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VARIETIES OF HUMANISM FOR A SECULAR AGE:  
CHARLES TAYLOR'S PLURALISM AND THE PROMISE  
OF INCLUSIVE HUMANISM

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's work on modernity and secularity is notable for many reasons, not least for its erudition and depth of historical detail. These aspects that make his work so rewarding, however, can obscure his overall philosophical vision. In what follows I propose to expand our understanding of Taylor's philosophy by taking account of his engagement with secularity, especially in *A Secular Age*.<sup>1</sup> I argue that Taylor's engagement with secularity demonstrates his deep concern for preserving key humanist insights, an abiding commitment to moral pluralism, and the sincerity of his religious faith. Taylor insists on transcendence as the best hope for securing the continued commitment to humanism in the west, and personally advocates a renewed Christian humanism.<sup>2</sup> His notion of tran-

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<sup>1</sup> Charles TAYLOR, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2009), ix (cited in text as SA).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kearney, in a recently published conversation with Taylor, "Transcendent Humanism in a Secular Age: a Dialogue With Charles Taylor," in Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, eds., *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016) summarizes the "conclusions" of *A Secular Age*. Kearney suggests that for Taylor the future of transcendence in the West hinges on whether or not a new vision of humanism becomes widely available, or the "dominant narrative of exclusive secular humanism" continues to be the default position. This new understanding of humanism Kearney refers to as "a new Christian humanism open to the transcendent." Kearney correctly characterizes Taylor's position to be a critique of exclusive humanism but one which appreciates much of value in the historical development of exclusive humanism as an option in the immanent frame. At the same time, it is clear that Taylor also thinks we should explore possibilities for belief and unbelief in the immanent frame beyond the usual, often uncritically accepted polemics. "[W]hy," Kearney

scendence, however, is amenable to other interpretations, including non-religious options, and so allows for a potential overlapping consensus on humanism from what Taylor calls the “transformation perspective.”

I begin with a general preliminary consideration of transcendence and offer a brief explanation of Taylor’s account of the decline of the viability of belief in transcendence. I then focus on the dominant, and for many the *sole*, version of humanism, what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism.” As will be-

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asks, “is atheistic humanism not enough? Why is a Christian or transcendent humanism so important for you?” (77–78).

Taylor’s response to this question, and indeed, the rest of his otherwise quite unfiltered conversation with Kearney, helps us understand the nuanced position on the future of transcendence, and the role Taylor envisions for the transformation perspective as a support for a new humanism. Taylor responds by distinguishing between “two kinds of secular humanism. One, which rules out any “beyond,” is a kind of reductive materialism that recognizes no source of value beyond the immanent frame. Then there is another kind, which does acknowledge something else, some aspiration for something more, some “meaning of meaning... But its notion of this surplus—for all its resistance to a general ‘flattening down’ and unlearning of the great wisdom traditions—remains intramundane” (78).

Taylor distinguishes his understanding of the Christian version of a transcendent humanism from the secular versions by contrasting the different responses to death, and the details of the Christian vision of the transformation that “breaks out of the immanent frame and looks beyond.” What Taylor and Kearney refer to as “transcendent humanism,” however, takes a narrowly religious sense, but Taylor’s understanding of transcendence as transformation admits a weaker reading, one that allows for non-religious variants at least as strong in transformative potential as any based on an original Judeo-Christian theism. There are inclusive, and exclusive versions of secular humanism. In his conversation with Kearney, Taylor uses “transcendent humanism” as a synonym for a “Christian humanism,” so we can consider his use of these terms to exclude intramundane transcendence. My use of his much earlier term “inclusive humanism” is intended to capture both, on the condition of an adequate transformative potential.

In fact, Taylor has been working on this idea for almost sixty years. See, for example, his fourteenth journal article (out of 500 and counting) from 1960 (Charles Taylor, “Clericalism,” *Downside Review* 78, no. 252 [1960], 167-180). Taylor argues against clericalism (“the emphasis on hierarchical *structure* of the Church which causes to be hid from view its *life* as the community of the faithful” [167].) which he charges with causing the laity to be “indifferent to human development,” and describes “a clear link between the view that this human development is devoid of significance and... clericalism, and also an important historical link between the dissolution of the laity as a people and the denigration of their task, of secular progress as a whole, a rejection of humanism” (169). In defense of what, in 1960, he explicitly calls Christian humanism, he claims that clericalism obfuscates “works of supererogation... as the *normal vocation* of the laity” (174). In defense of humanism the much younger Taylor complains that “[t]he Church has done more to condemn humanist doctrines... than it has tried to understand why all major humanist doctrines of the modern era have been anti-Christian. By “humanist doctrine” I mean some view of man which tries to show the scope and/or importance of human development towards greater well-being freedom, unity, justice... All these views have been anti-Christian for at least one main reason: that Christianity has seemed to their protagonists a doctrine preaching the impossibility of human betterment or its irrelevance” (177). Almost all the main points in Taylor’s later philosophy of religion are anticipated in this early work.

come clear, Taylor rejects the picture of a unitary vision of humanism predicated on the rejection of any good beyond humanity—the dominant understanding of “secular” humanism. Although Taylor rejects humanism of an exclusive variety, he is a pluralist with respect to versions that include rather than exclude transcendence, which admit a variety of interpretations including, but not limited to, religious senses of transcendence. He is, in other words, a pluralist with regard to questions of the sources of the moral achievement of humanism. From the point of view of his later work, his project can well be understood as a defense of just such a pluralism, rather than a tendentious defense of Christianity. Although he does argue for the viability of a new Christian humanism rooted in a revitalized Christianity, Taylor does not insist on the Christian, or traditional metaphysics of transcendence. Taylor is motivated to develop his account of the viability of transcendence in *A Secular Age* by a commitment to humanistic values, and a conviction that these values are not well supported by versions that exclude transcendent conceptions of the human good. I end with a sketch of the general shape of Taylor’s ideal of transcendence, and a consideration of its strengths as a source for a revitalized, overlapping consensus on humanism.

Transcendence has been central to Taylor’s thought throughout his career, but it takes center stage in his late work on religion and late modernity. Two of his most recent works are particularly important for an understanding of his approach to transcendence. The first is his 1999 Marianist Award lecture (“A Catholic Modernity?”) in which Taylor approaches the question of transcendence in a work addressed specifically to his fellow Roman Catholics, and is the closest he comes to removing the filter of philosophical neutrality on the subject of religion and God. The other recent work of primary importance to any discussion of Taylor and transcendence is his monumental *A Secular Age*.

#### DIFFICULTIES OF TRANSCENDENCE

The term “transcendence” is deployed in a bewildering variety of ways, often with very different meanings. The term is dangerously close to becoming so vague as to be useless in philosophical discourse. Even Taylor, for whom the term is crucial, expresses regret for the lack of a more suitable substitute (SA 16).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See, “Concluding Reflections and Comments,” in *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor’s Marianist Award Lecture*, ed. James L. Heft (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 105-108 (cited in text as CM).

At the most basic, etymological level we find the idea of “climbing beyond.” In this most basic sense, what would seem to be minimally necessary to be preserved in an acceptable usage is that the term must remain faithful to this basic idea of “climbing beyond” (and we might add, “by ascent”). The etymology of immanence, on the other hand, suggests dwelling, or remaining within, which offers the underlying contrast with transcendence as “going beyond through ascent.”<sup>4</sup> Though often opposed, “immanence” and “transcendence” are not necessarily contradictory. Also, transcendence often includes a normative dimension whereby “beyond” is construed as higher or better.

The basic and most common notion of transcendence is most fully captured in what is commonly called “vertical” transcendence, contrasted with “horizontal” transcendence. The idea of vertical transcendence is perhaps most familiarly illustrated in Plato’s cave simile in *The Republic*. “Vertical” transcendence likewise supports metaphysical dualism. The contrast case of “horizontal” transcendence conceives of the “beyond” of transcendence without necessarily involving a commitment to metaphysical dualism. That is, “horizontal” transcendence is less metaphysical than it is ethical, where recognition or acknowledgement of the other may be understood in terms of going beyond while remaining within immanence. Questions of what is sometimes referred to as “other transcendence” belong on this latter horizontal level. As Ingolf Dalferth points out, while a number of influential thinkers have seen a progressive development of the sense of transcendence from the robustly vertical, “ontological” transcendence of Plato to a lateral or horizontal “ethical” transcendence, that distinction is too simple to capture the nuances of the various senses of “transcendence.” Dalferth endorses Regina Schwartz’s view that “the categories... are heuristic distinctions that ultimately break down, for the vertical inflects the horizontal, and vice versa.”<sup>5</sup> The distinction is an important heuristic tool, and the spatial metaphors “vertical” and “horizontal” are important for gaining an initial purchase on the very idea of transcendence, especially in its overtly religious forms, but if they are taken as rigid categories the ideas are confining. We certainly cannot understand Taylor in these terms alone.

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<sup>4</sup> The etymology here can be substantiated in any of a number of etymological dictionaries. I have here relied on the classic, W. W. SKEAT, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910). This is a lovely book.

<sup>5</sup> Regina Schwartz, quoted in Ingolf U. DALFERTH, “The Idea of Transcendence,” in *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, ed. Robert Bellah, and Hans Joas (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Cambridge University Press, 2012), 153.

Taylor argues that we late moderns live under historically contingent conditions of pervasive disenchantment where belief in transcendence is marginalized, and that the lives of believers and unbelievers alike are understood to take place “within a self-sufficient immanent order” (SA 543). Taylor calls this the “immanent frame.” The immanent frame imposes a now familiar dualism between the “natural” and the “supernatural,” or “immanent,” and “transcendent,” and includes what Taylor calls “spin” in favor of immanence that problematizes belief in transcendence. Taylor goes on to defend the possibility of belief in transcendence, however difficult such belief may be.

Our late modern “framework” is an *immanent frame* because it occludes transcendence as a possibility, but not so completely as to render it impossible. The immanent frame is the common background for all in the secular age, and is not optional. Both believers and unbelievers understand themselves and their world through the immanent frame. Disenchantment is irreversible, according to Taylor, and the meanings that once were to be discovered, or passively accepted, are no longer naively available to the modern subject. The modern identity is “buffered,” according to Taylor, always at a remove from an unreflective acceptance of a meaningful life. With this comes an increased social alienation, and the hegemony of instrumental rationality. In nearly all of this Taylor follows Weber on the disenchantment of the world, but he adds “one more background idea: that this frame constitutes a “natural” order, to be contrasted to a “supernatural” one, an “immanent” world, over against a possible “transcendent” one” (SA, 542). Taylor’s use of the term “immanent frame” echoes another frame that plays a role in his critique of modern epistemology. And just like modern epistemology, Taylor argues that the immanent frame is a picture that “holds us captive” (SA 549). Rather than a set of beliefs we hold about the world and ourselves, it is the “sensed context about our predicament,” that “we have trouble often thinking ourselves outside of, even as an imaginative exercise” (SA 549).

The immanent frame, however, is not Weber’s “iron cage.” While some will be held “completely captive,” so to speak, the possibility of imagining alternatives remains open. Taylor thinks that by dint of imaginative effort, and articulation, it is possible to “feel the pull of the force of each opposing position” (SA 549). The immanent frame conditions the possibilities for the “obvious.” From the believing stance immanence obviously gestures to something “beyond” immanence, whereas it can appear just as obvious to the unbeliever that immanence bars the possibility of a beyond. The open space

that Taylor thinks is possible, though perhaps difficult to achieve, is where it becomes possible not only to imagine how others may live the frame (open or closed) but, going further, to actually feel the force, or appeal of the opposing possibilities. The immanent frame is crucial for understanding why Taylor thinks that the transcendent/immanent distinction is something we're stuck with, but also that it is something that may be overcome. Much of *A Secular Age* is aimed at disabusing his readers of any simplistic view of what is "obvious" about transcendence and immanence. A major element in achieving this goal is to point out how their beliefs, even what appear at first glance to be "obvious," are dependent on a wider, historically contingent, context.

EXCLUSIVE HUMANISM:  
THE MODERN ALTERNATIVE TO TRANSCENDENCE

Taylor argues at considerable length in *A Secular Age* that what he calls exclusive humanism is increasingly hegemonic in our age, and that it is the very possibility of exclusive humanism that accounts for the secularity of the secular age. Exclusive humanism is a form of humanism in that it is an affirmation of humanity and the good of human life and human flourishing. What makes exclusive humanism unique, what makes it "exclusive," is that it excludes any aim or goal for humanity *beyond* the good of human flourishing, or as Taylor sometimes puts the matter, any good beyond *life*. "Exclusive humanism," Taylor tells us, is a version of humanism "based exclusively on a notion of human flourishing, one that recognizes no valid aim beyond this" (CM 19). It is a "purely self-sufficient humanism... accepting no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (SA 18).<sup>6</sup>

Exclusive humanism is still a bit of a vague notion. Part of the difficulty here, as Ian Fraser points out in his engagement with Taylor's Marianist Award lecture, is that Taylor nowhere in that work "informs us which thinkers fall under that rubric."<sup>7</sup> *A Secular Age*, published after Fraser's remark,

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<sup>6</sup> Although Taylor recognizes that there may have been variants of exclusive humanism in the ancient world restricted to an elite minority (he names Epicureanism as a potential candidate), he argues that it only becomes a viable alternative to transcendence on a large scale with the advent of modernity—that it is coterminous with the coming of the secular age.

<sup>7</sup> Ian FRASER, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2007), 35.

also offers no specific examples of thinkers who may be counted among the ranks of exclusive humanists. In earlier works, especially *Sources of the Self*, Taylor uses the term “naturalist humanism,” which is a recognizable philosophical position. Likewise, especially when discussing the parameters of contemporary philosophical debates, Taylor often mentions “secular humanism” where one might expect him to use exclusive humanism. The reason for this is that exclusive humanism does not name a philosophical position, or a theory, in the precise sense. Rather, it is an identity-shaping perspective on spiritual and moral life. Exclusive humanism is a pervasive perspective. It is Taylor’s name for the condition of selfhood oriented by a conception of the good, exhausted by ordinary human flourishing—by what he also refers to as the “metaphysical primacy of life.” Together with the primary contrast case, religious transcendent perspective, it defines the context within which the philosophical debate takes place; philosophical theories can be understood as reactions to, or developments out of, apparently incompatible conceptions of the highest good—“life,” or something “beyond life.” The philosophical debate, Taylor says, “is shaped by the two extremes, transcendent religion, on the one hand, and its frontal denial, on the other” (SA 20).<sup>8</sup>

Of course, religious transcendence and exclusive humanism do not exhaust the plurality of options, and Taylor recognizes varieties of non-religious non-humanisms, which he associates with the thought and influence of Nietzsche, and refers to as “neo-Nietzscheans.” Unlike exclusive humanism, non-humanist options (religious or non-religious) are not committed to the constitutive goods that empower enlightenment values, and reject not only the primacy of life as the sole end or goal (exclusive humanism) but as any worthy end at all, besides which non-humanist options simply do not have the wide appeal in a culture still committed to the affirmation of humanity—indeed, this is something that Taylor thinks we can even detect in all but the most consistent neo-Nietzscheans. As we will see in more detail below, Taylor shares with exclusive humanism a concern for human flourishing, for what he calls “life goods,” and his critique of exclusive humanism is rooted in his belief that its rejection of transcendence places his shared commitment in jeopardy. Taylor makes common cause with exclusive humanism against the anti-enlightenment perspective, which aligns Taylor against those who

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<sup>8</sup> Charles TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), (cited in text as SS).

reject humanism from a religious, transcendent perspective, although exclusive humanism and the non-humanism are both anti-religion in so far as they deny transcendence. Taylor emphasizes that they differ radically on the issue of humanism: “The camp of unbelief is deeply divided—about the nature of humanism, and more radically, about its value” (SA 636). For Taylor the contemporary modern debate is about more than religious belief in transcendence; it is also about the nature and value of ordinary human flourishing. Rather than a “struggle between two protagonists,” or two “camps” of belief and unbelief, he sees a “three-cornered, even perhaps a four-cornered battle”:

There are secular humanists, there are neo-Nietzscheans, and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life. Any pair can gang up against the third on some important issue. Neo-Nietzscheans and secular humanists together condemn religion and reject any good beyond life. But neo-Nietzscheans and acknowledgers of transcendence are together in their absence of surprise at the continued disappointments of secular humanism, together also in the sense that its vision of life lacks a dimension. In a third line-up, secular humanists and believers come together in defending an idea of the human good, against the anti-humanism of Nietzsche’s heirs. (SA 637)

Taylor also identifies a distinction within the camp of belief, which introduces the possibility of a fourth party to the debate. It is this fourth option with which Taylor himself identifies, and takes into account the problems faced by both the transcendent and exclusive humanist perspectives. This “fourth corner” also forms the basis of Taylor’s positive suggestion for an understanding of transcendence that overcomes the confining categories of the three-cornered debate:

A fourth party can be introduced to this field if we take account of the fact that the acknowledgers of transcendence are divided. Some think that the whole move to secular humanism was just a mistake, which needs to be undone. We need to return to an earlier view of things. Others, in which I place myself, think that the practical primacy of life has been a great gain for human kind, and that there is some truth in the self-narrative of the Enlightenment: this gain was in fact unlikely to come about without some breach with established religion... but we nevertheless think that the metaphysical primacy of life espoused by exclusive humanism is wrong, and stifling, and that its continued dominance puts in danger the practical primacy. (SA 637)



Taylor introduces his fourth option only tentatively in *A Secular Age*, since his aim in that work is descriptive and diagnostic. In *A Secular Age* Taylor wants to describe the “spiritual shape of the present age,” and identify the problems facing belief and unbelief. His fourth option, which is clearly his own perspective, isn’t yet on the moral horizon of modernity—that he wishes it were, is a different matter altogether. Taylor hints at what his fourth option might look like, at the criteria for a suitable transcendent perspective, throughout *A Secular Age*.

With this picture of the contrast case of exclusive humanism, and his understanding of post-axial visions of transcendence, we are in a better position to grasp what Taylor understands to be the relevant notion of transcendence in his critique of modern secularity, and the threat posed by the perspective of exclusive humanism and “neo-Nietzscheanism.”

In both *A Secular Age*, and *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor recognizes a paradox in any religious/transcendent perspective. He argues, however, that the paradox ultimately due to a misunderstanding prevalent in contemporary culture. This misunderstanding is in part due to the “post-revolutionary climate” of modernity that strengthens an entrenched and narrow picture of transcendence. One of the goals of Taylor’s work, and not only his work explicitly dealing with religion, is to disabuse us late moderns of this overly simplistic picture of transcendence, and to make room at the table for a fourth neglected position, an implicit, though overlooked option within the camp of transcendence (CM 8).

Understanding the contrast between exclusive humanism and religious transcendence in the terms that Taylor suggests reveals an inherent difficulty for advocates of transcendence. The inherent tension within the transcendent perspective is between the affirmation of human flourishing, on the one hand, and the belief (definitive of the transcendent perspective) that the ultimate goal of life is beyond human flourishing, that the “final end” of life is something beyond life. If “the highest and best life involve[s] acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing,” the belief that “the highest, most real, authentic or adequate human flourishing could include our aiming (also) in our range of final goals at something other than human flourishing,” a problem is immediately raised. Taylor recognizes that in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition the final goals have indeed been conceived in exactly this way. He notes that, “in this tradition God is seen as willing human flourishing, but devotion to God is not seen as contingent on this. The injunction ‘Thy will be done’ isn’t

equivalent to ‘Let humans flourish,’ even though we know that God wills human flourishing.” Taylor marks an “inherent tension” here, or a “paradox,” that assails any transcendent perspective that affirms the good of human flourishing, of life, yet nevertheless refuses that good as a final end. Taylor’s paradigm case is Christianity, but the possibility of this paradoxical relationship between transcendent final ends and ordinary life goods arises with the axial revolution and the shift in the understanding of transcendence that accompanies it. On Taylor’s reading of the axial revolution, a major development in human understanding of the divine is that it is understood to have an unambiguously beneficent attitude toward human beings, as opposed to the ambivalent, capricious, even hostile, attitude of the pre-axial sense of the divine. This shift opens up the possibility, realized, according to Taylor, in Christianity, that the divine so conceived may function as a moral source empowering the practical goals of human flourishing. Taylor speculates that Buddhism is another post-axial religion that may involve the same paradoxical relationship (SA 16-17).

The paradox may be seen in sharper relief if we take into account that this understanding of the divine involves the *renunciation* of human flourishing insofar as it locates the (true) ends of humanity beyond human flourishing, while at the same time maintaining the *affirmation* of human flourishing in light of the unconditional benevolence of the divine. While Taylor recognizes a tension in this view of transcendence between renunciation and affirmation of life, he argues that the paradox may be resolved. This resolution is realized by a Christian view of transcendence he advances most directly in *A Catholic Modernity?*

Of course, framed in the way Taylor understands it, this paradox inherent in religious transcendent perspectives does not appear in all religious or philosophical views that defend a conception of transcendence. In the first place, this paradox only affects senses of transcendence with a strong vertical emphasis. More than a strong sense of transcendence is necessary, however, for the paradox to show up. There must also be some sense in which the good that transcends life, and calls for renunciation, is also the ground for the affirmation of the goodness of the life that is renounced. To illustrate this difference between views acknowledging transcendence Taylor contrasts Christianity with Platonism (rather narrowly conceived). “In the Christian case,” Taylor points out, “the very point of renunciation requires that the ordinary flourishing foregone be confirmed as valid. Unless living the full span were good, Christ’s giving himself to death couldn’t have the meaning

it does. In this it is utterly different from Socrates' death, which the latter portrays as leaving this condition for a better one" (SA 17). Platonism avoids the paradox, then, by renouncing life outright, as indeed do some forms of Christianity.

The paradox of transcendence, so understood, points to a division within the camp of transcendence that Taylor alludes to in the passage quoted above as a possible "fourth party" to the existing three-cornered debate on transcendence. Those who acknowledge transcendence are divided on the question of the value of human flourishing. On one side there are those who wish to affirm both the higher good beyond life as well as human flourishing, and so embrace some form of the paradox of transcendence—an understanding that Taylor characterizes as a "symbiotic relationship" between human flourishing and a good that transcends human flourishing. The alternative stance may "solve" the paradox by coming down on the side of transcendence against life and human flourishing. Taylor calls this the "stance of purity." This stance of purity rejects the symbiotic view, and "insist[s] on returning religion to its purity, and posit[s] the goals of renunciation on their own as goals for everyone, disintricated from the pursuit of flourishing. Some are even moved to denigrate the latter pursuit altogether, to declare it unimportant or an obstacle to sanctity" (CM 174). The stance that each view recommends toward the Enlightenment makes the distinction all the more striking. The first, seemingly paradoxical view welcomes the moral standards of the Enlightenment as genuine achievements, indeed, Taylor sees them as genuine developments of the "gospel ethic." The second picture of humanity's relationship with the transcendent seeks to return to pre-Enlightenment visions of the good life, and rejects the Enlightenment as an unmitigated error. There are "boosters" and "knockers" (to use two favored categories of Taylor's) within the camp of transcendence as well as the camp of those who reject transcendence.<sup>9</sup> While this completes the basic outline of Taylor's view of the placeholders in the debate on transcendence, it does not exhaust the difficulties for the transcendent viewpoint. The "boosters" on the side of transcendence remain faced with the paradox inherent in the symbiotic view. Taylor takes a more nuanced stance on transcendence that solves the paradox inherent in the symbiotic view and remains committed to Enlightenment values, but mixes his affirmation with criticism and even

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<sup>9</sup> These terms refer, respectively, to those who view modernity as unquestionably a good thing, and those who understand it to be unquestionably a bad thing.

a warning. Before Taylor brings his version of the fourth corner option to the table, however, he needs to offer a way of solving, or dissolving, the paradox of transcendence.

He does this in two ways. First he tries to disabuse his readers of an overly simplistic view of the options available on the side of transcendence, which he attributes to a pervasive prejudice stemming from the Enlightenment context in which the debate was originally undertaken. Taylor refers to this as a “post-revolutionary climate” in the West since the Enlightenment. In addition to diagnosing modern blindness to transcendent alternatives, Taylor advances his personal religious view, that is, he fills in the content of the basic form of the solution only adumbrated in *A Secular Age* with his personal religious understanding. This latter view is one of the main theses defended in *A Catholic Modernity?*, and it shows that Taylor’s deep originality as a thinker is not limited to his philosophy, but extends to his spiritual life. It also shows how deeply his confession of faith and his profession of philosophy deeply inform one another, as against some critics who, focusing one-sidedly on the influence of his faith on his philosophy, maintain some version of the charge that Taylor’s philosophical position must be tendentious, or at least fatally compromised by his religious belief. Taylor argues that, not without good reason, moderns are wary of religion and of any talk of “going beyond” human flourishing.

Taylor identifies other factors that conspire to occlude the vision of transcendent possibilities in modernity. First, transcendence is generally taken, especially religiously inflected notions of transcendence, to be exhausted by the “purist,” or reform understanding of transcendence.

The “purist” version of transcendence avoids the paradox by embracing a negative view of life in relation to the transcendent. This understanding became hegemonic after the rise of exclusive humanism as a genuine possibility during the Enlightenment, and provided the primary target, and much of the fodder for the Enlightenment attack on religion. In the process, the very notion of a legitimate alternative to the purist reform picture of religious transcendence became lost from view. According to the “Reform Master Narrative” that Taylor tells in *A Secular Age*, during the process of reform within Christianity it was the purist reform understanding of religious transcendence that came to be identified almost exclusively with the understanding of religious transcendence as such, and any serious alternative recedes from view. The stance of *ἀγάπη*/karuna, the vision of transcendence powered by love, Taylor says, “becomes invisible... because a transformed

variant of it has, in fact, been assumed by the secularist critic” (CM 175). More specifically, in the context of charges of mutilation of the body, or life, leveled against Christian religious transcendence by Nietzsche, Taylor makes the point that the charges are overly narrow in their target and that there are alternatives. It is not accidental that the passages where Taylor considers this aspect of the development of secularity in *A Secular Age* happen to be just those where he comes closest to apologetics; this is integral to his personal religious vision as well.

A second major explanation of the occlusion of alternatives to the purist reform version of transcendence stems from what Taylor calls the “postrevolutionary climate” of modernity. By “postrevolutionary climate” Taylor means the hypersensitivity to real or perceived threats by the previous regime to the gains of a revolution that pervades the order of things following in the wake of a revolution. Generalizing to contemporary modern culture in the West, Taylor claims to see “a milder but very pervasive version of this kind of climate” in the wake of the Enlightenment with respect to transcendence.

To speak of aiming beyond life is to appear to undermine the supreme concern with life in our humanitarian, “civilized” world. It is to try to reverse the revolution and bring back the bad old order of priorities, in which life and happiness could be sacrificed on the altars of renunciation. (CM 176)

#### THE INADEQUACY OF EXCLUSIVE HUMANISM

Taylor begins his Marianist Award lecture with a forthright admission on his part, as a Roman Catholic, that the decline of the ideal of Christendom (never realized) was necessary for the legitimate progress in the very core values professed by the Church, and own up to the “humbling realization” that the “authentic developments of the gospel” in modern liberal culture would not have been possible without the “breakout” from the confines of the older structures of belief. “For instance,” Taylor points out,

modern liberal political culture is characterized by an affirmation of universal human rights—to life, freedom, citizenship, self-realization—which are seen as radically unconditional; that is, they are not dependent on such things as gender, cultural belonging, civilizational development,

or religious allegiance, which always limited them in the past. As long as we are living within the terms of Christendom... we could never have attained this radical unconditionality. (CM16-17)

Although Taylor agrees that the decline of the hegemony of Christianity was a great boon for the West, he argues that it comes with dangers of its own. Once again we find Taylor exploring both sides in the debate, finding losses and gains in each. Here I want to focus on one complication in particular, one specific matter that, if Taylor is correct, should be a very serious concern indeed. Taylor thinks that we in the late modern West are “living beyond our moral means” as he claims in *Sources of the Self* (SS 517), and in *A Catholic Modernity?* he elaborates on this.

In the final section IV of *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor returns to, and elaborates, the problem of the strength of modern sources of morality that he raised in *Sources of the Self*. Taylor makes the case here that the transformation perspective is ultimately preferable to the “stripped-down” secular view now dominant in our culture in the wake of secularity 3. He does not, however, think that there can be an argument for the superiority of the transcendent perspective in absolute terms.

Many critics of modernity begin from the point of view that modernity is especially fractured, and in deep disagreement over first things. Taylor begins from the opposite pole. He argues that nearly all of us share the same highest moral standards. As an example of this deep agreement Taylor points to a convergence in terms of personal resonance when presented with examples of practical efforts to make good on the universality of our moral standards. We are all (or should be) moved by examples of solidarity with people on the opposite side of the globe, of philanthropic endeavors such as *Medicine Sans Frontières*. The list is long:

The more impressed one is with this colossal extension of a gospel ethic to a universal solidarity, to a concern for human beings on the other side of the globe whom we shall never meet or need as companions or compatriots... the more we contemplate all this, the more surprise we can feel at people who generate the motivation to engage in these enterprises... [and] the less surprised we are when the motivation... flags, as we see in the present hardening of feeling against the impoverished and disfavored in western democracies. (CM 30-31)

Taylor’s claim that “our age makes higher demands for solidarity and benevolence on people today than ever before” is clear enough to be uncontro-

versial. The question, however, is whether there is enough motivating force for the practical work necessary to live up to humanist universal ideals without, in some sense, going *beyond* humanity. “[W]e are asked” according to Taylor, “to maintain standards of equality that cover wider and wider classes of people, bridge more and more kinds of difference, impinge more and more in our lives” (CM 30). The question is whether we can, as a culture, keep up the good work.

All of this presupposes that the commitment to the same underlying standards is part of the modern identity, and again, whether we are “living beyond our moral means” as Taylor puts the problematic in *Sources of the Self* (517). This dedication revealed in our affective responses, “have become part of our self-image, our sense of our own worth” and failure to live up to these standards leaves us with a sense of moral inadequacy, even as instances of particular success, or participation, give us “a sense of satisfaction and superiority when we contemplate others—our ancestors or contemporary illiberal societies—who didn’t or don’t recognize them” (CM 31).

Can the commitment to the high standards of humanism as Taylor conceives of it be sustained in this way? Certainly, one might say that we have been doing well enough without answers to these questions, and that further argument over “sources” is unnecessary. The motivation to practical engagement with the goal of healing the world is “fragile” and “vulnerable” to setbacks as well as precipitous outpouring of philanthropy, and in too many cases ineffective. The unconditionality and universality with which a true humanism demands is very different from the “whimsical and fickle” philanthropy rooted in “shifting fashion of media attention and various modes of feel-good hype” (CM 31). To be clear here, although Taylor clearly is pessimistic about the present default secular sources for sustaining our affirmation, he is not cynical. Indeed, Taylor never doubts that our feats of philanthropy are honestly motivated by a genuine concern for humanity and by a true respect for human dignity. What he questions is whether the motivation is sustainable in the face of human failure.

In fact because the demanding standards of humanism are in principle realizable, the human failure practically to live up to these demands inevitably risks turning humanism against itself, and powering disgust for humanity. On the other hand, an *in principle* unachievable goal (in this life) has the advantage of inspiring in the face of human failure and weakness, as well as empowering continued action on behalf of the realization of the ideal, whether it is achievable in the lifetime of the individual or not and whether

or not individual efforts every pay dividends in success. Taylor does not make this exact argument, but it is in line with his general thought. This is also a common theme in religious ethics, that postponing satisfaction in this life (renunciation) is part of the demands of a love of humanity, which in turn is rooted in a love beyond the human. From the perspective of the transformation we are called to labor on behalf of an ideal, not to achieve it. Is there a secular account that can fire a commitment to ideals unlikely to be achieved in this life without threatening to view any life of uncompromised dedication to be wasted if it required renunciation of ordinary human fulfillments?

Nicholas H. Smith understands Taylor to be making an indirect argument for the superiority of God as the only qualifying hypergood when measured against the problematic of adequacy. Smith is right to point out that for Taylor the question hinges on whether or not something like Christian unconditional love of humanity can be powered without some relation to a good beyond the human. Smith is also correct in his reading of Taylor's argument from *A Catholic Modernity?* to be an articulation of Taylor's account of why he thinks a theistic perspective is an adequate solution.

What I think Smith gets wrong is that he presupposes Taylor to be mounting an argument for religious transcendence in the strong sense. That this is not the case becomes clear when we consider the vision of transcendence as transformation as outlined above, and the promise of achieving a transformative perspective without a strong ontological theism. As Smith points out, Taylor thinks that because theism can give an answer to the question of what empowers us to unconditional love of humanity, and thus represents an "epistemic gain" over non-theism. Smith points out that theism can "tell us that the unconditional love of one human for another is made possible in relation to something transcendent, or participation in an infinite, non-human love. Human beings owe their power to realize the highest good to their relation to a transcendent power."<sup>10</sup>

I do not read Taylor to be making an argument for the superiority of a theistic view in *A Catholic Modernity?* First of all, he is not doing philosophy *per se* in the address to his fellow Roman Catholics, who presumably do not need an argument. As I read Taylor, this is an articulation of theism as a moral source; he is giving an account of why it matters, not making the case for its superiority over other possible visions of transformation. If there is an

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<sup>10</sup> Nicholas H. SMITH, *Charles Taylor* (New York, NY: Polity Press, 2002), 231.



argument here Taylor is claiming that our best hope for the possibility of an unflagging commitment to the practical primacy of human life lies in the rejection of the metaphysical primacy of life. Taylor's view doesn't, as Smith thinks, require God—it is not an argument exclusively for God, or for theistic sources alone, but may be generalized as an argument for an inclusive humanism, for the need of a view from the transformation perspective. The point is the need to believe even in the face of setbacks, and the impossibility of achieving in one's lifetime, or the impossible demands of realizing practically the exigencies of universal benevolence.

Beginning from where we already find ourselves, from our present avowal of universal benevolence and unconditional justice, Taylor challenges us to find sources strong enough to empower the fulfillment of the demands of these, our highest moral and spiritual ideals. God is Taylor's source, and he is not shy about his claims for its adequacy. He does not, however, think that it is the only way. Taylor understands his theistic outlook to be one possibility for an inclusive humanism, but not to exhaust the human possibilities for transcendence as transformation adequate to the task. The failure of exclusive humanism should be taken as an opportunity to elaborate new sources as well as a project of retrieval of old sources. In this double project lies promise of a genuinely inclusive humanism.

#### TRANSCENDENCE AS TRANSFORMATION AND THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE HUMANISM

What is Taylor's positive view of transcendence, and what role does it play in his account of the moral life in late modernity? As we saw above, Taylor often characterizes transcendence in a minimal sense as "going beyond," a sense that often includes belief in and commitment to a monotheistic creator God who transcends "this" world. Taylor's characterization of transcendence, however, falls short of insisting on strong ontological claims about the existence, or nature of deity, or *the* transcendent. I argue in this chapter that Taylor advances a vision of transcendence that is intended primarily to be compatible with humanism, that is, he is defending a version of religious humanism, a humanism that does not exclude transcendence.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> This idea, which I argue is central to Taylor's pluralistic standpoint, bears striking resemblance to the later thought of Jacques Maritain. Maritain agrees with Taylor on the problem, and

Moreover, I argue that Taylor is interested in advancing the possibility of an *inclusive humanism* that may take either religious, or non-religious forms, but which includes transcendence. Taylor is primarily focused on undermining, or exposing the inherent weakness of a narrow, reductive *exclusive* or *self-sufficient* humanism that requires the rejection of any good beyond humanity, which plays a role in the determination of the goodness of humanity.

The best way to get at what Taylor means by transcendence, or “the transformation perspective,” is to look more closely at the way it works for his personal religious or theological view. I begin with a characterization of the picture of transcendence that emerges in *A Catholic Modernity*?<sup>12</sup> Carlos Colorado, in particular, has offered a very clear theological reading of Taylor’s view on transcendence. Like Colorado, I also agree with much of Steven White’s characterization of Taylor’s philosophical anthropology as a form of “weak ontology,” and his theism as “weak ontological theism” in my view of Taylor’s philosophical view of transcendence, which emphasizes the element of transformation, and the compatibility with non-religious forms. The

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offers a similar solution. Taylor and Maritain both share a commitment to political and ethical pluralism, a communitarian critique of liberalism, social democratic politics, and both thinkers share a commitment to a humanism based on a markedly similar account of agency. What I am here calling inclusive humanism is also quite close to Maritain’s notion of *integral humanism*. Briefly, integral humanism is the term Maritain gives to the political philosophy he developed after he abandoned the *Action française* (a monarchist/fascist political movement of the 1920s and early 1930s which initially attracted many Roman Catholic intellectuals, including Maritain). Maritain’s ideal of integral humanism is an attempt to elaborate a “theocentric” humanism, which preserves the underlying values of liberal humanism while rejecting the naturalistic and anthropocentric presuppositions. With Taylor, he argues: “Western humanism has religious and transcendent *sources* without which it is incomprehensible to itself [my italics].” Maritain finds the root of a modern crisis of liberalism in the fact that “liberal-bourgeois” humanism is now no more than barren wheat and starchy bread” because it is supported by naturalist philosophy “emancipated” from any reference to transcendence by which its continuing commitment to “some conception of human dignity, of liberty and of disinterested values...[that still]... move men’s hearts and move them to action” might be justified. Maritain seeks “to save the “humanist” truths disfigured by four centuries of anthropocentric humanism... at the very moment when humanist culture is becoming tainted, and when these truths are crumbling at the same time as the errors which vitiated and oppressed them.” Maritain’s integral humanism is his attempt to reconceive humanism from a transcendent perspective that integrates man’s temporal and material rights as well as his spiritual aspirations. Thus his vision of an integral humanism is “more human [than liberal humanism] because it does not worship man but really and effectively respects human dignity and does justice to the integral demands of the person.” Jacques MARITAIN, *Integral Humanism*, ed. Otto Bird, trans. Otto Bird, Joseph Evans, et al. (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame: 1996), 154, 155, 197.

<sup>12</sup> See also, Charles TAYLOR, “Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy,” in *Dilemmas and Connections* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 3-23.

idea that Taylor is working with a “weak ontology” helps us appreciate his resistance to making strong claims for theism in *A Secular Age*, something that has caused some readers to approach his work through a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Taylor sees the basic form of transcendence that he sketches to fit not only some forms of Christianity, but also Buddhism, a faith which does not necessarily posit a creator God. The articulation of transcendence can thus vary even to the extent that it excludes the robust, traditional theological idea of God, and immortality. It is true that in *A Secular Age* Taylor does define religion in terms of transcendence in a strong sense (which he recognizes to be problematic outside the western context), and there explicitly states that “we should see religion’s relation to the “beyond” in three dimensions,” namely, 1) “the sense that there is something higher than, beyond human flourishing... a possibility of transformation... that takes us beyond merely human perfection.” 2) “[T]he belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith,” and finally 3) a view of “our life as going beyond the bounds of its “natural” scope between birth and death; our lives extend beyond ‘this life’”(SA 20). But this apparently highly restrictive definition in *A Secular Age*, we must keep in mind, which insists on 1) self-transcendence, 2) God, and 3) immortality, is merely his working definition.

In *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor offers a gloss on transcendence as follows. “The fundamental idea” Taylor explains, “one might try to grasp in the claim that life isn’t the whole story” (CM 173). While he recognizes, however, that “one way to take this expression” is to read it as indicating immortality, that “life goes on after death,” Taylor brings it up to point out to his Catholic audience that the view he develops in his address is compatible with the stronger view. His more general definition here hinges on the idea that “the goodness of things is not exhausted by life, the fullness of life, or even the goodness of life.” “Let us agree,” he suggests, by way of putting the point in higher relief, “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” (CM 173). This is a reading of transcendence that is standardly objected to from the point of view of exclusive humanism, which is seen to be threatening, even if mistakenly.

Taylor’s solution to the problems associated with transcendence takes form as a solution especially when he re-describes transcendence in terms of “transformation,” and “change in identity.” This description, or re-description, of transcendence builds on Taylor’s moral ontology from *Sources of the*

*Self*. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor calls this view of transcendence the “transformation perspective.” There he contrasts it with views that explicitly take account of transcendence in terms of specific beliefs about the existence of supernatural entities (SA 430). With the move to the transformation perspective, it is clear that Taylor is now taking the discussion in a very different direction, and that he is focusing on the importance, and relevance, of religious experience. The transformation perspective involves what in *Sources of the Self* he calls “moral orientation,” and that he argues is the definitive feature of selfhood, without which self-identity would be close to impossible. For Taylor, self-identity requires some unity of moral direction, which is provided in each case by a moral source, a good transcending the self. A person without any understanding of the good such that identity is organized in relation to it (through reflection and “articulation”) would be pathological.<sup>13</sup> Taylor’s view of moral ontology here construes the “good as the object of our love or allegiance, or as Iris Murdoch portrayed it in her work, as the privileged focus of attention and will” (SS 3). In the case of religious transcendence the change in identity is brought about by a change in will and given orientation by the understanding of God.<sup>14</sup> Taylor offers the example of (Catholic) Christianity that involves “a radical decentering of the self, in relation to God,” but he also includes Buddhism as a paradigm case of the transformative perspective, whereby “the change is quite radical, from self to ‘no self’” (CM 173).

From the transformation perspective the paradox of transcendence is also re-articulated in terms of self-transformation. Taylor’s re-articulation of transcendence in terms of a change in identity, or transformation, he points

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<sup>13</sup> This is a brief gloss on a complicated picture of the modern self, which is the topic of *Sources of the Self*. Elsewhere Taylor is clear that a range of final ends is sufficient. He also doesn’t think that articulation must be so oriented to a good, at least not in the usual sense; for Taylor “articulation” is a term of art, and includes more than language. Another idea of Taylor’s, correlative to “moral orientation,” is “moral space,” which is where the self finds its bearings, to continue the metaphor.

<sup>14</sup> I take the idea of a “change in will” here from John Dewey, who, in *A Common Faith* distinguishes this from a “change of will.” In the first instance the will is passive, Dewey calls it a “voluntary surrender,” whereas the second is active, a choice of direction of the will. My sense is that something like this distinction is also important for Taylor, and it speaks to the question of whether the transformation Taylor has in mind is something entirely under the control of the will. This may be one of the most “Emersonian” sentences Dewey penned. It captures something of the aesthetic-affective “stickiness” of Emersonian subjectivity. For the concept of “stickiness” see Stephen WHITE, *Sustaining Affirmation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8–10, and my discussion of Taylor and weak ontology below.

out, “brings out a similar point to my first way [going beyond human flourishing] in that most conceptions of a flourishing life assume a stable identity, the self for whom flourishing can be defined” (CM 173).<sup>15</sup> In this case, however, the concept of transcendence is much more open than in the earlier case, more flexible, and amenable to a broader realization even outside of religious contexts. Here the relationship between the divine and human flourishing is reconceived in terms of the philosophical anthropology, the ontology of the self that emerges from *Sources of the Self*. The moment of renunciation on the transformative view is conceived of as a decentering of the self in relation to the good, however understood, as a moral source and (re-)orienting transformative power *outside* or *beyond* the self, though not necessarily beyond the world. Renunciation of life involves a transformation or *conversion* of identity by changing one’s moral allegiance. The moment of return and affirmation in Taylor’s understanding of transcendence becomes possible only in the face of the decentering source of meaning, or identity-orienting “source of the self.” Of course, for the purposes of Taylor’s main thesis in *A Secular Age* he needs to maintain a link with the dominant understanding of religion, and the religious, with the central connection to the supernatural. There is, however, in principle no reason that the initial moment of self-transcendence may not be realized in experiences that lie outside the traditionally understood range of “religious experience.” The affirmative moment clearly depends upon the specific form or forms of acknowledgement and articulation of the source, not all of which allow for an affirmation of life. Concentrating on the transformation perspective also allows Taylor to focus the question of transcendence on self-understanding, and to move away from the stickier metaphysical questions about the existence of God.

Summing up his position in *A Catholic Modernity?*, Taylor states that “acknowledging the transcendent means aiming beyond life or opening yourself to a change in identity” (CM 173). Jeffrey Stout, commenting on this sentence in his review of *A Catholic Modernity?* takes issue with the “or.” “Or?” he asks rhetorically, following up with his objection:

One can aim for a change in identity, and in that sense aim for transcendence of one’s self, without aspiring to a metaphysical state that tran-

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that a “stable identity” does not rule out changes in identity. Taylor is very good on the phenomenology of this in *Sources of the Self*. See also, his “Self-interpreting Animals,” in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.

scends life. The possibility of self-transcendence would seem to be sufficient to avoid the stifling of the human spirit.<sup>16</sup>

The first sentence of Stout's objection is entirely correct, but it is hardly an objection to Taylor's view on the matter. Taylor is a pluralist with respect to moral sources and their potential adequacy for motivating a change in identity. Taylor is careful never to argue *philosophically* for his personal vision in this regard. This is partly due to his dedication to certain philosophical principles of argument, and in part due to his sensitivity to criticism motivated by the "post-revolutionary climate" of modernity. Taylor acknowledges the possibility for a plurality of directions that the desire to transcendence may take. Taylor is a careful philosopher, and a straightforward reading, which Stout gives, shows that Taylor has no specific ontological commitments in mind. Besides non-western religions (Buddhism), Taylor also mentions deep ecology as a way "to reconstruct a non-exclusive humanism on a non-religious basis" (SA 19).

But is "the possibility of self-transcendence" without the other two dimensions of transcendence that Taylor lists, namely, God and immortality, "sufficient to avoid the stifling of the human spirit" as Stout suggests? Part of the problem here is the vagueness of the phrase "stifling of the human spirit." I think Taylor would agree with the suggestion that self-transcendence is sufficient for "fullness," as Taylor uses this term in *A Secular Age*.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Taylor's use of the phrase "stifling the human spirit" refers to exclusive humanism, and that his sense of pluralism is robust enough to accommodate a fairly wide range of non-exclusive humanisms.<sup>18</sup> But not all

<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey STOUT, "Review of *A Catholic Modernity?*," by Charles Taylor, et al., *Philosophy in Review* 18,6 (2001): 426.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor's use of the term "fullness" has occasioned a lot of contention in the literature subsequent to the publication of *A Secular Age*. For a particularly straightforward and relatively clear statement on "fullness" see Charles TAYLOR, "Afterword," in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 316.

<sup>18</sup> I think the case could be made that Stout's concern could be allayed by a further consideration of Taylor's account of the self. The picture of subjectivity developed in *Sources of the Self* and elsewhere is of a dynamic self, changing in response to successive attempts at increasingly perspicuous self-interpretations, though dependent on language, and resources of the cultural background. Religion is one resource. For some, the best account of his experience draws on Christianity. Others may find different resources in their own struggle to articulate the sources of spiritual fullness. Everything is variable here. It is not possible, however, to respond fully to Stout without a more detailed explanation of Taylor's theory of the modern subject, which would

ways of transcending are equal for Taylor. The bigger problem here is that some ways of transcending, in spite of the spiritual fulfillment they may bring, may still be inadequate.

As potential counterexamples Stout suggests Emerson and Dewey as among those who have explored “self-transcending religious possibilities that do not involve commitments to transcendent metaphysics,” and points out that “it is far from clear whether Taylor would want to classify them as exclusive humanists.” I think Taylor would certainly *not* discount Emerson, or Dewey’s ideals of self-transcending as a form of transcendence in line with the basic outline of the transformation perspective. However similar these positions may be in this respect, there is still much room for contention regarding the adequacy of the sources of self-transcendence.<sup>19</sup>

Returning to Taylor’s solution to the problem of transcendence, we can now explore how Taylor fills in the basic picture of transcendence as a change in identity, or transformation. For Taylor, the content that he fills in to complete his *personal* picture of transcendence in a way that brings together renunciation and human flourishing is love, specifically love understood in terms of the Christian concept of *ἀγάπη*. On Taylor’s religious understanding of this concept, “renouncing—aiming beyond life—not only takes you away but brings you back to flourishing... renunciation decenters you in relation with God, [but] God’s will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called *agape*” (CM 22). As Guido Vanheeswijck points out, Taylor believes that there is a kind of transcendence that does not thwart human flourishing; on the contrary, there remains the possibility of an openness to *agapeic transcendence* that promotes the very affirmation of ordinary life.<sup>20</sup> Vanheeswijck’s term “agapeic transcendence” excellently captures what is distinctive about Taylor’s understanding of Christian transcendence, his theo-

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take us too far away from the questions surrounding transcendence.

<sup>19</sup> J. STOUT, “Review of *A Catholic Modernity*,” 426. Stout also mentions Santayana to complete a trio with Emerson and Dewey, but I leave him out of the discussion here because I am not in a position to defend the same claims about him as I do about Emerson and Dewey. To my mind Emerson and Dewey are quite close to Taylor on this question. Dewey, I aver, actually argues against what Taylor calls “exclusive humanism,” and his later work (especially *A Common Faith and Art As Experience*) may well be read as trying for just the kind of middle ground between exclusive humanism and religious anti-humanism. We will briefly return to Dewey in the conclusion.

<sup>20</sup> Guido VANHEESWIJCK, “The Concept of Transcendence in Charles Taylor’s Later Work,” in *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics*, ed. Wessell Stoker and W.L. van der Merwe (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2012), 68.

logical interpretation of transcendence as transformation. Emphasizing the moment of affirmation, it also points to the difficulty inherent in transcendent perspectives between renunciation and affirmation, and his understanding of how Christian sources may be articulated to solve the paradox.

It is also clear that Taylor is a pluralist with respect to the variety of forms that this “full-hearted love for some good beyond life” (SA 639) may take, so long as love of God (or the Good as a moral source) returns one to an enlarged love of, and affirmation of life and human flourishing. He also suggests, for example, the Buddhist concepts of *metta* (loving kindness) and *karuna* (compassion) might also work in their own context (or different “civilizational sites” as he sometimes puts it). However overdetermined by various contexts of articulation, and self-interpretation, on this reading life renounced out of a love beyond life returns you to a love of others, and a loving concern for their welfare.

If Vanheeswijck’s reading of Taylor on transcendence as agapeic focuses on the moment of affirmation, Carlos Colorado develops a reading of Taylor on transcendence that emphasizes the moment of renunciation. Colorado’s interpretation Taylor’s emphasis on self-decentering, or change in identity, is read through the lens of the New Testament concept *κένωσις*, often explained in terms of “dispossession,” or emptying. These are both technical terms from Christian theology, and refer to the surrender of the will in a total act of obedience.<sup>21</sup> This reading of Taylor does seem to capture one way to fill out his understanding of transcendence as transformation in more theologically weighted language than either my account or Vanheeswijck’s. Colorado argues that it is the dispossessive, or kenotic reading of transcendence that allows Taylor to hold a difficult position. On the face of it, Taylor’s commitment to transcendence, especially a strongly transcendent monotheistic God, is in conflict with his commitment to pluralism. Thus, the question is whether or not Taylor’s theism gets in the way of his pluralism, and the answer to this hinges on an account of the foundational role (if any) that theism plays in Taylor’s moral ontology.

In order to support Taylor on this question Colorado defends Stephen White’s characterization of Taylor’s ontology as “weak ontology.” Another way of putting this is in terms of the relationship between Taylor’s theism and moral value. To what extent does Taylor’s conception of God determine

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<sup>21</sup> The canonical location for the concept of *κένωσις* is Philippians 2:7: “He [Jesus] emptied [*ἐκένωσεν*] himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.”



moral value? Colorado convincingly argues that Taylor is a weak ontologist in the specific sense developed by Stephen White, and further, that Taylor's conception of transcendence is in effect "weak" transcendence because it is underwritten by a weak ontology.<sup>22</sup>

What White has in mind is a subtler shift in the focus of ontology in late twentieth century philosophy. The relevant "entities" under discussion in the turn to ontology that White has in mind are those presupposed not by our *theories* (social or scientific), but by our late modern ways of being-in-the-world. White argues that Taylor is among a loose group of contemporary philosophers who have turned to ontology, but without taking on a full commitment to an ontology which rejects any relationship between moral and political intuitions and commitments (such as Rortian irony). These thinkers nevertheless admit the instability and contestability of former certainties thought to determine our commitments. Rather, these late twentieth century thinkers allow for an ontology of the self that accepts the need for stability, but falls short of determining morality in a strong sense.<sup>23</sup> White argues that what he sees as an "ontological turn" in recent philosophy stems from the dawning "sense of living in late modernity," in that our former unreflectively accepted certainties are contingent, mere convention.

The sense of living in *late* modernity implies a greater awareness of the conventionality of much of what has been taken for certain in the modern West. The recent ontological shift might then be characterized generally as the result of a growing propensity to interrogate more carefully those "entities" presupposed by our typical ways of seeing and doing in the modern world.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen WHITE, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strength of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); C. COLORADO, "Transcendent Sources," 85.

<sup>23</sup> Of course, by "ontology" White is referring to a turn in philosophy that begins with Martin Heidegger's analysis of being through an analytic of *Dasein* in Division One of *Being and Time* (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson [New York: Harper and Row, 1962]), and not the dominant Anglo-American interest in ontological commitments presupposed by our scientific theories. In his elaboration of the idea of weak ontology, White admits to using the term "ontology" in a unfamiliar way. He notes that around the middle of the twentieth century there was a shift in the understanding of ontology. The new understanding of ontology understood it to be primarily concerned with investigating which entities one is committed to in virtue of holding a particular scientific theory. It is easy to mistake the sense that White has in mind with a concomitant transfer of this concern to the social sciences.

<sup>24</sup> S. WHITE, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 4.

At the same time White finds that philosophers such as Taylor, in spite of this contingency and conventionality, argue that *some* stability is necessary to make sense of ourselves and our moral life.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, White argues that weak ontology “shift[s] the intellectual burden here from a preoccupation with what is opposed and deconstructed, to an engagement with what must be *articulated, cultivated, and affirmed in its wake*.”<sup>26</sup> Weak ontologists accept the weakness, the contestability of our fundamental understanding of what it means to be a human being in the world, but also argue that such a foundation may be contestable without requiring a stance such as Rorty’s, which recommends an unproblematic acceptance of an ironic stance toward even our most cherished moral and political commitments.

Thus White introduces the concept of “weak ontology” as a description of what he takes to be a distinct philosophical position in contemporary thought, one that he contrasts with “strong ontology,” on the one hand and what is often called postmodernism on the other. The idea of weak ontology offers what White refers to as “figurations” of self, other, and world that resist returning strong ontological solutions to late modern problems, such as God, which ground moral and political life. “Strong are those ontologies,” White explains, “that claim to show us “the way the world is,” or how God’s being stands to human being, or what human nature is...[and] [f]or strong ontologies the whole question of passages from ontological truths to moral-political ones is relatively clear.” Strong ontologies, in contrast to weak ontologies, “carry an underlying assumption of certainty.”<sup>27</sup> Against anti-foundationalism, or anti-metaphysical gestures from the “postmodern” camp, weak ontology re-emphasizes that there remain pressing moral and political concerns in need of the immediate constructive concern of philosophy.

My own understanding here is that what White calls weak ontology is a working, or interim, position between modernity and a genuine postmodernity. Neither modern, nor properly postmodern, our age is “late modern”. Late modernity is a liminal stage; we are at the threshold of the next. White takes this as a presupposition of his understanding of the turn to weak ontological conceptions of subjectivity in contemporary thought. It is a powerful vision; it does justice to what Taylor captures with the idea of a generalized

<sup>25</sup> S. WHITE, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. Italics are mine.

<sup>27</sup> I agree with Stephen White when he suggests that he “can’t imagine [Taylor] deploying the metaphor of light and darkness to characterize the relation of his own tradition to that of his opponents,” that is, Taylor does not think absolute certainty (in this life) is possible (*Ibid.*, 7 n.9).

malaise of modernity, and it also offers legitimate hope for the future.

It is the late modern “disengaged self,” what White often refers to as the “Teflon subject,” that is a primary focus of weak ontologies. The Teflon metaphor is intended to get at the idea of the isolation, or separation of the modern sense of self. White contrasts it with a “stickier self” suspended between modern and pre-modern senses of the self. This self is separated from both its background understanding (now destabilized in the wake of late-modernity), but also from what White calls the “foreground,” the external world of nature, including other subjects. All of this goes to make up a picture of modern subjectivity as in a state of skeptical anxiety and paints a picture of the self as alienated, distanced. Nothing sticks. Weak ontologists want something in-between, something stickier than the modern, though not as “porous” as the pre-modern (to use Taylor’s descriptor for this in *A Secular Age*).

Besides the emphasis on a “stickier self” there are other features shared by weak ontologies that emerge. Briefly, weak ontologies refuse the dichotomy of “no ground,” and “absolute ground,” opting for a *via media* that affirms fundamental conceptualizations of a human being’s self, world and the other, while recognizing their contestability. Weak ontologies accept contestability, but also believe in the necessity of fundamental conceptualizations for morality. As White points out, the need for an “adequately reflective moral and political life... demands from us the affirmative gesture of constructing foundations,” while owning the contestability “prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion.” Thus weak ontologies face considerable difficulty articulating the affirmation of humanity. White argues that a final feature of weak ontologies is “cultivation.” The idea here is that the appeal of any particular weak ontological “figuration” (to use White’s term) is necessarily oblique, and that the moral and political demands made by a weak ontology requires the cultivation of spiritual engagement with the source. In terms taken from Taylor’s ontology of the self, this is the idea that articulation brings us closer to the good as a source.<sup>28</sup>

Colorado’s defense of both the consistency of Taylor’s ontological commitments and his commitment to moral pluralism hinges upon whether White is correct in his assertion that Taylor is a “weak ontologist,” in the specific sense that White understands this philosophical position. Colorado argues that White is correct to read Taylor as a weak ontologist, and this in spite of his

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<sup>28</sup> S. WHITE, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

avowed commitment to theism. White calls Taylor a “weak ontological theist,” that is, his theism informs his moral and political life without allowing it to determine absolutely in a way that excludes all margin of contestability.<sup>29</sup>

Colorado also recognizes that Taylor often *sounds* like a strong ontologist, especially when he is speaking to his fellow Roman Catholics, but that “his theistic formulations must be contextualized within his wider anthropological and moral vision. He consistently discusses Christianity and scripture, and even theism in general, as *a best account* of what it is to be human and to live the good life, an account that issues forth from the hermeneutical stance and that takes history seriously.”<sup>30</sup>

In fact, Taylor’s appeals to transcendence are even weaker than Colorado suggests here. In *Sources of the Self* Taylor appeals to what he calls the “best account principle” (or “BA principle” for short) in his argument for moral realism, that is, for the reality of moral value. Taylor offers a kind of transcendental argument, or an argument from conceptual necessity, such that until there is a better account of the ontological status of moral sources that is true to our moral experience—faithful to the phenomenology of being a moral agent—we should take them to be real, to be features of the world (notwithstanding that these “sources” come into being with humanity).<sup>31</sup> The BA principle is intended to make a stronger claim than Taylor makes regarding theism, for theism is not necessary to any account, only to *some* self-interpretations. The BA principle defends ontological claims, though weak, which are aimed at convincing the skeptic—it aims at universal agreement.

When Taylor invokes what sounds like the BA principle in his defense of transcendence in the strong sense he is not offering a best account, but (in the terms of *Sources of the Self*) an exploration of objective order through personal resonance (SS 510-512). The BA principle is supposed to incline one to accept the ontological status of values, that is, moral sources. Because there is no longer a publically accessible moral order our only access to sources is through personal resonance, and articulating these brings us into

<sup>29</sup> White’s characterization of weak ontology fits Taylor remarkably well. Many of the crucial terms of White’s account of weak ontology, and the weak ontological turn in recent philosophy, are taken from Taylor. For example, he takes “sources,” “goods,” “disengaged subjectivity” directly from Taylor, and other major features of weak ontology, such as “cultivation” are explicitly central to Taylor’s ontology, though expressed in different terms.

<sup>30</sup> C. COLORADO, “Transcendent Sources,” 85. Italics are mine.

<sup>31</sup> This is a central thesis in the first part of *Sources of the Self*, and is also well (and more compactly) argued in Charles Taylor, “Ethics and Ontology,” *Journal of Philosophy* 100,6 (2003, June): 305.

closer proximity, or fuller contact with the source. This doesn't mean that everyone will, or should, feel their way to an objective moral order in the same way. In fact, the subjective element here precludes a uniform approach as each individual explores sources in their own way.<sup>32</sup> For Taylor, his Christian faith doesn't have the appeal as a best account of what it is like to be a moral agent, but makes the best sense of the life *he* is living. So much so, in fact, that he can claim that it is "inconceivable that [he] would abandon [his] faith" (SS 53).

Colorado's account of Taylor's sense of transcendence supports my own reading, and although his focus on *κένωσις* emphasizes the decentering moment of renunciation in Taylor's vision of transcendence, he does recognize the affirmative moment as well. Colorado is surely correct to note that "Taylor argues that Buddhism and Christianity present us with complementary notions of how an encounter with transcendence initiates a decentering movement away from the self or atman that leads to an inevitable return to immanence that upholds human flourishing."<sup>33</sup>

My understanding of inclusive humanism is supported by a weak ontology such as Taylor's. The picture that emerges here is a view of ontology compatible with a wide range of possible claimants for our allegiance, which need be understood in a strongly transcendent sense. If White is correct in his reading of Taylor as a weak ontologist, even if faith commitments are questionable as to their objective validity, if not their spiritual strength to power practical dedication to high standards.

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<sup>32</sup> It is important to note, and Taylor is clear on this in *Sources of the Self*, that the fact that this exploration of an objective moral order through personal resonance is undoubtedly subjective, it is not on that account to be assimilated with a subjective stance on morality—moral sources are real, and as such part of an objective order. Still, as Taylor also points out, the subjective element carries an inelimitable danger of falling into subjectivism in spite of the fact that his whole point here is to overcome subjectivism. With the decline of a publically accessible order we only have contact with an order through subjective responses. See, especially, SS 510-514.

<sup>33</sup> C. COLORADO, "Transcendent Sources," 87.

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VARIETIES OF HUMANISM FOR A SECULAR AGE:  
CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE HUMANISM

S u m m a r y

I argue that Taylor's engagement with secularity demonstrates his deep concern for preserving key humanist insights, an abiding commitment to moral pluralism, and the sincerity of his religious faith. Taylor insists on transcendence as the best hope for securing the continued commitment to the moral legacy of humanism in the west, but while he personally advocates a renewed Christian humanism, his notion of transcendence is amenable to other interpretations, including non-religious options, and so allows for a potential overlapping consensus on humanism from what Taylor calls the "transformation perspective."

RÓŻNE ODMIANY HUMANIZMU DLA WIEKU SEKULARYZMU:  
PLURALIZM CHARLES A TAYLORA I OBIETNICA  
POWSZECHNEGO HUMANIZMU

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Staram się dowieść, że zaangażowanie Taylora w badania nad świeckością świadczy o głębokim zatroskaniu tego filozofa o ocalenie kluczowych wątków humanizmu, o jego trwałym opowiedzeniu się za moralnym pluralizmem, a także o autentyczności jego wiary religijnej. Taylor kładzie nacisk na transcendencję jako dającą najlepszą nadzieję, że przyjęcie moralnego dziedzictwa humanizmu będzie kontynuowane w kulturze Zachodu. Osobiście jest on zwolennikiem odnowy chrześcijańskiego humanizmu, jednak jego pojęcie transcendencji pozostaje otwarte również na inne interpretacje, łącznie z opcjami poza obszarem religii, zatem dopuszcza ono potencjalny konsens ogarniający różne odmiany humanizmu w perspektywie, którą Taylor nazywa „perspektywą przekształcenia”.

**Key words:** Charles Taylor; transcendence; humanism; Christian humanism; philosophy of religion; secularity.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Charles Taylor; transcencja; humanizm; humanizm chrześcijański; filozofia religii; świeckość.

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