is a contingent act. Everything about the Incarnation, God’s generous approach to humanity, rings with surprising and seemingly inappropriate elements. God becomes man, is born in a stable, and laid for his first night of sleep in a manger. As Dostoyevsky asks so poignantly in the story of the Grand Inquisitor, who would notice such a God today? Similarly, the neighbor, the stranger, the man on the road are reminders that our lives are enveloped by grace, that love, even salvation, is an event that appears unexpectedly.

Not until modernity, however, does contingency take on the meaning of chance. What is contingent in Christianity is still replete with meaning and pregnant with possibility. But in modernity, the contingency that once signified gift is now a burden. It is increasingly understood simply as an arbitrary event, pointless and purposeless. Time becomes empty units, and contingency becomes chance. But Taylor and Illich remind us that the parable offers a different notion of time and of our participation in its unfolding. In the parable, God’s time breaks into the present. When God becomes man, the eternal appears in the temporal, and the stranger becomes neighbor. And in this rupturing of time, the suffering of the body

is shared in the breaking of the bread, and agape pours out with the wine become blood. For Taylor and Illich, the secular surrogates of benevolence and progress mask this central import of the parable as a story of communion: “Communion has to integrate persons in their true identities, as bodily beings who establish their identities in their histories, in which contingency has a place. In this way, the central concept which makes sense of the whole is communion, or love, defining both the nature of God, and our relation to him” (SA, 279).

As with *Sources of the Self*, Taylor concludes *A Secular Age* with a provocative theological intervention by expressing sympathy for John Milbank’s stress upon developments in late medieval theology as central to the rise of modern secularity. According to Taylor, his emphasis upon Reform is a complement to the “Intellectual Deviation” story offered by Radical Orthodoxy. They are “exploring different sides of the same mountain, or the same winding river of history” (SA, 775). Milbank’s Protestantism that does not drive out the “magic” of an erotic cosmos might be the sort of Protestantism that Taylor counterfactually imagined would have led to a different modernity (SA, 75).²⁶ But Taylor’s remarks are instructive in light of our reading of his relationship to Illich, a relationship that shares the same ambivalence that characterizes his account of modernity.

Taylor says he does not want to blunt Illich’s radical message, but he does seem to soften its blow when he reads it in terms of political correctness and a reminder not “to become totally invested in the code, even the best code of a peace-loving, egalitarian, liberalism” (SA, 743). It is a helpful reminder, but presumably one that any Christian would have resources to affirm. What is less evident in Taylor’s story is Illich’s concern that the projects of the secular state, itself an expression of the immanent order, are bound up with exclusive humanism. For Illich, the political institutionalization of charity is a sinful witness to a modern “brutal form of earnestness” (RNF, 58). Illich tells a story from best to worst; Taylor’s ambivalence is reflected in his perplexity at “the century both of Auschwitz and Hiroshima and of Amnesty International and Médecins sans Frontières.”²⁷ It would be too strong to suggest that Illich would not here see a difference, but it would be hard to imagine him serving on the Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences.

Reading Illich in this way might allow further dialogue between Taylor's concluding remarks about Radical Orthodoxy and his own political commitments to rights culture, democracy, and the rule of law. In his reading of Taylor and Illich, Milbank asks a very helpful question: "How do we acknowledge the truth of Illich's insights, while still saluting the uniquely practical bent of Latin Christianity? How do we allow that some procedure and institutionalization is required without destroying the interpersonal?"²⁸ If Taylor were to take up this question, he would contribute to ongoing debates within Catholic social thought, including arguments about the political implications of Catholic personalism between followers of Jacques Maritain and Dorothy Day. In the spirit of the parable, addressing this problem would put flesh on Taylor's resistance to hypertranscendence and hyperimmanence.

Taylor appears to agree with Milbank that we need to find ways to get beyond a stark choice between the spontaneity of immediate encounter and practices of charity in complex social wholes. Like Taylor and Illich, Catholic encyclicals of the early twenty-first century invoke agape as the heart of the Church's social doctrine and offer extensive remarks on the parable of the Good Samaritan as both universal and concrete. But they offer a more positive account of what Pope Benedict XVI calls the "institutional path of charity" that is "no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly outside the institutional mediation of the polis."²⁹ Sounding more like Milbank than Taylor, however, Benedict writes that "*only in charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith*, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value."³⁰ Perhaps, in the end, rather than evidence of a lack of theological courage, Taylor's ambivalence is an expression of courage to hope, beyond these dichotomous options, for a possibility not yet imaginable.

NOTES

This essay is a contribution to an interdisciplinary project on The Pursuit of Happiness, supported by the Center for Study of Law and Religion at Emory University and by the John Templeton Foundation.

1. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 325. Hereafter abbreviated as SA.
2. Charles Taylor, "Afterword Apologia pro Libro suo," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, eds. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 300.
3. George Marsden, "Matteo Ricci and Prodigal Culture," in Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture, with Responses by William Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain*, ed. James L. Heft (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 85. For a systematic theological reading of modernity as prodigal, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 275–88.
4. Marsden, "Matteo Ricci," 84.
5. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), x.
6. Taylor, *Catholic Modernity?*, 16.
7. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 518.
8. Marsden, "Matteo Ricci," 85.
9. *Ibid.*, 88. For similar criticism from a nontheological perspective, see Quentin Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Reflections on Charles Taylor's Diagnosis," in *The Politics of Postmodernity*, ed. James Good and Irving Velody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49–60.
10. On the usefulness and danger of rhetorical excess, see Jeffrey Stout, "The Spirit of Democracy and the Rhetoric of Excess," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 35, no. 1 (2007): 3–21. Taylor's rhetoric of qualification is connected to, but can be distinguished from, what Stephen K. White describes as Taylor's "weak ontology." See Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
11. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, xi.
12. For a helpful account of Taylor's "religious turn," see Ruth Abbey, "Turning or Spinning? Charles Taylor's Catholicism: A Reply to Ian Fraser," *Contemporary Political Theory* 5 (2006): 163–75.
13. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 85.
14. See Taylor's preface to David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as Told to David Cayley* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 2005), ix. Hereafter abbreviated as RNF.
15. Taylor's soteriology is radically incarnational: "Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness . . . the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone" (Taylor, *Catholic Modernity?*, 14). It seems, for Taylor, the Incarnation is the significant content of atonement rather than the crucifixion.
16. On patristic readings, see Riemer Roukema, "The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity," *Vigilae Christianae* 58 (2004): 56–74.

17. References to the parable as an illustration of universal concern abound in secular moral and political philosophy. For a recent example, see Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 170–73. Sen retains the modern preoccupation with the “classificatory question” but argues that universalism is secondary to the primary point that “the story as told by Jesus is a reasoned rejection of the idea of a fixed neighborhood” (171). Notable contemporary invocations of the parable in debates about obligation and supererogation can be found in the writings of R. M. Hare, John Rawls, and Judith Jarvis Thomson. For classical and modern readings in relation to contemporary debates about global poverty, see Eric Gregory, “Agape and Special Relations in a Global Economy: Theological Sources,” in *Global Neighbors: Christian Faith and Moral Obligation in Today’s Economy*, ed. Douglas A. Hicks and Mark Valeri (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 16–42.

18. See Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), esp. 157–87.

19. On the connections between the parable of the Good Samaritan and the Hebrew Bible (especially 2 Chron. 28: 5–15), see Craig A. Evans, “Luke’s Good Samaritan and the Chronicler’s Good Samaritans,” in *Biblical Interpretation in Early Christian Gospels, Volume 3: The Gospel of Luke*, ed. Thomas Hatina (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2010), 32–42.

20. For political readings of the parable, see Richard Owen Griffiths, “The Politics of the Good Samaritan,” *Political Theology* 1 (November 1999): 85–114.

21. For an alternative interpretation of these developments, see Jennifer A. Herdt, “The Endless Construction of Charity: On Milbank’s Critique of Political Economy,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 301–24. Herdt’s criticisms of Milbank apply to Taylor to the extent that he adopts parts of Milbank’s story.

22. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), especially 67–99.

23. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 394–95.

24. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 263.

25. Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 133.

26. For Milbank’s vision of an ecumenical Protestantism that develops key themes in patristic and medieval theology, see John Milbank, “Alternative Protestantism: Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition,” in *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition*, ed. James K. A. Smith and James H. Olthius (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 25–41.

27. Taylor, *Catholic Modernity?*, 37.

28. John Milbank, “A Closer Walk on the Wild Side,” in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 80.

29. Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth: Caritas in Veritate* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 7; emphasis added.

30. *Ibid.*, 9.

