A Non-Secular „Critique“ of Things Secular and Sacred

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In one respect, John Lennon was right in 1966 when he observed that “The Beatles were more popular than Jesus.” That he was very wrong in another respect illustrates the shallowness of social criticism, generally, and the depth of a corresponding social disorientation, as well. The following proposes that more than ever our contemporary international situation calls for a new form of critique that profiles the necessity of religion, but *not* doctrinal or dogmatic religion, for the human species, universally.

John Lennon was right that, when it came to entertainment, the Beatles were more popular than Jesus. What he overlooked, though, is that entertainment is faddish and that music, like fashion and technology, is exceedingly transient. However, this observation by no means seeks to re-establish the “truth” of Jesus any more than it would serve to justify some other doctrinal or dogmatic religious “truth” that has endured over millennia.

What John Lennon didn’t understand, apparently, is that, whereas the Beatles offered a form of effervescent *entertainment*, religion generally and Jesus in particular speak to deeply individual, personal *self-interest*. There is a self-interest that drives the individual’s desire to be “right with ‘God’” that is totally absent when it comes to the individual’s ranking of the significance of an entertainment form for her/his life.

For example, the Beatles offered the fleeting hiatus of “a good time” that distracts one from the daily grind that is driven by the need to provide, at the least, food, clothing, and shelter as well as by the need to be “successful” in the eyes of those who constitute one’s significant social world. Screaming with a crowd involves far more than celebrating the power of maturing hormones, it is one way of briefly identifying with one’s humanity beyond the parameters of indifference, difference, inequality, and injustice that characterizes daily life. John Lennon apparently believed that those intermittent experiences were enough to change the world. He, obviously, was very wrong. One doesn’t change the world by briefly escaping from it, as important and valuable as such evasion can be.

Slavoj Žižek would surely point out that a subliminal force behind the popularity of the Beatles was their insane financial “success.” The “Boys from Liverpool” were another example of the Horatio Alger “myth” (story) of rising from poverty and obscurity to achieve dizzying wealth absent, as Žižek always would add, any “critique” with respect to the kind of economic system that makes such a story possible in the first place. Despite the myth’s power to fuel the dreams of individuals, the logic of the myth is that it is achievable only by a few. Not every poor and obscure, hard-working person achieves wealth. In fact, far more than illuminating a broad pathway to be followed by all, the myth privileges the “materially successful” and reinforces the enduring strength of the *necessary*, economic structures that allow for a few to rise to the top, like cream in non-pasteurized milk. In the absence of critique, one “overlooks” that there is no limited cream if there isn’t all that milk that supports it.

Milk production can serve as a metaphor for the secular, "capitalist" system. As much as there are desperate people who would enthusiastically take on the burdens, which are by no means slight, of dairy farming and who would view dairy farming as a form of economic liberation from "working for the man" in an urban world, milk production illuminates that one is by no means "master" of one's life. One is a slave to an economic system: not only a slave to one's property (more likely owned by a bank), the technology of production, as well as the need to "be in the barn" twice a day to milk the cows, but also, one is a slave to the commodities market and the complex infrastructure that controls the price and the distribution of milk. In this respect, the economics of the urban world are hardly different. The only difference between a secular "capitalist" and a secular "socialist" system is with respect to who controls the property, technology, and economic infrastructure. In either case, the "worker" is controlled by structures and forces outside of her/his control. No wonder, *entertainment* is such a welcome and lucrative industry!

Although there are surely analogies between *entertainment* and *religion*, the core difference couldn't be greater. "Jesus" can serve as a metaphor for all religion. This is not to say that a "Jesus" theology (of whatever kind) is correct and/or that all religion leads to "Jesus." Rather, "Jesus" is a metaphor, not just a fleeting moment of entertainment, but for the ultimate fulfilment of self-interest that drives historical religions.

To be sure, there are individuals and groups who embrace the "Jesus" metaphor out of a *concern for the other*, and they would even deny that their concern for the other is anchored in self-interest. The "Golden Rule" is found in many traditions: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" or "Love your neighbor as yourself." One can build a "theology of resistance" on this foundation. Where there is suffering and injustice in the world, there is a failure of "love:" National interest, corporate interest, regional interest, community interest, personal interest can always be "critiqued" as a religious error, a failure of love. A "theology of resistance" might appear to be the rejection of the "Jesus" religion of self-interest.

Nonetheless, this "critique" that what is missing is love is as shallow as the critique that everything "is the fault of capitalism." In the absence of a scheme of priorities, the critiques of entertainment, capitalism, and religion are simply naïve. All share the same motivation: self-interest. Entertainment's escapism provides relief for the immediate audience but no solution to the increasing pressures of daily life. With capitalism, self-interest is obvious because capitalism provides the structures for me to be materially successful but with no solution to inequities and exploitation. Even a "theology of resistance" is driven by self-interest, at the least, because its theological justification is based on doing to others as I would like them to treat me. Every criminal hopes that the judge will adhere to this maxim.

Even more, though, a "theology of resistance" is frequently (but not always) anchored in a deeper motivation of self-interest: vertical forgiveness. Anselm's *Cur deus homo* can serve here as the theological model although Eastern Christianity's theological lynch pin of "theosis" (divinization of the individual) is no less self-serving (see McGaughey, *Christianity for the Third Millennium: Faith in an Age of Fundamentalism and Skepticism*). However, Western Christianity, to be sure with some exceptions of kind if not degree, can be summarized under Anselm's Augustinian logic: "sinful" humanity, even if it were at a particular point in time to become "perfect," could do nothing "extra" on its own that could compensate for its prior errors because one cannot be "more than" perfect. As a consequence, the theology of perfection demands an economic exchange to "pay the debt" for imperfection that no

amount of effort on the part of the individual (or community) can erase. However, that debt was paid by a substitute: the sacrifice of a perfect human being who alone is capable of satisfying the debt because His perfection is infinite. If self-interest here is not already obvious enough, the concern to be a part of the community of "saints" who achieve perfection profiles the self-interestedness of salvation: In order to curb the sin of hubris according to Augustinian/Anselmian logic, God must give humanity not only the means for achieving perfection (the exclusive sacrifice of His Son), but He must also give the individual the desire for transformation as well as the grace to achieve and remain sustained in perfection. Otherwise, the individual would be in the position to make a claim on God: "I have earned salvation so that You, God, must give it to me." Even more perniciously when it comes to vertical forgiveness: It is great for the individual, but it ignores the individual's victims. In fact, vertical forgiveness is a "second wounding" of the victim, as we're reminded by Vladimir Jankélévitch. My victim doesn't profit from my forgiveness, and I don't have to be concerned about her/him/them because I am forgiven.

One might want to retort that not all religion involves the self-interest of the "Jesus" religion. When it comes to the details, of course not! However, all religion that is based upon "salvation" or "influencing God/the gods" to achieve personal or corporate ends is ultimately anchored, obviously, by the taproot of self-interest. Even more pernicious than self-interest, though, are those occasions where a religion storms the divine citadel and claims to occupy the divine throne to "speak for God." Here human hubris knows no bounds for it ignores humanity's profound limits and claims to make absolute pronouncements and to act for God. Humanity is at no time more dangerous than when it ignores its limits to make absolute pronouncements or to act on absolute truths – no matter how well intended!

In stark contrast, there is another form of non-secular critique that is not driven by self-interest and that one can call *new* only because it has been ignored for over 200 years. This critique is simultaneously, quintessentially "religious" because it recognizes humanity's profound limits and provides an orientation that empowers the creativity of individuals in a way that simply waiting for a system to change cannot do (whether political, economic, or religious). Furthermore, this critique illuminates the crucial, human capacity upon which any and all political, economic, and/or religious change depends.

Rather than a *historical* critique, we are speaking here of a *transcendental* critique. Make no mistake, however! This is no transcendent critique, like 20th Century Christian Neo-Orthodoxy, that takes one to a (divine) position outside of the material conditions of life to assume a perspective outside of history from which to judge history! Rather, it is a critique that calls on and empowers the best elements of the individual and humanity at large even without an over-arching political, economic, or salvific agenda. Precisely in contrast to such agendas over which we can ceaselessly quarrel, this critique seeks out *necessities*, not *peut-ėtres*.

A *transcendental* critique turns the spyglass around. Rather than look to something external to the individual either in the past, present, or future to provide the explanation and/or solution to humanity's problems, a *transcendental* critique asks, first: what *necessary* capacities must I possess as an individual in order for me to identify a problem or to seek its solution?

Transcendental critique illuminates a set of *necessary* capacities, which are universal to all persons but which can only be exercised exclusively be each individual. This is a set of capacities that distinguish us *in degree, not kind* from all other species.

The Neo-Kantian, Ernst Cassirer, saw in Johannes Uexküll's "functional circle of the animal" the key to the peculiar kind of power possessed by humanity. Uexküll spoke of this "functional circle" as a capacity that unites all sentient species. He called it the circular interactions of a *Merkwerk* and *Wirknetz* (or stimulus/response) structure. The characteristic of this stimulus/response circle that is developed to a unique degree in humanity, Cassirer emphasizes, is that we insert symbols into the midst of the circle. We don't have these symbols by instinct because they must be learned. Yet, these symbols do not occur naturally in perception, either. Symbolic language arose long before the development of notational systems to write them down so that they could be "perceived." *We perceive objects in the world, not the linguistic system of whatever kind that we use to identify, calculate, manipulate, predict, and control those objects*. In short, for us to be the animals that we are, we must *add to* phenomena symbol systems that, in turn, allow us to "see" things about phenomena that we cannot actually see. The creative potential and power (as well as danger) of these symbols borders on incalculability; it is so huge. It is what gives us the power to harness the laws of nature, for example, to build skyscrapers and send space probes into the depths of our universe while simultaneously giving us the power to destroy the world.

Second, our capacity to add symbols to our perceptions that are the *necessary* condition for us to understand and act in the world illuminates a further, *necessary* capacity (not something dispensable, but required for us to be and do what we do in the world). This is a capacity that is even deeper than our symbolic capacity because it is what, in the first place, makes it possible for us to exercise a symbolic capacity. *To a degree unlike any other species* (our ability to destroy the world is an indicator of the degree), we are able to initiate sequences of events that nature on its own could not otherwise accomplish. In short, we are not merely the blind consequence of physical events. For those tempted to think that neuroscience is daily contradicting this claim, I defer to J. Kevin Regan's and Alva Noë's 2001 (!) article "A Sensorimoter Account of Vision and Visual Consciousness," Alva Noë's 2015 article "How Art Reveals the Limits of Neuroscience," Otfried Höffe's (2010/2007) chapters 17, 18. And 19 on material determinism and neuroscience in *Can Virtue make us Happy? The Art of Living and Morality*, and Höffe's (2015) chapter 16 in *Kritik der Freiheit. Das Grundproblem der Moderne*.

Because this capacity is universal to all humanity, it is more significant than even self-interest and not merely because this capacity is the condition of possibility for any self-interest. Rather, it is because of our ability intentionally and not merely instinctually to do things that nature on its own cannot do that we can and do hold ourselves and one another responsible for what we do. A beaver doesn't insure its dam against possible damage to the property of others.

Yet, the extent of responsibility made possible by this ineradicable and indispensable capacity is far broader than our answerability to tort law. Our symbolic capacity makes it possible for us to take advantage not only of physical laws to achieve our ends, but it also makes it possible for us to take advantage of the civic law to achieve our ends. It is clear to everyone that the civic law alone cannot guarantee justice. We can accomplish self-interested ends even contrary to the intent of the law by adhering to the minutia of the law. In other words, simple adherence to the law does not bring justice. Justice requires that adherenence to the civic law conforms to a higher law, and only the individual agent can determine whether or not her/his actions seek to conform to this higher, moral law.

We encounter a circularity here between our *necessary* capacity of initiating that nature cannot accomplish on its own and our *responsibility* for those sequences that we initiate. On the one hand,

wherever such a causality as creative freedom occurs to whatever degree independent of material causality, there we encounter the conditions for moral responsibility – long before the creation of civic law in the form either as a theonomous command or as a particular, cultural construction. On the other hand, wherever such a thing as a moral principle occurs even as a possibility, it confirms the presence of a "rational," not merely a material, causality because moral principles can only occur and apply to such a rational causality. Were there to be no "rational" animal capable of initiating sequences of events that physical nature is incapable of accomplishing on its own, there could be no moral principle(s). However, we do not mean by "rational" mere instrumental reason that is simply concerned with the calculation, prediction, manipulation, and control of things in the world. "Rational" in this context refers to the "super-sensible" (not super natural) capacities of transcendental consciousness that are the condition of possibility for us to understand, act, and assume responsibility for our actions. Those super-sensible, intelligible capacities are concerned with far more than mere epistemology. They include the epistemological capacities of theoretical reason, to be sure, but they also include the capacity of judgment that extends far beyond the classification of objects, as well as the specific, extra-ordinary judgments of beauty and the sublime, and the moral capacities of practical reason.

Of course, one often encounters the claim that there are no universal, moral principles. Moral principles are all personally or culturally relative. However, Otfried Höffe readily points out that there is no society that encourages lying as a principle to govern action. Furthermore, Kant pointed out that there is no exception to the recognition of the injustice of false witnessing against an innocent individual even when one does so to protect one's own life. *In neither case is there universal agreement over what the individual should do in such a circumstance (only the individual can decide for her-/himself), but there is universal recognition of the universal, moral principles involved*.

Whereas there is no escaping the circularity of transcendental freedom and its moral law, it is not simply an abstraction of castle building in the sky, either. We un-cover this imperceptible capacity and responsibility *only because we are in a material world* although neither the rational, creative capacity nor moral principles themselves are capable of verification or falsification because they themselves are nothing empirical – only their effects are empirical. Were there not a material world governed by physical laws, there could not be a "rational" creature capable of acting *to a degree* independent of that material world governed by physical laws. Were this "rational" creature capable of *not* acting in the world (on the contrary, we cannot *not* act), then we would not be able to identify those capacities *that are necessary* for it to act in the world. In short, given the limits to our experience, we have to say that there is no possibility even of abstraction (i.e., no imperceptible, transcendental capacities) independent of the material conditions under which we now experience abstraction. In other words, creative freedom and moral responsibility are no indication of humanity's exercising some "divine causality" over against and independent of nature. At most we exercise a "finite causality" complementary to but never able to ignore or to contradict "mechanical," blind, physical causality.

To be sure, the "fact" that we can exercise these capacities confirms the *this-worldliness* of those capacities in no way proves that there can be no other world in which such capacities might be exercised. All that it demonstrates is that *this material world* is the condition of possibility for us to experience transcendental capacities and responsibilities, now. Because religion has to do with those things for which we can hope, one can get at least a provisional sense, then, why Kant would propose that "any religion without an afterlife is no religion at all." However, the realistic value of hope for an afterlife is not that it allows us to escape our capacities and responsibilities in this world but that it in

some manner must contribute to the *proper* exercise of those capacities in this world (see, McGaughey, "Historical and Pure Religion: A Response to Stephen Palmquist" in *The Journal of Religion*, 93/2 (April 2013): pp. 151-176).

Note well, however, that the *necessities* invoked here are of two dramatically different kinds. The necessity of the physical law is confirmed by immediate experience. If one violates a physical law, one (at least, almost) immediately experiences consequences. However, when it comes to the transcendental, moral law, one's experience confirms time and again that one can ignore it and sometimes even profit by ignoring it. However, this difference between the physical and moral laws is only a matter of appearance. First, although we can immediately experience the consequences of violating a physical law, it is not possible for us to prove or disprove that there are such laws and that they are applicable to all times and places. This is, in part, the reason that at least some physicists today speak of *lawfulness* rather than *law*. A physical law refers to a cause, and we can only experience the effects of, not the causes themselves. However, the same applies to the moral law. Because it is part of the causal system of transcendental freedom, it is by definition inaccessible to the senses, and, hence, it is incapable of proof/disproof. With physical and moral laws, we must proceed as if they were applicable or we couldn't understand and act the way that it is obviously possible for us to act in the world. Second, the differences between these two lawful systems is not that one is possibly universal whereas the other is possibly relative but, rather, one is a *heteronomous* law imposed upon us whereas the other is an *autonomous* law that must be self-imposed. A heteronomous, physical law functions *blindly*. An autonomous, moral law can only function, if at all, as an intentional principle imposed by an individual upon her-/himself. This difference is the *necessary* consequence of the two systems of causality.

Nature's laws function blindly; freedom's laws must be freely, self-legislated by an agent or else there is no true freedom. Neither system of laws, however, is capable of proof/disproof. However, if we want to understand nature, we must approach events as if they were governed by lawfulness, and we must approach our own transcendental freedom as if we can hold ourselves responsible for it. The "fact" that we can act on the basis of a moral principle that is *contrary to our self-interest* is one of those clear indicators that we possess transcendental capacities whose very existence make it possible for us to be moral beings and not just sentient animals exclusively driven by a circular, stimulus/response structure of self-interest and hormones. Our ability to act on the basis of moral principles underscores not that we *must be moral* but that we *can be moral*. Even more, the fact that we *can be but not must be* moral is what distinguishes us in degree from all other species. Hence, if we want to be human and not merely animals, we have to place ourselves as individuals and communities under self-legislated, moral obligation, not divine or civic obligation.

It is a popular observation made by empirical psychologists that everyone lies. The fact that it is possible to lie and that "everyone does" is taken to somehow "prove" that there is no universal, moral principle that prohibits lying. Yet, empirical psychology succumbs in this case to the *is/ought fallacy*. Simply because something "is" the case does not mean that it "ought" to be. A moral principle is not limited to or by its particular application but serves as a standard of *autonomous freedom* to govern the exercise of humanity's highest capacity, transcendental freedom. Logically, there would be no reason to demonstrate empirically that there was no such thing as a prohibition of lying if there was no experience of the transcendental conflict that accompanies lying. However, no more than the "fact" that everyone lies, this experience of "transcendental conflict" is no proof of the fact of the moral principle. What it

does confirm is that such a moral principle requires a "rational" being capable of transcendental freedom. Again, we are not moral beings because we *must be* – for that would be a *heteronomous* imposition upon us. Rather, we are moral beings because we *can be* – for that confirms that to a degree we exercise an *autonomous*, transcendental freedom.

A *non-secular, critique* seeks to identify the *necessary conditions of possibility* for us to experience and to act responsibly in the ambiguous world in which we exist; yet, this is no merely secular critique. The identification of those necessary conditions of possibility confirm that they are not of the individual's or society's own construction. As with the laws of nature and physical events that cannot generate the laws to which they confirm, transcendental freedom cannot itself create the material conditions, much less, the autonomous causality and moral laws that govern it. Here is the threshold where humanity encounters its "religious" nature.

No other species comes close to creating the rituals, repetitive festival calendars, myths, doctrines, creeds, institutional hierarchies, and motivated social agency that is "religion." However, religion is not reducible to this list of human artifacts. Furthermore, acknowledging that all of these activities are inseparable from self-serving interest, self-interest alone is, nonetheless, inadequate to account for the universal phenomena that is religion. A far more likely candidate for explaining this phenomena is the *necessity* on the part of transcendental consciousness to *add causal explanations* to the phenomena upon which it is dependent. Again, transcendental consciousness is nothing "outside" of a world of phenomena because it can occur only because there is physical phenomena. However, transcendental consciousness can and does *add imperceptible things* (e.g., language systems, mathematics, physical laws, moral laws, as well as, causal explanations, etc.) to the perceptible phenomena.

The world shaped by the natural sciences is appropriately convinced that, the more we add a coherent totality of imperceptible physical laws to phenomena, the greater accuracy of our understanding and predictive capacity. However, there is nothing about human understanding that requires it to employ such physical laws for its understanding, calculation, prediction, manipulation, and control of things, and over millennia humanity has employed various systems of causal explanation to account for the origin of the universe (myths/stories like the most ancient Hindu dismemberment of Purusha, the 21 accounts of creation at http://www.gly.uga.edu/railsback/CS/CSIndex.html, Plato's Demiurge, the Logos analogy to human thought and action, as well as the most recent Big Bang theory) and to account for particular events (animism, magic, Aristotle's four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, alchemy, theories like phlogiston, etc.) in order to understand and "control" its world. The constructive character of causal explanation guarantees the plethora of ubiquitous, religious phenomena that we find around the world. The vehement struggle between "fundamentalist" Christians and the natural sciences is confirmation that one has to win the minds *and hearts* of humanity to embrace a certain system of causal explanation. One doesn't arrive at a causal explanation simply by *opening one's eyes*.

However, as we can recognize by transcendental critique, there are two systems of laws (lawfulness) that are *necessary* for us to be the kind of species that we are in our physical world, and both of these systems of laws are neither of our creation nor capable of proof or disproof. We embrace them because *we must if we want to be the species that we are capable of be(com)ing*. At the core of all historical religions is humanity's moral capacity that *makes religion necessary* for humanity. At the core of visible religion is invisible religion, and it is the latter that is the condition of possibility for the former.

Explicitly, then, the non-secular critique that leads to the *necessary* conditions of possibility for transcendental freedom and the possibility of moral responsibility is no rejection of historical religions because "invisible religion" is precisely the *necessary* condition not only for "visible, historical religion" but also for humanity's responsible cultivation of its creative potential. However, as is so painfully obvious in our world today, to the extent that we tie humanity's identity to *external, perceptible circumstances* of nature, culture/tradition, and/or religion, in other words, the more we tie humanity's identity to *historical traditions religious or* secular, we are profiling what divides us as a species, not what unites us as a moral potential. Without a grounding of understanding and action in something other than mere self-interest, humanity can only be a mistake of history, and its mistakenness will be manifest by its destructive consequences. With awareness of its dependence upon "invisible religion," the individual possesses an anchor and orientation as well as an ineradicable dignity (transcendental freedom incapable of being exercised by any other) that is not only the basis for self-imposed moral responsibility but also the basis for human solidarity. In the end, the individual can exercise her/his highest capacities only to the degree that there is a social order, a "culture," that promotes the individual's assumption of responsibility for cultivating her/his creative talents and the individual's assumption of responsibility for those talents. However, this is not a "culture" that heteronomously demands skills; it is a culture that silently, invisibly, and inexorably encourages each individual autonomously to be(come) what s/he is capable of becoming.

We can and must talk about a non-secular, yet "religious" critique because our position is so precarious:

> Here ... we see … [ourselves] *in a precarious position* [emphasis added], which is to be firm even though there is nothing in heaven or on earth from which it depends or on which it is based. Here … [the individual] … manifest[s] … [her/his] purity as sustainer of … [her/his] own laws, not as herald of laws that an implanted sense or who knows what tutelary nature whispers to it, all of which -- though they may always be better than nothing at all -- can still never yield basic principles that reason dictates and that must have their source entirely and completely a priori and, as the same time, must have their commanding authority from this: that they expect nothing from the inclination of human beings but everything from the supremacy of the law and the respect owed it or, failing this, condemn the human being to contempt for himself and inner abhorrence. (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008]: 35)