



A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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Abstract

In this article I argue that Rahner's notion of the Supernatural Existential serves to complement and more concretely illustrate Taylor's at-times tacit, if conflicted, advocacy for some sort of human characteristic that seeks, desires, or is otherwise oriented toward something 'beyond human flourishing.' By engaging Rahner's theological anthropology with Taylor's thought in 'A Secular Age,' I show how Taylor's immanent and transcendent divide presupposes an overly cognitive framework that relies extensively on human agency, thematic reflection, and the necessary intellectualization of human experience. As such, Taylor only ever engages in a secondary-level or a posteriori reflection on belief and unbelief, thereby (perhaps unwittingly) precluding the possibility of considering the a priori 'condition' for his proposed 'conditions for belief or unbelief,' otherwise known as 'secularity 3.' In uncovering the secondary-level cognitive conditions for categorical belief and unbelief today, helps shed new light on the relevance and value of Rahner's project. Furthermore, I suggest that both Rahner and Taylor, although maybe not immediately recognizable, actually share similar concerns that initially launched their respective projects. Read together, Rahner and Taylor offer a fuller treatment of both the human condition and the social circumstances of this age.

Keywords

Karl Rahner, Charles Taylor, secularity, supernatural existential, secular age

Central to Charles Taylor's narrative of the emergence of secularity and the current social landscape, which he identifies, in part, as the condition for the choice between belief and unbelief, stands his understanding of the relationship between immanence and transcendence.¹

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

Taylor suggests that part of the shift concurrent with the rise of secularity is the ‘disenchantment of the world’ such that human flourishing and ‘fullness’ beyond that are sought immanently and no longer considered from an external, transcendent horizon.² Yet, throughout his text, but especially in his concluding chapter, Taylor advocates for a persistent sense of our perennial human quest for ‘something more’ to existence that is not adequately met by the ‘present immanent orders of psychological or moral self-understanding.’³ In this essay I argue that Karl Rahner’s notion of the supernatural existential serves to complement and more concretely illustrate Taylor’s at-times tacit, if conflicted, advocacy for some sort of human characteristic that seeks, desires, or is otherwise oriented toward something ‘beyond human flourishing.’ By engaging Rahner’s theological anthropology with Taylor’s thought in *A Secular Age*, I will also show how Taylor’s immanent and transcendent divide presupposes an overly cognitive framework that relies extensively on human agency, thematic reflection, and the necessary intellectualization of human experience. As such, I claim that Taylor only ever engages in a second-order or a *posteriori* reflection on belief and unbelief, thereby, perhaps unwittingly, precluding the possibility of considering the *a priori* ‘condition’ for his proposed conditions for the choice between belief and unbelief, otherwise known as ‘secularity 3.’⁴

The structure of this paper is organized in two parts with a conclusion. First, I will examine Charles Taylor’s understanding of immanence and transcendence as it is presented in *A Secular Age*, paying particular attention to the rigidity of the divide he maintains between the two spheres. Additionally, in this section I will offer a close reading of Taylor’s use of ‘fullness’ and argue that he implicitly affirms the existence of an anthropological constant. Second, I will present Karl Rahner’s notion of the supernatural existential as a theological response to Taylor’s immanent and transcendent divide. Following an explication of this theological concept, I will highlight the ways in which I see the work of Rahner and Taylor as complementary and demonstrate how the supernatural existential serves as both a theological supplement and a challenge to Taylor’s secularity narrative. In conclusion, I argue that read together, Rahner and Taylor

² This theme is featured throughout Taylor’s text, but is most compactly introduced in *A Secular Age*, pp. 4–20. For a more recent comprehensive reflection by the author on this theme also see Charles Taylor, ‘Disenchantment-Reenchantment,’ in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 287–302.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 744.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 2–4; and Charles Taylor, ‘What Does Secularism Mean?’ in *Dilemmas and Connections*, pp. 303–25, which was also published in a slightly different form as ‘Western Secularity,’ in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 31–53.

offer a fuller treatment of both the human condition and the social circumstances of this age than each thinker provides independently.

‘Fullness,’ Immanence and Transcendence in *A Secular Age*

Early in the introduction to *A Secular Age* Taylor highlights what he terms a ‘central facet’ of his project. It is a description of the landmark shift in the social landscape that serves as one of the foundational presuppositions of Taylor’s theory of secularity and, subsequently in his effort to trace the historical underpinnings of this development, becomes the précis of his particular narrative. Taylor explains: ‘We have moved from a world in which the place of fullness was understood as unproblematically outside or “beyond” human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which place it (in a wide range of different ways) “within” human life.’⁵ Taylor will use this notion of fullness as a religious and, at times, more-specifically ethical standard by which to adjudicate the conditions for belief and unbelief in both the ‘social imaginary’⁶ of society and in the affective religious expression of individuals in a secular age. Fullness, Taylor explains, has become his ‘shorthand term here for the condition we aspire to,’ but which falls short of any straightforward and apodictic definition.⁷ While we can appreciate the humility with which Taylor presents the term, its usage does become a helpful marker in examining the social and individual shifts in belief posited throughout the text, even if it remains somewhat ambiguous.

Throughout Taylor’s project we come to understand that fullness represents something of the human *telos* that moves beyond the quotidian experiences of life including, as Taylor states early on, ordinary striving toward human flourishing.⁸ Taylor describes what he understands fullness to mean early in *A Secular Age*: ‘Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth

⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 15.

⁶ For more on Taylor’s term ‘social imaginary’ (an adaptation inspired by the work of Benedict Anderson), see Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). Major selections from this book were subsequently incorporated into *A Secular Age*, see pages 159–218 and *passim*.

⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 780 n8.

⁸ This notion of human flourishing is closely aligned with Taylor’s description of modern secular humanism in *A Secular Age*. Taylor explains: ‘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’ (p. 18).

while, more admirable, more what it should be.’⁹ This definition is significant because it allows us to ostensibly narrow the domain or, to use Taylor’s term, ‘place’ where modern women and men seek such fullness.¹⁰ Emphasis here should be placed on ‘seek,’ because Taylor’s account of this dimension of human striving is understood according to his theory of secularity as a the result of a cognitive act or decision. This is precisely what distinguishes our age from that of previous epochs: with the advent of widespread exclusive humanism as a viable option among others, no longer does one necessarily need to pursue religious paths toward this fullness in terms of a transcendent order. In fact, one does not even need to pursue this fullness within the confines of what Taylor calls the ‘immanent frame,’ a space characterized by a this-worldly conceptual structure, but one could conceivably choose only to seek basic human flourishing if he or she so chose.¹¹

To obtain a better grasp of the significance of these claims, we must examine how Taylor understands immanence and transcendence within this argument. What we will come to see is the rigidity with which Taylor divides immanence and transcendence, a move necessitated by the thesis he advances in *A Secular Age* to sustain the claim that the novelty we experience in our current age and according to the contemporary North-Atlantic social imaginary is one of a *de facto* immanent frame. Such an advocacy on Taylor’s part leads us to consider the ways in which he tacitly argues in *A Secular Age* that the quest for fullness is, ultimately, a human universal.

The Immanent and Transcendent Divide

As Eoin Cassidy has noted, Taylor’s use of immanence and transcendence serves as a foundational template for ‘distinguishing the religious believer from the exclusive/atheist humanist.’¹² The usage denotes a particular, personal, and rational disposition or cognitive affirmation or denial of something more than a this-worldly reality. Furthermore, the use of immanence and transcendence as disjunctive categories extends from individual taxonomical application in *A Secular Age* to serve as demarcating descriptors of meta-sociological shifts. Throughout the text Taylor describes his understanding of the difference between the conditions for belief and unbelief around

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 5. He also reiterates this definition on p. 677.

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 6 and *passim*.

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 539–66.

¹² Eoin Cassidy, “‘Transcending Human Flourishing’: Is there a Need for a Subtler Language?” in *The Taylor Effect: Responding to a Secular Age*, ed. Ian Leask et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 32.

the year 1500 CE (and before) and 2000 CE (and after) within the grammatological framework of immanence and transcendence. The distinction is helpful for us to identify the terminological usage in Taylor's project and the broader implications contained therein.

For Taylor, transcendence is constituted, at least in part, by those factors that contribute to and populate the pre-secular 'enchanted' world.¹³ Described occasionally as 'naïve religious faith' (in an admittedly non-pejorative sense), the so-called social imaginary of an earlier time took for granted the veracity of a transcendent reality. In such a time and according to such a social imaginary, the quest for fullness or 'richness' (as Taylor occasionally uses the terms synonymously) presupposed an 'other-worldly' order of meaning. Taylor explains: 'Thus in the enchanted world, charged things can impose meanings, and bring about physical outcomes proportionate to their meanings... the clear boundary between mind and world which we mark was much hazier in this earlier understanding.'¹⁴ In opposition to the post-Enlightenment subjective starting point, wherein meaning is categorically ascribed to that which is 'outside' (the mind, oneself, etc.), the enchanted-world starting point presumes that 'meaning is already there in the object/agent' and that 'it is there quite independently of us; it would be there even if we didn't exist.'¹⁵ There are epistemological implications contained in this worldview, namely, that one's identity and outlook are influenced by exterior phenomena such that one's understanding of 'the self' is, as Taylor puts it, 'porous' and open to sources of influence and meaning from without.¹⁶

¹³ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 25–6 and *passim*. For more on the theme of 'enchantment' and the emergence of the secular, see Charles Taylor, 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment,' in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, pp. 287–302; Taylor, 'Western Secularity,' in *Rethinking Secularism*, pp. 31–53; James K. A. Smith, 'Secularity, Globalization, and the Re-enchantment of the World,' in *After Modernity? Secularity, Globalization, and The Re-enchantment of the World*, ed. James K. A. Smith (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), pp. 3–16; Bilgrami, 'What is Enchantment?' in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 145–65; Jonathan Sheehan, 'When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age,' in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 217–42; Holmer Steinfath, 'Subtraktionsgeschichten und Transzendenz. Zum Status der »modernen moralischen Ordnung«,' in *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, ed. Michael Kühnlein und Matthias Lutz-Bachmann (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011), pp. 599–622; Stanely Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*," *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 349–62; and Kiernan Flanagan, 'A Secular Age: An Exercise in Breach-Mending,' *New Blackfriars* 91 (2010), 699–721.

¹⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 35.

¹⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 33.

¹⁶ Drawing on the work of Stanley Tambiah, Taylor distinguishes one's 'orientation to our cosmos' (p. 781 n3) in terms of the 'porous' and 'buffered' selves as discussed here and below. For Taylor's most sustained reflection on the 'porous self,' see *A Secular Age*, pp. 35–43.

Elsewhere Taylor elaborates on what he means by transcendence according to this historical and sociological framework.

What I mean is something more like: the point of things isn't exhausted by life, the fullness of life, even the goodness of life. This is not meant to be just a repudiation of egotism, the idea that the fullness of my life (and perhaps those of people I love) should be my only concern. Let us agree with John Stuart Mill that a full life must involve striving for the benefit of humankind. Then acknowledging the transcendent means seeing a point beyond that.¹⁷

This acknowledgement of and openness to the transcendent is understood to be axiomatic of an earlier era, during the pre-secular. With the emergence of secularity, the conditions for this presupposition of other-worldly sources of meaning and the possibility of being affected by something from without begins to shift such that the locus of fullness is no longer seen in a transcendent reality, but in a closed or immanent frame.

Taylor presents immanence in opposition of transcendence. While at various points Taylor appears to qualify his theory of the 'immanent frame' with the discussion of one's openness or closed stance toward this 'this-worldly order,' he asserts that the shift to our current secular age has ushered in a self-sufficient order that constitutes the world of meaning and subsequently shapes our collective political, economic, and scientific practices.¹⁸ Concurrently, what was once a porous self, opened to sources of influence and meaning from without has become a 'buffered self,' such that one's surroundings, and the cosmos more broadly, have now come to be understood as disenchanted. 'In general, going against God was not an option in the enchanted world. That is one way the change to the buffered self has impinged. It removes a tremendous obstacle to unbelief.'¹⁹ Unbelief is no longer impossible, or minimally taboo, but a widespread experience and a default grounding in a secular age.

Taylor argues that part of what contributed to this condition was the increased availability of 'exclusive humanism' as a legitimized mode and worldview. This new default mode, which is characterized by 'disengagement from cosmos and God,' is seen as 'an opportunity for self-control or self-direction.'²⁰ Whereas meaning was located in the transcendent according to the axiomatic belief within the context of the enchanted world, one is able now to disengage from 'whatever is beyond the boundary' of the immanent realm of

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, 'A Catholic Modernity?' in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays*, p. 173.

¹⁸ See Charles Taylor, 'Challenging Issues about the Secular Age,' *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), p. 412.

¹⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 41.

²⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 39–41.

existence.²¹ Accordingly, we retreat into the identity-making world of our own buffered selves in a disenchanted world, no longer presupposing the reality of anything beyond (*transcending*) the immanent frame.

The process of disenchantment is the disappearance of this world [of spirits, demons, and moral forces], and the substitution of what we live today: a world in which the only locus of thoughts, feelings, and spiritual élan is what we call minds; the only minds in the cosmos are those of humans (*grosso modo*, with apologies to possible Martians or extraterrestrials); and minds are bounded, so that these thoughts, feelings, and so forth are situated 'within' them.²²

This is an order of existence that does not necessitate anything beyond itself to provide meaning or sense.²³ Additionally, Taylor argues that this notion of the emergence (and persistence) of a default social imaginary of the immanent frame is 'common to *all of us* in the modern West.'²⁴

Taylor does not preclude the possibility that women and men in a secular age could live in a manner closely resembling the practices, traditions, or even beliefs of the enchanted world. Rather, Taylor strongly argues two interrelated points: (a) this is indeed a choice, whereas, he asserts, in the pre-secular epochs such a choice would have been unthinkable (outside the rare experience of some exceptional 'elites'); and (b) the shift to a buffered self is irreversible such that, whether one chooses to believe in a transcendent reality or not (which is the summary definition of his 'Secularity 3'), 'What changes is our way of being in, experiencing the world.'²⁵ As we will see below, this claim borders on the blurring of epistemic shifts and concerns with those of a more existential or ontological variety. While Taylor makes a convincing argument that the popular and likely individual perception of one's relationship to the world and others has shifted (that which constitutes the 'experience' of the world cited above), to posit that the *being in the world* of women and men has shifted is quite another claim, one that does not, as we will see below, stand in line with Taylor's tacitly held position of a universal dimension of the human person oriented toward fullness. Nevertheless, the divide between the immanent and transcendent stands as a constitutive element of Taylor's thesis. The shift Taylor identifies toward an immanent frame, in which one's disposition can be either 'open' (sense of highest good is informed theologically or by

²¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 38.

²² Taylor, 'Disenchantment-Reenchantment,' p. 288.

²³ This is strongly emphasized in Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 543 and p. 832 n7.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 543. Emphasis added.

²⁵ Taylor, 'Challenging Issues about the Secular Age,' p. 415.

religious practices) or ‘closed’ (sense of highest good concomitant with materialistic outlook), ostensibly restricts the experiential domain of fullness to the present, this-worldly order.

The presence of something beyond (what we call today) the ‘natural’ is more palpable and immediate, one might say, physical, in an enchanted age . . . once we set aside the illusion which identifies religion and enchantment, what we have to retain from this whole movement is a certain direction of transformation in religious life itself. We have moved from an era in which religious life was more ‘embodied,’ where the presence of the sacred could be enacted in ritual, or seen, felt, touched, walked towards (in pilgrimage); into one which is more ‘in the mind,’ where the link with God passes more through our endorsing contested interpretations – for instance, of our political identity as religiously defined, or of God as the authority and moral source underpinning our ethical life.²⁶

Here again we see the role of the immanent and transcendent divide in Taylor’s presentation. There has been an internalization of meaning-making within the context of the immanent frame, such that any discursive consideration of God or religion is done so from a cognitive starting point rather than affecting the individual from without as it would have in a world characterized by axiomatic affirmation of a transcendent reality. For, as Taylor readily asserts, ‘we have undergone a change in our condition, involving both an alteration of the structures we live within, and our way of imagining these structures.’²⁷ This transformation raises some questions about what people seek concerning meaning or fullness in a secular age and where precisely they are able to find it. With at least a rudimentary appreciation for Taylor’s understanding of immanence and transcendence, we can proceed to briefly examine how this shift in the condition for belief or unbelief concurrent with the emergence of the secular relates to the human search for meaning or ‘the aspiration to wholeness’²⁸ within the immanent frame.

The Tacit Admittance of an Anthropological Constant

Despite the claim that a radical transformation in the way that people view the world, understand themselves, and seek or produce meaning has occurred in the ‘North Atlantic world,’ there remains an unaddressed tension present in Taylor’s account of the emergence of secularity and the disillusion of the transcendent. This tension, perhaps alternatively described as a ‘cross pressure’ (to use Taylor’s

²⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 554.

²⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 594.

²⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 618.

own phrase in an analogous way here), exists in Taylor's narrative between the implications of a contemporary worldview formed by the immanent frame or 'within the natural-human domain'²⁹ and the tacit admittance of an anthropological constant that accounts for something resembling an *a priori* condition for fullness (whatever its particular manifestation).³⁰ Throughout his text, Taylor makes passing references to something that he most explicitly revealed in an article published three years after *A Secular Age*; namely, that 'this distinction [fullness] and its analogues are a human universal.'³¹ This tension or cross pressure also exists in the struggle Taylor exhibits in advancing a descriptive narrative of the emergence of secularity, while in fact presenting a more normative account of a cognitive-based shift in the conditions for belief and unbelief. Whereas Taylor appears to want an overarching explanation for the transformation of the 'social imaginary' in the 'North Atlantic world,' his theory only addresses the *choice* or *decision* one makes regarding beliefs, practices, and worldviews. Insofar as this is his point, he makes a compelling argument for the long history of influence and change that has resulted in our current social, cultural, and religious milieu. However, if his point is to provide, as he claims at the end of *A Secular Age* and in the essay, 'Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,' a *master narrative* of secularity and our current social imaginary, then he neglects to take into adequate consideration the *condition* for the condition for belief or unbelief.³² This becomes clear in the way that Taylor alludes to his personal conviction that there is some sort of anthropological characteristic or constant that cannot be lost or dismissed, despite the cognitive decision of an individual to reject the quest for fullness in accord with his or her personal agency.

Some of these references in *A Secular Age* are found throughout portions of his earlier historical narrative, but they appear most explicitly and regularly in the latter part of the text. For example, immediately after reiterating his longstanding diagnosis of the secular

²⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 677.

³⁰ While the term 'anthropological constant' closely resembles the theory advanced by the theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, its usage here is not meant to be understood in exactly the same way. Rather, an anthropological constant as applied to Taylor's work is intended to be descriptive of the proposed *a priori*, universal characteristic that is tacitly advocated in Taylor's theory of the human openness to or drive toward 'fullness' (in whatever manifestation). For more on Schillebeeckx's view, see *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1980), pp. 731–43.

³¹ Taylor, 'Challenging Issues about the Secular Age,' p. 416. Intimations of this universal dimension are also identified in the earlier work of Charles Taylor according to Thomas Rentsch, *Gott* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2005), p. 65: 'Charles Taylor spricht von einem ebenfalls konstitutiven, unthematischen Hintergrund des Erkennens und Erfahrens.'

³² Charles Taylor, 'Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,' in *Varieties of the Secular in a Secular Age*, pp. 300–3.

age as largely conditioned by the choice, offered by the immanent frame, ‘whether or not to believe in some transcendent source or power,’ he admits:

I believe that there is no escaping some version of what I called in an earlier discussion ‘fullness;’ for any liveable understanding of human life, there must be some way in which this life looks good, whole, proper, really being lived as it should. The utter absence of some such would leave us in abject, unbearable despair. So it’s not that unbelief shuns Christian ideas of fullness for nothing at all; it has its own versions.³³

Whether that fullness is defined in terms of a sovereign or creator God or in some other way, there is in Taylor’s account some consistent *telos* toward which all of humanity is oriented. The apparent object of this orientation is described as fullness, but the condition for that orientation goes unaddressed in any explicit form. And, as Stephen Costello has asserted, fullness ‘explicitly relates us to the transcendent, however that is conceived.’³⁴

To some extent, Taylor has acknowledged this tension in his writing. One of the clearest concessions to critiques of his strong distinction between the immanent and the transcendent appears in a response to critiques of *A Secular Age* raised by Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles.³⁵ Although Taylor validates their critical assessment of his rigid uses of immanence and transcendence, he responds with an explanation for why he sees those terms as indispensable.³⁶ Nevertheless, more telling than his defense of the indispensability of immanence and transcendence is his acquiescence to their concern about the absolute distinction between the two terms. In other words, even while elsewhere Taylor argues for a stricter demarcation of immanence and transcendence, the natural and the supernatural,³⁷ he nevertheless appears open to the possibility that such a rigid divide is in need of further evaluation and possible overcoming.

³³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 600.

³⁴ Stephen Costello, ‘Beyond Flourishing: “Fullness” and “Conversion” in Taylor and Lonergan,’ in *The Taylor Effect: Responding to a Secular Age*, p. 40.

³⁵ Taylor, ‘Challenging Issues about the Secular Age,’ pp. 410–11.

³⁶ Taylor writes: ‘So the distinction is indispensable, because without it we couldn’t understand our dominant social imaginary, and hence the world it helps constitute. And this would make it difficult to understand some of the ways in which the issues of belief and unbelief are inevitably posed for us, whether there is something “beyond” this order or not, whether it exhausts reality or not’ (p. 412).

³⁷ Taylor, ‘Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,’ p. 304.

Toward a Theological Response

It is perhaps no mere coincidence that Taylor concludes *A Secular Age* positing, as his most preferred possibility, something of a return to religion, especially in the form of Christianity.³⁸ Reading this move as a heuristic for further engagement with his project, I believe that Taylor's narrative theory of secularity is compelling as a second-order reflection. Reliant as it is on cognitive decision-making and the conditions for such a choice between belief and unbelief, forms of religious expression or exclusive humanism, and so forth, Taylor's account neglects a more foundational or *a priori* consideration of what provides the possibility of or grounds the universal human desire for fullness. This might explain why he never explicitly expresses such a view in *A Secular Age*. It is my conviction that a theological response provides the first-order reflection necessary to sustain Taylor's thesis, thereby simultaneously broadening his argument through the complementary identification of a grounding principle for a universal characteristic of human openness toward fullness and highlighting the privative quality of his project given the overtly rational and cognitive emphasis of his argument.³⁹ As D. Stephen Long has expressed, Taylor's project seems primed for theological engagement. 'Taylor's theological significance is just that – he invites us in and even listens to what we have to say, thinking it not only has to do with some private realm of faith, but also with how to reason in a secular age.'⁴⁰ In what follows, I will present Karl Rahner's supernatural existential

³⁸ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 767–72. Also see Tobias Braune-Krickau, 'Charles Taylors religionsphilosophische Rehabilitierung der christlichen Religion in *Ein säkulares Zeitalter*,' *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 53 (2011), pp. 357–73.

³⁹ Although an explicit engagement of Taylor's project with Rahner's thought has not previously been attempted, others have nonetheless engaged Taylor's project in *A Secular Age* from a theological or philosophy-of-religion vantage point; some examples include: Fergus Kerr, 'How Much Can a Philosopher Do?' *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 321–36; Graham Ward, 'History, Belief and Imagination in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*,' *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 337–48; Gregory Baum, 'The Response of a Theologian to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*,' *Modern Theology* 26 (2010), pp. 363–81; Markus Knapp, 'Gott in säkularer Gesellschaft. Zum Gottesverständnis in Charles Taylors Philosophie der Religion,' in *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, pp. 650–80; Karl Kardinal Lehmann, 'Entsteht aus dem verfälschten Christentum die Moderne? Zur Begegnung von Charles Taylor und Ivan Illich,' in *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, pp. 327–49; Thomas Rentsch, 'Wie ist Transzendenz zu denken? Kritische Thesen zu Charles Taylors Säkularisierungskonzept,' in *Unerfüllte Moderne? Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor*, pp. 573–98; John Milbank, 'A Closer Walk on the Wild Side,' in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 54–82; and D. Stephen Long, 'How To Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of *A Secular Age*,' *Pro Ecclesia* 18 (2009), 93–107.

⁴⁰ Long, 'How To Read Charles Taylor,' p. 107.

as a formidable resource for engaging Taylor's secularization theory in this twofold, complementing, and constructively critical way.

Rahner's Supernatural Existential as Theological Response

Counted as one of the most creative elements of Rahner's theology, the supernatural existential (*das übernatürliche Existential*) is central to his theological project.⁴¹ A doctrine that arises organically from both his assertion that the human person (*Dasein*) is spirit (*Geist*) and that this spirit is always already historically situated in the world, the supernatural existential seeks to conceptualize and articulate the *a priori* graced-experience of being human that is intrinsic and constitutive.⁴² While it is indeed, by virtue of being an *existential*, a dimension of the whole human person, Rahner is clear that this existential is not simply a natural element of human existence, but instead the gratuitous gift of God.⁴³ John Galvin summarizes this notion well: 'the divine offer of self-communication forms a constant dimension of human existence, always present, yet not part of human nature as such, affecting the whole of our being and directing us toward unsurpassable nearness to the triune God of grace and eternal life.'⁴⁴ We can understand this element of human existence

⁴¹ While Rahner's earlier work is often cited (as it is in notes below) as the foundational source for his development of the supernatural existential, one scholar has recently advocated for a broader reading of Rahner's written corpus to better contextualize and understand what he means by this concept. See David Coffey, 'The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential,' *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), pp. 95–118. In contrast to Coffey, Karen Kilby has sought to emphasize the incongruities between the earlier versions of Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential and the later, see her *Karl Rahner: Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 49–69.

⁴² See Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994); and Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word: Laying the Foundation for a Philosophy of Religion*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Continuum, 1994).

⁴³ John Galvin, 'The Invitation of Grace,' in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner's Theology*, ed. Leo O'Donovan (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1995), p. 72. Rahner emphasizes this gratuity in several places, for example see Karl Rahner, 'Selbstmitteilung Gottes,' in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, 2nd ed., 14 vols. (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1957–1965), p. 9:627; Karl Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,' in *Theological Investigations*, vol. I, trans. Cornelius Ernst (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), pp. 297–317; Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*, trans. Dinah Wharton (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), pp. 114–49; Karl Rahner, 'The Experience of Self and Experience of God,' in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VIII, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), pp. 122–32; Karl Rahner, 'Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,' in *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 231–49; and Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William Dych (New York: Crossroad, 2002), pp. 116–37 and *passim*.

⁴⁴ Galvin, 'The Invitation of Grace,' p. 72.

as the constant, *a priori* offer of grace that is present even prior to our response to God's own self-communication. Additionally, the supernatural existential is universal, meaning that it does not apply only to a particular group or sect of believers. This is succinctly summarized in Rahner's *Hearer of the Word*, when he wrote: 'To be human is to be an absolute openness for being, or, to say it in one word, the human person is spirit. The transcendence toward being as such constitutes the basic makeup of human beings.'⁴⁵ Such a shift in the understanding of grace from previously held understandings offers a new space for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, perhaps especially in a pluralistic and secular age, for, as Stephen Duffy explains, 'the grace of God's self-offer is not the exclusive privilege of Christians.'⁴⁶ This broadens the applicability of the condition of the possibility for an openness or potential receptivity of the divine, of grace, of what Taylor identifies as fullness.

The supernatural existential is Rahner's answer to the problem of extrinsicism in previous theological systems and the contemporary proposals of the *nouvelle theologie* theologians.⁴⁷ In other words, while it is generally held that humanity has a supernatural *telos*, or a goal found in supernatural finality in grace and glory, the means to that end has often been explained in such a way as to suggest something resembling an external structure or 'addition' to human nature. Rahner finds this to be puzzling. If God has ordained that human finality be supernatural, why would its means remain foreign to human nature from the start? Rahner rejects this previously held view for one that has serious ontological consequences.

Instead of some external structure foreign to human nature, Rahner asserts that God's gift of self-communication and grace is present from the very beginning, and remains part of *who* or *what* each human is.⁴⁸ Or, put another way, 'man [*sic*] is the event of God's absolute self

⁴⁵ Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, p. 41.

⁴⁶ Stephen Duffy, 'Experience of Grace,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, eds. Declan Marmion and Mary Hines (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 46.

⁴⁷ See Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,' pp. 297–317; Duffy, 'Experience of Grace,' pp. 49–52; and George Vass, *The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System: Understanding Karl Rahner Volume Two* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985), pp. 59–64. Also, see Patrick Burke, *Reinterpreting Rahner: A Critical Study of His Major Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), pp. 56–60. It is worth mentioning that Kilby's argument in emphasizing the discontinuity between the earlier versions of the supernatural existential and the later relies, in part, on the revisions made to Rahner's original essay concerning extrinsicism and *nouvelle theologie* in *Orientierung* and its later publication in *Theological Investigations* as 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace.' To examine the original text, see Karl Rahner, 'Eine Antwort (Ein Weg zur Bestimmung der Verhältnisse von Natur und Gnade),' *Orientierung* 14 (1950), pp. 141–45.

⁴⁸ Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship Between Nature and Grace,' pp. 300–2.

communication.’⁴⁹ The gratuitous act of God’s self-communication reflects a contingent, loving form of divine intention. There is also a primordial relationship present between God and humanity. Duffy explains that, ‘Even in the absence of reflexive awareness of the existential, humans remain, nonetheless, always graced by an inner dynamism thrusting toward the God who calls and gives God’s self.’⁵⁰ Rahner describes this *a priori* self-communication of God as a clearly ontological statement, not tied down to the categorical or objective realm of conceptualization. Instead, it is precisely our ability to be un-thematically aware of God’s self-communication that is subsumed in the notion of the supernatural existential. The supernatural existential is the condition of the possibility for any subsequent thematic or categorical expression of God’s self-communication. Rahner is keen to note that it is not as though revelation is something exterior to us, something placed from ‘without.’ Instead, revelation, as it is commonly used, is the categorical expression of a reality *within* (the absolutely gratuitous and donative quality of God’s self-disclosure), which is the foundation or ground of humanity’s transcendental experience.⁵¹

However, the supernatural existential as universal and constitutive of the human person is not simply the ground of one’s *experience of transcendence* (especially, but not limited to the encounter with Absolute Mystery), but instead is the very foundation or grounding for *all* experience, including the categorical. Duffy’s clear summary of this point is worth quoting at some length:

Because the initial opening and disposition of human transcendence to God’s self-communicating presence is already revelation, implying the possibility of a response in faith, Rahner does not view revelation as restricted to Israel or the Christ event, but as co-extensive with history’s sweep. Where humanity is, there is grace, hence transcendental revelation. God addresses all in self-communicating love. No purely natural order has ever existed. All human acts, even those appearing secular, are religious, for, ultimately, all are decisions to pursue or spurn the truth and authentic good, the God who calls. A special or categorical revelation in history is required, however, for knowledge not only of the fact but of the very possibility of graced existence. Conversely, *transcendental revelation is the condition for the possibility of a response to categorical revelation.*⁵²

⁴⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 126.

⁵⁰ Duffy, ‘Experience of Grace,’ p. 47.

⁵¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 127.

⁵² Duffy, ‘Experience of Grace,’ p. 47. Emphasis added. Also see Karl Rahner, ‘Atheism and Explicit Christianity,’ in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 145–64.

What Rahner intends is not a bifurcation or rigid demarcation between something ‘other-worldly’ or transcendent and ‘this-worldly’ or immanent, but instead he describes the intrinsic openness of all human persons toward the infinite horizon, the absolute mystery, the wholly other or, simply, ‘God,’ as the very grounding for categorical or immanent experience.⁵³ The quotidian experiences of ordinary, this-worldly actions within the ‘immanent frame’ are made possible, according to Rahner, by virtue of the supernatural existential. Rahner, in fact, dismisses explicit religious activity as the singular, or even ordinary, locus for the actualization of this intrinsic supernatural characteristic of humanity. ‘It is rather the experience which is given to every person prior to such reflexive religious activity and decisions, and indeed perhaps in a form and in a conceptuality which seemingly are not religious at all.’⁵⁴ Rahner continues: ‘This means in principle that the original experience of God even in his [*sic*] self-communication can be so universal, so un-thematic and so “un-religious” that it takes place, unnamed but really, wherever we are living out our existence.’⁵⁵

Grace and Fullness: The Complementarity of Rahner and Taylor

Whether one ever thematizes this pre-cognitive, un-thematic transcendental grounding in the form of an explicitly ‘religious’ experience or not, Rahner’s assertion is that this supernatural dimension of human personhood is a universal (an *existential*) and exists in an *a priori* fashion with regard to categorical experience in history. His notion of the supernatural existential is understood in terms of a first-order reflection that offers a theory for the condition or grounding of the condition for the possibility of judgment, free activity, decision-making, and the like. Or, as he explains in *Hearer of the Word*:

As spirits, human persons have always already transcended all these finite realities toward something that differs from all this not only in

⁵³ Anne Carr provides a brief and elucidative summary of this point in her essay, ‘Starting With The Human,’ in *A World of Grace: An Introduction to the Themes and Foundations of Karl Rahner’s Theology*, p. 27: ‘In stressing the intrinsic and reciprocal relationship between transcendence and history, Rahner notes that any aspect of human history may be the carrier of transcendence; the particular experiences, actions, and aspects of our various histories together form the prism through which our transcendent natures are realized.’ Furthermore, Thomas Sheehan offers a helpful term from the study of logic to denote Rahner’s unification of the transcendent and immanent in one, coextensive fabric of history. He describes this reality as Rahner’s ‘hermeneutics of bivalence,’ see *Karl Rahner: The Philosophical Foundations* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1987), pp. 185–6.

⁵⁴ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 132.

⁵⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 132.

degree, but basically and in kind. Human persons are spirits and, as such, we always already stand before the infinite God, who, as infinite, is always more than only the ideal unity of the essentially finite powers of human existence and of the world. We not only acknowledge God in fact, but in the daily drift of our existence we are self-subsistent human persons, capable of judgment and of free activity, only because we continually reach out into a domain that only the fullness of God's absolute being can fill.⁵⁶

In this sense, rather than competing worldviews, we might see that there is an inherent compatibility present in the theories of Rahner and Taylor, provided a careful distinction is made between their two projects. On the one hand, Rahner is offering a transcendental, foundational, and universal theory for the capacity to seek 'something more' and to experience the 'fullness' about which Taylor writes. For Rahner, any exercise of human will in terms of the actualization of freedom and responsibility, no matter how banal or unthinking, is a categorical manifestation or *a posteriori* iteration of this transcendental ground of our existence presupposed in the supernatural existential. On the other hand, Taylor is concerned, as he readily admits from the outset of his project, with the conditions for the particular cognitive act of choosing between belief and unbelief.⁵⁷ Taylor's considerations stay within the realm of the historical, empirical, and cultural in such a way that they, according to the transcendental method of Rahner, always already remain within the categorical sphere, as *a posteriori* or second-order reflections.

According to these distinct, though interrelated domains – the transcendental or *a priori* reflection of Rahner and the categorical or *a posteriori* considerations of Taylor – there is an inherent complementarity that surfaces in the juxtaposition of these two approaches. Neither thinker's respective project offers a comprehensive and conclusive response to questions of universal human longing in terms of experiences of fullness or of grace, nor does each independent theory account for the multivalent and nuanced contours of the contemporary age (whether we name this historical epoch secular or something else). However, together they combine to provide a more-integrated and theologically compelling theory in response to (a) the persistence of the individual and collective experience of longing for 'something more' beyond mere human flourishing and (b) the historical, sociological, and culture shifts that have irrevocably transformed the modern social imaginary within the 'North Atlantic world' such that strictures otherwise limiting one's ability to choose between belief or unbelief (however such a choice is manifested) have been eliminated or at least terminally reduced.

⁵⁶ Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, p. 54.

⁵⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 4 and *passim*.

A Theological Supplement and a Cognitive Critique

With regard to Taylor's tacit maintenance of a universal dimension of human personhood, what he otherwise refers to as the quest or desire or longing for fullness, Rahner's supernatural existential appears to provide both a descriptive and normative theological supplement to Taylor's theory of the emergence of secularity. The various ways by which Taylor describes fullness as the human *telos* in *A Secular Age* and elsewhere closely resembles the supernatural or infinite end of the finite human being expressed in Rahner's theological anthropology. Nowhere does Taylor offer an adequate account for the perennial recurrence of this human longing for fullness, for 'something [that] goes beyond the usual scope of our lives.'⁵⁸ In fact, in one explanatory footnote set to qualify his claim that, 'I hold that religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, what Chantal Milon-Delsol calls a 'désir d'éternité,' remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity,'⁵⁹ Taylor expresses his own *apologia* for, at one and the same time, advancing a persistent longing for fullness while remaining uncertain about what precisely that might be or how it could be defined. He writes:

In using this rather vague expression, I am not trying in any way to *define* some kind of anthropological constant, a *timeless definition* of the human religious sense. I believe this is quite beyond our powers, at least today. The forms and modes of religion are much too varied across history. 'Eternity' is a meaningful term in the religious traditions which have defined Latin Christendom; hence my use of it here. The claim is that religion in this register still has a powerful draw on people today.⁶⁰

Although Taylor is admittedly unwilling or, perhaps, unable to define 'some kind of anthropological constant,' his use of connotative (and, as it were, conative) terms like 'fullness' and 'eternity' nevertheless point toward something universal and beyond the domain of his conceptual confines. From the vantage point of the theologian, particularly through Rahnerian lenses, this is an understandable position, yet it is not totally aporetic.

Rahner's supernatural existential is descriptive with regard to Taylor's seemingly apophatic stance toward defining this longing, desire, inclination, yearning, and so on, for fullness or depth such that this goal is not met by the ordinary pursuit of everyday human flourishing. The rigidity with which Taylor establishes his immanent and

⁵⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 677.

⁵⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 530.

⁶⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 831, n. 48. Emphasis added.

transcendent divide necessitates an either/or approach to locating the source and setting of this fullness, so that it can be found only either within the immanent frame of the empirically human realm or it is 'other-worldly' according to his thick definition of the transcendent.⁶¹ Given his commitment to the irrefutable and commonsensible shift in the social imaginary, such that concomitant with the emergence of secularity there are *only* the bounds of the immanent frame within which to seek this fullness, Taylor is left without an ability to answer the apparent paradox of the absent transcendent and the continuation of human longing for fullness. For example, drawing on the work of Luc Ferry, Taylor contends that in a secular age women and men are able to 'transcend the ordinary,' but only in a way that 'doesn't take us outside the human domain' and in a 'horizontal,' but not 'vertical' sense.⁶² Therefore, the enchanted world of transcendence remains inaccessible and, however modern people wish to 'interpret' their experiences (in religious terms or not), the experiences are nonetheless restricted to the immanent frame.

Rahner's theological framework offers a possible solution and opportunity for expansion. According to Rahner's supernatural existential, and the theological insight and phenomenological presuppositions upon which it is based, there is no divide *per se* between the transcendent and the immanent. Rather, the transcendental constitution of the human person as *capax Dei* and open to the infinite horizon of meaning in an *a priori* fashion is the very condition for the possibility of immanent experience and categorical freedom. As Rahner explains in *Hearer of the Word*, 'To be human is to be spirit as a historical being [*Der Mensch is als geschichtliches Wesen Geist*]. The place of our transcendence is always also a historical place. Thus the place of a possible revelation is always and necessarily also our

⁶¹ Again, it is interesting to note that, among others to whom Taylor alludes in his response, Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles have critiques Taylor's detectably strong division between the immanent and the transcendent in *A Secular Age* (Hauerwas and Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on *A Secular Age*," pp. 352–60). Recognizing that his distinction between the two spheres or realities has been consistently attacked by other critics as well, Taylor at one point laments the use of the terms, but quickly changes his tone to (a) defend 'that the distinction it [the divide between immanence and transcendence] marks is indispensable,' and that (b) because he suggests a 'closed' or 'open' *spin* within the immanent frame, the distinction is not as absolute as some might believe (Taylor, 'Challenging Issues about the Secular Age,' p. 411). I do not find his second point convincing for this binary disposition of 'spin' within the immanent frame is presented in *A Secular Age* as a set within a set, not at all open to his other-worldly sense of the transcendent. Rather, the twofold modal conception of 'spin' within the immanent frame serves as a semantic, or perhaps more-broadly epistemological, qualifier for naming the perception of some experience, upon reflection, of a 'buffered self' within the immanent frame.

⁶² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 677.

history.’⁶³ Put another way, according to Rahner’s theological anthropology, it is because of the supernatural existential that one is able to choose between belief and unbelief, or that a person can choose *anything* at all. This is important for two reasons. First, one is only able to ‘experience the transcendent’ within or through the immanent and categorical actualization of human existence in history. Second, human persons have a choice about whether to accept this truth in a thematized, conceptual, or religious way, or not. Rahner’s framework for the supernatural existential presumes, as he puts it himself, ‘the possibility of evading the experience of transcendence.’⁶⁴ Rahner explains in a rather colloquial and matter-of-fact way:

A person can, of course, shrug his [*sic*] shoulders and ignore this experience of transcendence. He can devote himself to the concrete world, his work, his activity in the categorical realm of time and space, to the service of his system at certain points which are the focal points of reality for him. . . . One goes about his business, he reads, he gets angry, he does his work, he does research, he achieves something, he earns money. And in a final, perhaps unadmitted despair he says to himself that the whole as a whole makes no sense, and that one does well to suppress the question about the meaning of it all and to reject it as an unanswerable and hence meaningless question.⁶⁵

In a very straightforward way, Rahner also accounts for something akin to the ‘exclusive humanism’ that Taylor sees as so significant in the historical narrative of secularity. The theological grounding of human personhood in terms of the supernatural existential does not, according to Rahner, necessitate a universal affective religiosity analogous to that of medieval or pre-secular-age Christendom, or any other confessional or social reality for that matter. Instead, it offers an explanatory description of what Taylor, despite his best efforts, cannot seem to shirk throughout his project: a universal human desire, restlessness, or longing for ‘fullness.’ It is in this sense that Rahner’s supernatural existential is also normative. There is a universal, intrinsic, and inalienable quality to it that is predicated of every human being, without prejudice or exception.

In addition to the supplementary quality of the supernatural existential, Rahner’s thought offers a second type of theological response to Taylor’s project in *A Secular Age* in the form of a challenge. This is what I call a ‘cognitive critique.’ As has been alluded to above, Taylor’s rigid immanent and transcendent divide is problematic for, among other reasons, its preemptive preclusion of the possibility that transcendence – in a supernatural, spiritual, divine, or ‘vertical’

⁶³ Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, p. 94.

⁶⁴ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 32–3.

form⁶⁶ – can be, let alone is *only*, experienced within the limits of the immanent, categorical, empirical, and historical world. Part of the foundation for Taylor’s distinction between these two poles is the reliance he maintains on human agency. The shift in the social imaginary of our time is, as is stated from the outset of *A Secular Age* and throughout, the result of the conditions for a choice between belief and unbelief. It makes sense according to his narrative of the emergence of secularity that the exercise of one’s agency in association with an explicit cognitive act – choosing between belief or unbelief, interpreting experiences by means of ‘open’ or ‘closed’ spins within the immanent frame, and so forth – that Taylor would advance his argument within the realm of a second-order reflection, one that is, to borrow the Rahnerian terminology, thematic, cognitive, conceptual, interpretive, and explicit. However, a challenge that Rahner’s supernatural existential presents to Taylor and his project, his ‘master story,’⁶⁷ is to follow through with the seeming trajectory presented at the conclusion of *A Secular Age*, which advocates – however subjectively – for some religious (i.e., Christian) worldview.

At the end of his extensive tome, Taylor reveals the possibility for an acceptance of a ‘transcendental reality’ and suggests that one possible future beyond (or, perhaps, within) secularity is a turn toward naming, conceptualizing, choosing, identifying, thematizing, etc., this reality in an overtly religious sense after some sort of conversion. He writes:

In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all have some sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it. They are shutting out crucial features of it. So the structural characteristic of the religious (re)conversions that I described above, that one feels oneself to be breaking out of a narrower frame into a broader field, which makes sense of things in a different way, corresponds to reality.⁶⁸

However, Taylor never pursues the path he himself identifies to its logical end. This is the path back toward an *a priori* foundation for his claim or beneath the cognitive or second-order reflection he describes. It is a path that raises heretofore-unanswered questions in Taylor’s narrative of secularity, its related proposals, and its subsequent implications. These questions include: What, therefore, is the condition for the possibility of *experiencing* this ‘transcendent

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 677 and *passim*.

⁶⁷ See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 773–6; and Taylor, ‘Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,’ pp. 300–21.

⁶⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 768.

reality?’ What, more precisely, *is* this ‘transcendent reality?’ According to what framework, theory or, to use Taylor’s preferred method, *narrative*, do we understand this ‘transcendent reality’ to be universal, such that it is even recognized by adherents of various iterations of exclusive humanism, even if they are ‘misrecognizing’ it?

An engagement between Rahner’s supernatural existential and Taylor’s description of our age poses a challenge to Taylor in terms of the reevaluation of his epistemological starting point and, as I am arguing, his overly conceptual ending point.⁶⁹ What he offers by way of the second-order reflection on the cognitive or agency-based history of shifting social imaginaries still stands according to the Rahnerian supplemental application of an understanding of the transcendent and fullness in terms of the supernatural existential. In fact, I believe it strengthens Taylor’s arguments through the grounding of this secularity narrative in the foundation of an un-thematic, pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, and *a priori* sense of the human person’s constitution.⁷⁰ Taylor himself, in his response to several essays about *A Secular Age*, actually comes close to admitting this fact. He writes: ‘Fullness is not a category fundamental to *cognition* in the Kantian sense, as [Jonathan] Sheehan suggests I might be saying, but to human life in its mutual intelligibility. The argument that I’m putting forward is this: all human beings make something like this kind of distinction, and it’s very important to me to have, if not this word, this, as it were, general category, because I think that part of what’s involved in understanding other positions is understanding their notion of fullness.’⁷¹ But, as it were, Taylor, especially in *A Secular Age*, never proceeds to address this point adequately. And it is here that Rahner’s theology can provide tremendous insight.

⁶⁹ From an historical perspective, Jonathan Sheehan raises some allied concerns about Taylor’s overly conceptual discursive approach to belief and unbelief, fullness, and the transcendent. See his essay, ‘When Was Disenchantment? History and the Secular Age,’ in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, pp. 217–42.

⁷⁰ This pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, and un-thematic experience of the openness of the human person toward absolute mystery or, alternatively expressed according to the discursive framework of *A Secular Age*, the universal condition for the possibility of striving toward fullness, is expressed throughout Rahner’s writings. For example, see Rahner, *Hearer of the Word*, pp. 23–89; Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, pp. 14–43, 51–89, 126–33, and *passim*; Rahner, ‘The Experience of Self and Experience of God,’ pp. 122–32; Rahner, ‘Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God,’ pp. 231–49; Karl Rahner, ‘The Theological Dimension of the Question About Man,’ in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XVII, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 53–70; and Karl Rahner, ‘Theology and Anthropology,’ in *Theological Investigations*, vol. IX, trans. Graham Harrison (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), pp. 28–45. An insightful study on the relationship between this theme can be found in Shannon Craigo-Snell, *Silence, Love, and Death: Saying ‘Yes’ To God in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Marquette: Marquette University Press, 2008).

⁷¹ Taylor, ‘Afterword: Apologia pro Libro suo,’ p. 317.

Conclusion

One could anticipate that Charles Taylor's response to an essay of this sort in which his project concerning the emergence of secularity is engaged with the transcendental theological anthropology of Karl Rahner might either be a welcomed reception of an expansive experiment with his theory from a theological vantage point or an outright rejection of something viewed as extrinsic to his method and goal. Regardless of Taylor's personal stance toward systematic theological reflection on the themes that appear in his *A Secular Age*, this essay has attempted to follow the intuition of D. Stephen Long in his article, 'How to Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of *A Secular Age*,' in which Long argues that Taylor's work leaves theologians with substantive questions worthy of further exploration and conclusions in need of greater elucidation.⁷² The purpose of this essay has been to explore the question of the relationship between transcendence and immanence in *A Secular Age* and in accord with Taylor's use of the term 'fullness' as both an evaluative category and as something of a teleological end for all human persons. The conclusions Taylor posits in asserting the uniqueness of our secular age are a form of *a posteriori* or second-order reflection, which might very well withstand the test of time and critique but, from the theological perspective, they were still in need of a grounding or *a priori* explanation for what makes possible the condition for modern women and men to choose between Taylor's understanding of belief and unbelief. In both instances, Rahner's supernatural existential offers the promise of supplementing and critiquing Taylor's work. As a theological supplement, the supernatural existential broadens Taylor's project to include a theological anthropology that bolsters the concurrent persistence of humanity's universal capacity for fullness throughout history and the historical *a posteriori* epistemological shifts, which Taylor has traced along the way toward the emergence of our contemporary social imaginary. While far from complete, it is my hope that this essay might serve as a broadening and heuristic sign pointing toward the manifold opportunities to engage in theological reflection in a secular age.

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⁷² Long, 'How To Read Charles Taylor: The Theological Significance of *A Secular Age*,' pp. 93–107.