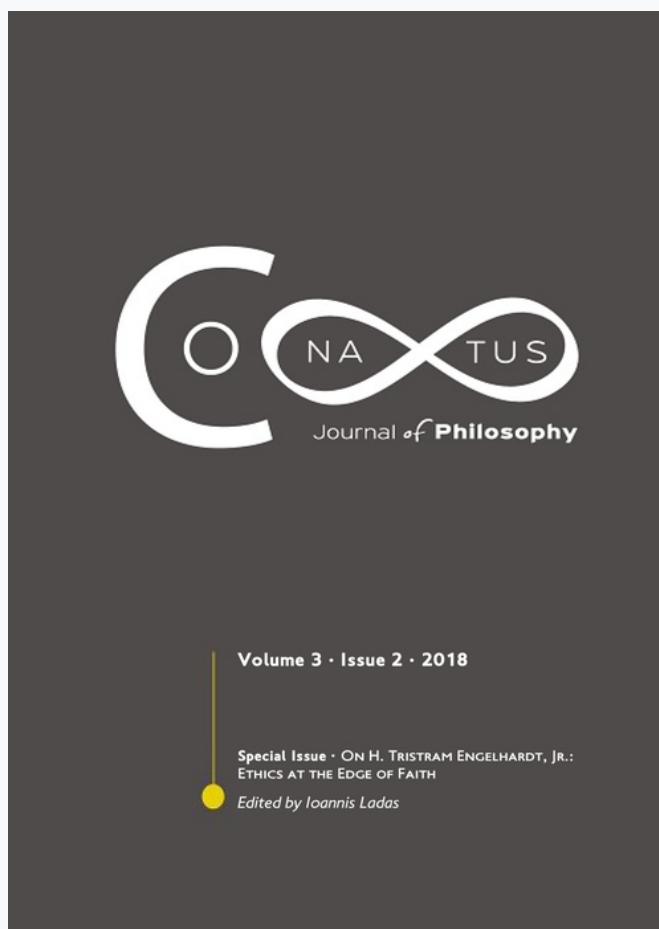


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Why Morality Will Continue to Flourish in a Secular Society After God: An Appreciation and a Short Criticism of the Late Engelhardt

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Abstract

*The paper is mostly limited to an analysis of the main theses advanced by Engelhardt in his great book *After God* (2017), compared with those elaborated in the first edition of *The Foundation of Bioethics* (1986). The first part is devoted to a summary of Engelhardt's proposals, and two of them are criticized in the second part. In particular, Engelhardt is doubtful that a morality after God is possible, while I argue that it is going to be produced and possibly will be more adequate than traditional morality. In the same line, Engelhardt holds that without God everything is meaningless, while I argue that meanings are instilled by humans in our projects, and that even in our forthcoming post-history age people will continue to have meaningful ethical actions.*

Key-words: *foundation of morality; concept of secularization; Biomedical and Industrial Revolutions; concept of post-history*

I. Engelhardt's development of the moral situation

This Engelhardt's *After God* is a great book, not only for its size (454 pages), but mainly for the richness of analysis and intuition. It also contains an intellectual autobiography which provides a lot of personal impressions that affected his cultural development and that will be of the utmost importance to reconstruct Engelhardt's thinking. It is perhaps too early to try such an enterprise, but one thing is sure: Engelhardt admits that his research was gradual and at times he

“was confronted with puzzles. They were foundational puzzles about the roots of bioethics and of morality generally. Prominent among these questions were what it means to acknowledge the existence of God, and what

difference the acknowledgement of God does or should make in how one lives one's life" (p. 34).¹

This is a basic and crucial point, because Engelhardt informs us that the "foundational puzzles about the roots of bioethics and of morality" accompanied all of his intellectual life. As a matter of fact, he had the privilege to live through one of the most dramatic and massive changes that have occurred in human history. Engelhardt's youth was still in a world unaffected by the Biomedical Revolution, and he is aware of it and describes the situation in a short and wonderful presentation:

"It was 1954. I had arrived in Europe for the first time, indeed in Genoa. In that early June, bright with flowers, a joy for my mother, I entered a world that was a universe apart from the Europe of the second decade of the 21st century. The moral and metaphysical texture of the then-dominant life-world was radically different. There was a pronounced folk piety. Italy's streets were full of young priests and children. Everywhere there were grey and black friars. Italy was young, generally pious, and dynamic (although side chapels were at times marked by signs bearing an astonishing warning: *Vietato urinare*). The churches were not empty. These observations are not meant to deny the presence even then of the roots of the now-dominant secular culture. Italy had its full share of agnostics and atheists. However, Italy was then just before, but still surely before, a major and dramatic cultural tipping point. Vatican II (1962–1965), the sexual revolution of the late 1960s, the student protests beginning in 1968, and the general impact of the Frankfurter Schule would soon precipitate a comprehensive secularization. However, this transformation had not yet taken place. I was in a cultural lull before widespread turbulence and change. It was not yet a culture after God." (p. 57).

At the cultural level, the big change started in the '60s, and it was a real shock and an amazing social struggle. But it was also the peak of the Golden Age of the Short Century, the age of the New Frontier of Science and Rights, the age of the dialysis and heart transplant, as well as of the conquest of the Moon. It was also the decade of the beginning of mass secularization, as the young sociologist Peter Berger noted in 1969: "Probably for the first time in history, the religious legitimations of the world have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals and other marginal individuals, but for broad masses of entire societies" [quoted by Engelhardt at p. 128]. Berger immediately perceived that the new situation "opened up an acute crisis not only for the nomination of the large social institutions but for that of in-

¹ All the quotations are from H.T. Engelhardt Jr., *After God: Morality and Bioethics in a Secular Age* (Yonkers, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017).

dividual biographies. In other words, there has arisen a problem of ‘meaningfulness’ not only for such institutions as the state or the economy, but for the ordinary routines of everyday life” (pp. 128-129). However, these negative aspects appeared to be minor troubles compared to the new possibilities opening up. In *The Secular City* (1965), Harvey Cox regarded secularization as integral to “the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and toward this one” (Engelhardt p. 128). In short, optimism prevailed over pessimism, and the positive attitudes towards the future lasted for the next decades. Even in the ’70s and ’80s serious moral and social quandaries were described as mere challenges to be faced and overcome.

In the ’80s, when Engelhardt elaborated one of his masterpieces, the first edition of *The Foundations of Bioethics* (1986), he was under this impulse. The book was a sort of great thought-experiment in order to test the limits of reason alone in ethics. He informs us that he was denounced for heresy within the Catholic Church, and that “[t]he accusations were discounted when [he] responded to a committee appointed to review the issue” (p. 40) that *The Foundations of Bioethics* (1986), and his work in general, had to be understood “to have explored *only* that which can be known by reason unaided by grace.” (p. 40). In this sense he was interpreted “to be an extreme theological liberal” (p. 40), and a few years later his “work received a condemnation in *La Civiltà Cattolica* (Editorial 1992). Some Roman Catholic critics even regarded *The Foundations of Bioethics* as taking a utilitarian position, *mirabile factu*, similar to that of Peter Singer” (p. 42)

Of course, Engelhardt never was [or had been] a utilitarian in strict and technical terms: from the beginning it was crystal clear that he was a kind of contractarian putting individual autonomy at the core of his reflection. However, he could be understood as a utilitarian in a wider sense, because his proposal was devoted to explore “*only* that which can be known by reason unaided by grace” (p. 40), i.e., by reason alone, as requested in and by a secular environment. As a matter of fact, arguing from that [secular] point of view, Engelhardt concurred with Peter Singer on some practical conclusions, such as the moral permissibility of abortion. Of course, we knew well that the arguments justifying the conclusion were different, but being in the midst of a culture war, that aspect appeared irrelevant: in 1991, the Italian translation of “*The Foundations* was at a white-hot point of collision between a Roman Catholic and a post-Christian Italy” (p. 33). At that time, in the late decades of the xxth century, the teaching of John Paul II was at the apex, and the climate was that in which the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* was prepared. Not to be in line with the traditional Catholic teaching was considered equivalent to being against it. That is the reason for which the first edition of *The Foundations* “engendered a controversy that reached into the public media” (p. 33). Engelhardt was perceived as the liberal philosopher who could provide a perspective apt to permit a peaceful social life for “moral strangers”. This was the magic expression which catalyzed the attention: “moral strangers” are the inhabitants of our secularized societies, people who do not speak the same moral lan-

guage and, therefore, do not understand each other, but they can still live peacefully. And Engelhardt tried to elaborate a moral theory embedded in (secular) “rationality” in order to show that each individual could be free to express one’s own perspective and still live peacefully. His proposal was fascinating not only for the many references to classical European philosophy which were appealing to educated people, but also because it opened applications for the political arena. The idea of a “free and peaceful island for moral strangers” became a sort of new utopia for many countries in which secularization was crawling in practice without receiving cultural recognition. For this reason, the first edition of *The Foundations of Bioethics* had immense success, and it is interesting that the French edition was published when the second edition was already available: it was the proposal needed for “public reasons”.

In his short autobiography, Engelhardt presents the threads underlying his work and provides explanations for his proposals, stressing the unitary frame of his research. In light of his reconstruction, it is quite possible that his book was grossly misinterpreted. But there is also another possibility, i.e., that Engelhardt’s thinking went through different stages and accents, and that he might also have changed his views on some aspects. It is too difficult to examine the point here, and I leave this task to others. However, my hypothesis is that starting from the ’90s, Engelhardt’s reflection entered into a new stage, so that the late Engelhardt of *After God* (2017) is significantly different from that of *The Foundations* (1986). Here is one point to support such a statement: in 1986, Engelhardt coined the expression “moral strangers” and tried to elaborate a moral theory to make them live together in a peaceful way. In *After God*, the late Engelhardt starts taking for granted that “Bioethics provides some of the most important battles in the culture wars” (p. 12), so that the old moral strangers transformed themselves in “moral enemies”. Such a war can assume different forms, and become “guerrillas”, but the root depends on the fact “that the substance of bioethics will still be known by traditional Christians to be anchored in the will of God. This knowledge will perpetuate the culture wars” (p. 24).

Since Engelhardt’s intellectual progression was similar to that of many other important scholars, I dare to try and offer a brief explanation for such a shift. The starting point is the historical process of the Biomedical Revolution, which started after the Second World War and came to the fore in the ’60s. What I call the “Biomedical Revolution” is that huge phenomenon which is the continuation of the Industrial Revolution. As Eric Hobsbawm remarked, the Industrial Revolution was the greatest transformation of human history of which we have written documents. As the Industrial Revolution provided control over inorganic nature, the Biomedical Revolution aims to provide control over organic nature.²

Bioethics as an academic discipline started the next decade, in the ’70s, as the

² For an analysis of the relevance of the Biomedical Revolution and its connections with the Industrial Revolution, see. M. Mori, *Manuale di Bioetica: Verso una Civiltà Biomedica Secolarizzata* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2013²).

systematic cultural reflection on what had happened and what was going on.³ Often those epochal transformations are mixed up with many other phenomena, such as the space programs, feminism and the civil rights movement, and start in a piecemeal way. This last issue is particularly important, since it is sometimes difficult to perceive the paradigmatic shift that one single change brings with it, or produces. At its beginnings, bioethics was involved in analyzing single issues, and one of the most debated was the moral permissibility of abortion. However, at that time abortion required medical intervention and was seen as the last resort to women in difficult situations. Analogously, assisted reproduction through IVF [In Vitro Fertilization] still had an uncertain future and was primarily seen as a remedy for infertility, and not as an alternative method of reproduction. In that situation, bioethics was a sort of adjustment of the traditional moral frame: disagreements were deep and lively, but limited to specific moral issues. On the other hand, it was clear that morality had to be secular, but that was not seen as a threat to religion. Purified from the magical and superstitious aspects, religion would remain a respectable option: secularization was perceived as a positive process of liberation. In this context, it was perfectly correct for Engelhardt to try to elaborate, on the assumption of reason alone, a set of moral rules apt to guarantee a peaceful social life geared toward autonomy and respect for individual freedom. In any case, this appeared to be the core message conveyed by Engelhardt. The first edition of *The Foundations* is one of the mature fruit of the first stage of bioethics.

In the '90s, the general situation started to change. Events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall (November 9, 1989) and the consequent end of the USSR, the first Gulf War (January 17 – February 28, 1991), and the birth of the European Union (November 1st, 1993) modified the geopolitical scenery (and possibly put an end to the Short Century).⁴ After the first decade of his long papacy which began in 1978, in which he had to fight against liberal opponents, pope John Paul II started to crown his program aimed at restoring traditional Roman Catholicism. One step was the *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), an encyclical entirely devoted to bioethics, to contrast with, and combat, secular perspectives on the point. Secularization had in the meantime continued its process in the world. Not only is atheism now the fastest growing “religion”, but so-called neo-atheism claims that religion is dangerous and should be forbidden. While in the '60s it was atheism that had to be accepted as a “respectable option”,

³ For the distinction between bioethics as an academic discipline and bioethics as a cultural movement springing in society, see Maurizio Mori, “La ‘de-teologizzazione’ della Bioetica e la Nascita dell’Etica come Nuova Istituzione Specifica”, *Quaderni di Diritto e Politica Ecclesiastica* 1 (2015): 57-68 (translated into Brazilian as: “A desteologização da bioética e o nascimento da ética como nova instituição específica Idéias”, *Idéias, Campinas* 9, no.1 (2018): 287-304. For a more recent analyses of the consequences of the interplay of the two levels, see M. Mori, “Bioetica”, *Aggiornamento Enciclopedia Utet* (Torino: Utet, 2018), 93-100.

⁴ For a more detailed analysis of the history of bioethics from this general point of view, see the part that I wrote in the book G. Fornero and M. Mori, *Laici e Cattolici in Bioetica: Storia e Teoria di un Confronto* (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2012), 1-77.

and in the '70s it was taken for granted that as long as they were private options, any religion was "respectable", now the situation is quite opposite: neo-atheists claim that religions are false beliefs to be forbidden. One religious reaction to this rapid and great growth of secularization was fundamentalism and a strong revival of traditional attitudes. This already explosive background was increased by the provisions of the Biomedical Revolution that came forward in the '90s. It became clear that the new biomedical technologies were not limited to single aspects, but that it was going to affect the whole human existence, since control of life will bring about deep modifications of traditional arrangements. For instance, abortion was no longer proposed as an extreme remedy to a frightening situation for the woman, but started to be claimed as a woman's human right, a claim expressed by the slogan: "Abortion on demand and without apology". IVF had become a routine practice and started to be proposed as an alternative option for human reproduction. This brought about a radical modification of parental responsibility and of family structure. Surrogate pregnancies became frequent, as well as pressures in favor of equalitarian marriage. In February 1997, the announcement that Dolly the sheep was born on July 5, 1996 through cloning was the straw that broke the camel's back, because public opinion was scared of the new frontiers of science.

In this new context, Engelhardt started to reconsider his views. The first aspect is about secularization, which was incipient in the '70-80s and pluralism could still reach a fair equilibrium: secular views were accepted at the intellectual level, but real social life was still informed by religious perspectives. Now, in the '10s of the new century, secularization is a mature fruit and it is overwhelming. So he observes that "A new orthodoxy has been established, and it is secular. We have entered an age resolutely set "after God". The contemporary dominant culture of the West is committed to acting as if God did not exist. The implications of this culture without God are vast" (p. 27).

Granted that the cultural background is characterized by secular premises, new biomedical technologies such as IVF and stem cells are pervasive in all areas of life and not limited to only some specific parts. This means that ethical pluralism has become ubiquitous, and therefore intractable. As Engelhardt says,

"[w]e are confronted with the core concerns and passages of life: sexuality, reproduction, suffering, dying, and death. But there is no agreement about how properly to live, have sex, reproduce, and die. As we have seen, in the dominant secular culture, possible decisions in these areas are reduced to life- and death-style choices, with morality itself becoming only a particular macro life-style choice and the state to being merely a *modus vivendi*, a political life-style choice" (p. 23).

Engelhardt is very profound in the analyses of the current situation and very sharp in distinguishing the new aspects that characterize it, such as the new meaning

that “tolerance” has come to acquire in the last few decades. What I perceive as problematic are the proposed solutions to these issues that he examines. While in 1986 he tried to find a way to keep society together, now, in 2017, he strongly doubts that this is possible. So Engelhardt puts forth some pressing questions: “Is a society with such a “weak” account of morality, bioethics, and political authority sustainable? [...] Is a society after God actually governable over the long run? Is a society fully without God livable? And if so, in what sense?” (p. 23).

Of course these are rhetorical questions, because according to Engelhardt, in reality

“[t]he epistemological and metaphysical roots of contemporary morality and therefore of bioethics that many thought were available through an anchor in being or in moral rationality, turn out not to exist. Once one abandons God, once one attempts to live after God, as if all were without ultimate meaning, one is set adrift within the horizon of the finite and the immanent. Secular morality and therefore bioethics cannot be what many had presumed” (pp. 23-24).

In brief, the answer to those rhetorical questions is that after God the Great Fall will occur and society will break apart! The first Engelhardt was confident that a secular bioethics could develop a new way of living in order to allow for a peaceful and free society. The late Engelhardt examined the “complex and wide-ranging changes in the appreciation of what secular morality and its bioethics can be” (p. 24), and concluded

“that the substance of bioethics will still be known by traditional Christians to be anchored in the will of God. This knowledge will perpetuate the culture wars. The content and the significance of religious morality and bioethics contrast with that of secular morality and its bioethics. The conflicts will not abate. As this book shows, in this culture after God, God’s powerful presence will endure in Orthodox Christianity” (p. 24).

II. Elements for a short criticism of the late Engelhardt’s views.

As with any summary, the former outline is also reductive and cannot provide the richness of the original argumentation. However, I hope that it provides at least a general idea of the main issues that are at the basis of Engelhardt’s perspective. There appear to be two points that mostly attracted his attention: at the foundational level, secularization initially appeared to be a sort of liberation, but ended up being a new orthodoxy threatening the traditional Christian civilization; at the contentful level, new customs concerning sexuality, family life and ending lives are seen as replacing the old enchanting religious rites, and this process was extremely

quick, so that people could not properly adjust to the change: the final result is a kind of moral chaos.

Engelhardt put it very directly:

“The Italy of the 1950s was an Italy that could not have conceived that there would soon be serious debates regarding the possibility of Roman Catholic priestesses and homosexual marriages, not to mention the propriety of third-party-assisted reproduction with donor gametes, abortion, physician-assisted suicide, and euthanasia. This is not to say that in the 1950s there was no abortion, fornication, adultery, active homosexuality, and even physician-assisted suicide. There surely was. However, the official culture expected repentance for such acts, or at least the tribute of hypocrisy. [...] The cardinal difference between then and now turns not just on a difference regarding certain norms, but much more *on a change in the very nature of public morality*. It turns not just on the force and meaning of norms, but on the contemporary requirement that the public square must be free of any mention of God. As a consequence, public moral discourse had a very different character. In the dominant culture of the West, and of Italy in particular, one could still be publicly judgmental regarding the morality, or better regarding the immorality, of abortion, fornication, adultery, homosexual acts, and physician-assisted suicide. Such adverse judgments were taken to have foundations, to be anchored in reality, in being itself. Moreover, one could publicly mention God. The culture I experienced in the 1950s was a world in deep contrast with what one encounters today in the public space of the West, even in that of Texas” (pp. 59).

Here we have a conjunction of the two levels of Engelhardt’s criticisms: secularization modified, in depth, the nature of morality itself, and the conclusion was a change of moral norms so that the content of morality is different, and sometimes opposite. More briefly, “*immanence has triumphed and the transcendent has been exorcized*. The discourse of sin has become politically unacceptable” (p. 61). This could occur because most aspects of the framework of our life-worlds have changed: our deep ontology concerning the structure of reality, our moral epistemology concerning how we know the moral world, our sociology of moral experts that indicates who the scholars are that are appointed to give us moral advice, and finally our axiology, concerning the values itself and their hierarchy. The final result of the process is that the whole morality has become *ultimately foundationless* and has changed its role. Moral judgements do not prescribe what is required by the moral reality which is given, but have been transformed “into life-style and death-style choices, which are to be appreciated fully within the horizon of the finite and the immanent”.

My first disagreement with Engelhardt concerns the idea that the new morality underlying bioethics would be “ultimately foundationless”. One can say this only

if it is taken for granted that the only possible foundation is in reality, or in the being itself. However, this solution is destined to be inadequate because the reality, or the being itself which is assumed to serve as the foundation of morality, is the *biological being*. But, as I mentioned before, we are living at the time of the Biomedical Revolution, which is the continuation of the Industrial Revolution. As the latter made it possible for humans to control inorganic nature, the Biomedical Revolution is enabling human control of organic nature: the past centuries have been the time of civil, mechanical and electrical engineering, while our time is one of genetic and biomedical engineering. This means that we realize that the supposed stable and immutable “being itself” is no longer so, since we can modify it according to our needs and wants. For this reason, morality cannot be grounded in the biological reality, but this does not entail that morality is necessarily foundationless. Even without being a utilitarian in the strict sense of the term, morality can be founded on the welfare of sentient beings.

A morality based on such a new foundation can have analogous functions in society, even if it is something else, since moral decisions have been transformed “into life-style and death-style choices” which do not have an impact on eternal life, but they “are to be appreciated fully within the horizon of the finite and the immanent”. This is true, and this is an epoch-making change. Morality is like a language, and the change of a language with the creation of a new one is an enormous and complex phenomenon. But this shouldn’t frighten us: in one sense the process is in line with our times and should be welcome.

In order to understand why we should face this challenge with confidence and positive attitudes, without being frightened, I would like share just a few remarks. If it true that, as Eric Hobsbawm used to say, the Industrial Revolution was the most fundamental transformation in human history, then we have to realize that we are also experiencing a tremendous change. Possibly, the transformation that we are witnessing is even more profound and deeper than the one experienced in the past centuries. As I have hinted, the Biomedical Revolution is the continuation of the Industrial Revolution, but in some sense it is even more profound than the former. The Biomedical Revolution comes together with other extraordinary events, such as the information and robotic revolutions, which are synergetic with the same goal: human control of life. While the Industrial Revolution aimed at the control of inorganic nature, the Biomedical Revolution aspires to control the organic one, i.e., life itself: the former was about modifying the *external* environment of life in general and human beings specifically, while the latter points directly to modifying the *internal* environment of life, and even of humans. This would be enough to support my statement that the Biomedical Revolution is even more profound than the Industrial one. Moreover, life is what we are constituted of, and, therefore, strong feelings are rooted in whatever pertains to life and is connected with it. This means that interventions in the organic nature raise very passionate, if not violent, reactions in the public. People are bewildered and frightened by the idea that life can be forged by human intervention. This,

in fact, is a new possibility that may radically change the course of history and the very structure of our existence.

Just to give an idea of the magnitude of the phenomena we are speaking of, I can say that the Industrial Revolution was something much greater than, for instance, the passage from the Medieval age to the Modern one: possibly it was something comparable to the Neolithic revolution, i.e., the passage from the state of nomadic being to the residential, with the beginning of what we call “civilization”. To elaborate this point, I can say that we are living at the time of transition from *history* to *post-history*: in fact, “*pre-history*” was the time in which no writing could register the events; “*history*” is the time where written documents testified to the occurrence of the most important events; and now “*post-history*” is the time where almost everything is going to be recorded and where life itself is under human control. My hypothesis is that we are facing a transition which is greater than any other change, because the control of life allows a new kind of setting.

If we consider the moral storm that we are facing, we shouldn’t be too surprised to find ourselves living in a sort of “moral chaos”. This situation is quite normal, because something similar occurs in our individual lives: when we have a shocking experience that modifies the structure of our existence, we live for a period in a kind of “suspensive vacuum” in which we do not know exactly what to think and do. Far from being on the edge of an abyss, I believe we are in a situation of departure for new directions.

Certainly, the task is not easy to accomplish, because the elaboration of a new morality is a momentous enterprise. But we have an advantage to use in our task, and this is provided by the new conception of morality as one of the various normative institutions regulating our social life, and by the fruitful results given by ethical theorizing of the last centuries. Engelhardt is critical of all this when he remarks that “secular theoreticians of bioethics are reduced to serving as geographers of our ongoing controversies, unable to give any canonical moral guidance. They are like map-makers or tour guides who can show us alternative moral and bioethical destinations, but who cannot tell us what destination one ought to choose, where one should go on the map” (p. 20). However, I think that this “second order” reflection marks the strength of recent moral thinking, because it enables us to provide a more considerate moral guidance. This will not prevent bioethics from continuing to provide “some of the most important battles in the culture wars” (p. 12), but we can explain that such battles are the result of the persistence of “cultural survivals” that are tenacious and deeply rooted.

In his descriptive part, Engelhardt’s last book is a masterpiece in portraying, or photographing, the passage of an epoch. But in his prescriptive proposal, I think that Engelhardt is too pessimistic, and he does not take the possibility that we are living in a time of a great transition seriously enough. Willy nilly, the future will be radically different from the past, and there is no point in being a *laudator temporis acti*, i.e., someone praising the old times in which things had another shape. Morality is

like fashion: being against a fashion (that sometimes appears to be the only fashion) doesn't necessitate destroying all fashion, but simply starting a new fashion with its own styles and canons. To take another explicative analogy, morality stands to social life as the shadow stands to its object: the shadow can assume different shapes and intensities, but cannot be cancelled. This implies that our society can and will survive even without a morality founded on God, and our task is to find out a contentful morality adequate for a society inhabited by moral strangers, as Engelhardt recognized.

A brief final remark concerning why ours is a society *after God*, the topic that is at the basis of Engelhardt's contribution. The central aspect is the grand process of secularization, which in the last hundred years has become prominent. Secularization is an extremely complex phenomenon, and this is the place to limit to only one observation. Certainly the crucial point of secularization is the disenchantment with of the world consequent to the scientific revolution and to the spread of a scientific outlook. But there is another aspect to reflect upon. In the last century, life expectancy has doubled and now it is around 90 years. In rich countries people are sufficiently confident to live long enough as to realize their own life-plans. Secularized people are not militant atheists *against God*, but they are simply *after God*, i.e., not interested in God. They are neither interested in whether God exists or not, nor in what He wants and commands for salvation, because they are too busy in pursuing their own human projects. God is beyond their preoccupations, because they assume that their own life is stable and safe enough so that they can postpone metaphysical speculations to a later time. The Biomedical Revolution has provided us enough blood analyses, scans of various sorts, surgery, diets, etc., to make people confident enough to control life for an adequate time, so that secularized people can lose, or disregard, their interest in God and religion.

If this short consideration is correct, then the increase of life expectancy is another crucial factor engendering secularization. In fact, the *timor mortis* (or fear of death) is supposed to be one of the main springs of religion. According to Titus Lucretius Carus, as well as David Hume, religions are basically nourished by such an attitude. But our recent confidence in an adequate quantity of life expectancy is changing this basic feeling. Let us imagine what will be when our life expectancy will be at 250 or 400 years: for sure it is very difficult to strain our imagination to that point.⁵ However, in that case, it might be possible that the *timor mortis* will be replaced by the *taedium vitae*, boredom for life, so that people will be annoyed with continuing to live. Some indications in this direction are provided by very old people, over 90, who have lost all their peers, and even if they are in adequate physical con-

⁵ For some excellent analysis on these points see J. Harris, *Genes, Clones, and Immortality: Ethics and the Genetic Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), and John Harris, "Immortal Ethics", *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1019, no. 1 (2004): 527-534.

dition, seem to be less interested in living.

In his book, Engelhardt repeats several times that once one abandons God, everything is without ultimate meaning, and therefore secular morality is destined to collapse. For sure, the morality of the future will be quite different from that of the past, which we know and study. However, meaning is not something that we discover in the world, or that is inscribed in the nature of things, but something that humans instill in their projects and life-plans. And it is very likely that they will continue to instill meanings even in a society after God. Such meanings will be set within the horizon of the finite and the immanent, but hopefully it will be a horizon wide enough as to establish a morality which will produce more benefits for all than the old morality that we are acquainted with.

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