

6-9-2016

Transcendence and Transformation: Charles Taylor and the Promise of Inclusive Humanism in a Secular Age.

Phillip Williamson Schoenberg

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**TRANSCENDENCE AND TRANSFORMATION:
CHARLES TAYLOR AND THE PROMISE OF INCLUSIVE HUMANISM IN A
SECULAR AGE**

By

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B.A., Philosophy, San José State University, 2004

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Philosophy**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2016

Dedication

To Amanda

*Por un beso de la flaca daría lo que fuera por un beso de ella
aunque sólo uno fuera.*

Aunque sólo uno fuera.

Acknowledgements

I have been blessed, as they say, with many friends without whom the present project could never have come to be. I began the study of philosophy in John Himelright's introduction to philosophy class, and I'm happy to lay all the blame on him for the subsequent two decades I spent reading philosophy. John is an inspiring teacher, and a true friend. A related debt goes to Maranina Olcott, who taught me to construe the Greek, and much more besides. These two have enriched my life by introducing me to classical Greek philosophy and culture, and I owe them a debt I cannot repay.

During the three years I spent at San José State University I was fortunate to study under Peter Hadreas, Thomas Leddy and Richard Tiezen, who encouraged me to continue my study of philosophy beyond the MA, and supported my application to the University of New Mexico.

At UNM Stephen Harris was the only other member of my "cohort" (a martial metaphor especially oddly applied to us), and I have learned much from his friendship, and kindness over the years. At UNM I have also had the pleasure to work alongside, and am grateful for many conversations with Graham Bounds, Daniel Briggs, Andrew Dobbins, Jennifer Gammage, Laura Guerrero, Charles Kalm, Jeremy Martin, Ethan Mills, and Douglas Vanbenthuisen.

My committee at UNM was supportive of my project from the beginning, and continued to support it to the end, through the many versions of my thesis. I am deeply grateful to Iain Thomson, my true *Doktorvater*, for his moral and intellectual support, and his example as a teacher, a scholar, and as a human being. Likewise, I am grateful to Russell Goodman, my original advisor. It was Dr. Goodman who originally encouraged my interest in Taylor and introduced me to pragmatism. He also reintroduced me to Ralph Waldo Emerson, for which I am exceedingly glad. Kelly Becker was important for the dissertation in ways I'm sure he may never fully appreciate, but it is a better work because of his presence on my committee. Finally, Piotr Gutowski, the "outside" member of my committee was, in the end, also one of the most engaged, supportive and *critical*. I am also thankful for his friendship. Besides these four official members of my committee, I would like to thank John Bussanich, a truly maieutic soul, who should have been on my committee. For friendship and encouragement I would also like to thank Gail Baker. Gail read a very early version of this manuscript and it is better for her comments.

For our sacred retreat of friendship and virtue, without which I would have given up on this project long ago, I would like to thank my fraternity brothers, especially Esteban Aguilar, Kenneth Davis, Jeff Johnson, and Robert Jones. I am a better person for our acquaintance.

Finally, I would like to thank my students. I have taught every semester for over a decade, and each class has offered me a renewed commitment to philosophy, and confirmed my conviction that the teaching of philosophy changes lives. Among the many students who have inspired me, Ranime Oueis, Tim Regalado, Ricardo Roybal, Oliver Stephanz and Lisa Sundval especially stand out. I would also like to mention, by way of memorial, my student Wolfgang Scott-Cohen.

Finally, I thank my family most of all: Amanda, Robert and "baby girl." One of the most fundamental, and most important experiences of self-transcendence available to us in this world comes with becoming a parent, the sudden realization one only finds one's true self in loving devotion to another.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study in the religious philosophy of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. I focus in particular on the role of transcendence in his later writing on religion and secularity with the aim of contributing to a better understanding of his overall vision of the way out of the malaise of modernity, namely, his adumbration of a pluralistic solution, which I call "inclusive humanism" in contrast to both a narrow religious humanism on the one hand, and a narrow "exclusive" secular humanism on the other. Transcendence as transformation is the centerpiece of Taylor's hope for the moral and spiritual health of the late modern West, a civilization that he argues is struggling to maintain its commitment to a number of demanding universal moral standards in the face of dwindling resources for

articulating continued affirmation or practical commitment. While Taylor believes that the Judeo-Christian tradition contains within itself the potential for renewal, his pluralist vision is open to the possibility of a new, inclusive humanism. The requisite transformation he envisions is modeled after religious conversion, but it is also clear that Taylor is open to non-religious possibilities.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Let us pose the question once more in principle: Is faith possible without transcendence? Can man be taken possession of by a goal belonging to the inner world, that has the character of faith, because its content appertains to the future and is therefore, so to speak, transcendent to the present and in contrast to the suffering, discordancy and self-contradictory reality of the present?--a goal which, like so many religious faiths, has the tendency to delude us concerning the present, to console, to find a substitute in something non-existent, non-present?--and is nevertheless capable of successfully calling for self-sacrifice and renunciation in the interests of this illusory future?

-- Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*¹

In his review of Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, Richard Bernstein remarks that the 800-page book "is so richly textured that it is difficult to know how to approach it."² Bernstein, I think, probably echoes the experience of many of Taylor's readers. Even Taylor, in the brief preface to his work, recognizes that there is a fundamental lack of unity in the book. "I ask the reader who picks up this book not to think of it as a continuous story-and-argument, but rather as a set of interlocking essays, which shed light on each other, and offer a context of relevance for each other." In what follows I take up the question of transcendence, and the role that it plays in Taylor's

¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1953), 218.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2009), ix (cited in text as SA).

work, especially in *A Secular Age*, and other recent writing on religion and secularity. Transcendence, indeed, may well be considered the most salient topic running throughout the several "interlocking essays," and also ties *A Secular Age* to Taylor's other work, especially *Sources of the Self*.³

Although transcendence is the best candidate for a unifying theme in Taylor's most recent thought on religion, his understanding of transcendence is anything but straightforward. His use of the term is easily misunderstood, and has caused some confusion among the reactions to his thought. In the following pages my aim is to clarify Taylor's understanding of transcendence, the role that it plays in his broader critique of our secular age, and the unique challenges that our age poses for those committed to the affirmation of humanity.

One outcome of Taylor's engagement with the question of transcendence and secularity is greater clarity surrounding a set of questions too often thought to have obvious, if not simple, answers. Taylor challenges the dominant picture of secularity, which tends toward a complacent acceptance of one or another form of what Taylor calls a "subtraction theory" of secularity. According to subtraction theories the decline in religious belief is a natural outgrowth of modernity, to be

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1989), (cited in text as SS); Richard Bernstein, "The Uneasy Tensions of Immanence and Transcendence," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 1 (December 2008): 11.

explained as a mere "subtraction" of adventitious beliefs and practices, these having been superseded by modern scientific and technological means. As Taylor explains the idea, subtraction theories explain modernity and secularity "by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge" (SA 22). Taylor challenges a certain complacent acceptance of this kind of story of modernity, and brings the weight of his reputation as a major philosophical thinker, and his well-earned, undeniable claim to our attention and serious consideration to a set of issues long thought by many to be closed, or hardly worthy of serious consideration.

This is Taylor's *métier*: complicating and problematizing answers to questions that to many seem to be obvious, and so safely neglected. Indeed, one of the most compelling aspects of *A Secular Age* is Taylor's sympathetic treatment of the phenomenological description of unbelief. This stems from more than a sense of argumentative fairness, however. As Nicholas High Smith points out, Taylor is methodologically committed to a "cultural theory" of modernity, which attempts to understand the developmental history of culture in terms of a comparative approach to culturally contingent, internal pressures driving the development. As Smith puts it, what Taylor thinks is necessary is the careful reconstruction of "the intrinsic appeal of the values embedded in the Enlightenment outlook as it emerged

historically through a contrast with the preceding moral horizon"⁴ The culture-theoretical approach demands a particular sensitivity to the original appeal of values, as well as the affective draw of the preceding cultural understanding. This contrasts with the "acultural" approach that seeks to understand the evolution, or cultural development in terms of non-contingent, "cultural neutral," feature that defines the trajectory of cultural development. "Subtraction theories" fit well into the "acultural" category of theories of modernity. As Smith explains, the cultural theorist is careful to "reconstruct the intrinsic appeal of the values and standards that help constitute modern culture, as they arose out of mutation from the values and standards of the predecessor culture." Smith's characterization of Taylor's cultural theory of modernity is especially salient in *A Secular Age*, where Taylor focuses on the development of one particular feature of modernity, secularity. I think philosophers, regardless of their ultimate take on the picture of our age that Taylor paints, can appreciate that he undermines the standard lines of *both* sides of the polemic surrounding religion and transcendence since the Enlightenment.⁵

This is primarily a study in the religious and moral philosophy of Charles Taylor. In subsequent chapters I develop an interpretation of Taylor on

⁴ Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor: Meaning, Morals and Modernity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 200.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 204.

transcendence, a reading that is consistent with his overall philosophical project, and I tie this understanding of transcendence to a set of moral challenges that Taylor argues, successfully in my view, are unique to our age. Beyond his diagnosis of our "malaise" in a secular age, and his problematizing the usual polemics surrounding religion, Taylor also has a positive vision for a way forward, albeit one he has insufficiently developed. My aim is to contribute to a better understanding of Taylor's moral/spiritual prescription for the ills of our age, and the role transcendence plays in overcoming the challenges of life in our late modern secular age.⁶ To that end, in the following pages I defend the thesis that Taylor's account of transcendence is capable of supporting a pluralistic vision of an *inclusive humanism*.⁷

⁶ Taylor often uses the terms "moral" and "spiritual" as near synonyms. In his wider project they are closely connected ideas, inseparable. In *Sources of the Self* he explicitly defends his use of "moral and spiritual" in the same breath, as it were, by pointing to the wider project of the book, and of his conception of the moral economy of the self. Whereas the "moral" tends to be associated with other-regarding considerations and intuitions, "our reactions on such issues as justice and the respect of other people's life, well-being, and dignity," the "spiritual" broadens the set of concerns to include the more self-regarding questions, including our personal dignity, the spiritual concerns "what makes life worth living." Still, they are close to the traditional questions of morality: "What [spiritual issues] have in common with moral issues, and what deserves the vague term "spiritual," is that they all involve what I have called elsewhere "strong evaluation," that is, they involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged" (SS 4).

⁷ Taylor uses the term "inclusive humanism" at least as early as 1988. See, Charles Taylor, Review of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy*

With this term I intend to refer to any view of the goodness of human life predicated on the spiritual devotion, or moral allegiance, to a conception of some good beyond human life. It is "inclusive" because it includes more than the goodness of life in the conception of the good for humanity. At the same time, I conceive of inclusive humanism to be neutral on the question of the content or articulation of this good beyond the human in which the goodness of humanity is rooted. The key element in any adequate inclusive humanism is that the conception of the good beyond humanity be such as to effect a transformation radical enough to effect a change in identity, and which self-understanding makes it possible to sustain an affirmation of and devotion to universal benevolence and justice.

Taylor does not believe a narrow "exclusive humanism" (one that excludes transcendence) is likely to provide sufficient support for the practical affirmation of universal benevolence and justice, and we therefore need to reconceive humanism in such a way that it satisfies the human desire to transcendence. Taylor's preference is clearly for a religious, specifically a Roman Catholic, articulation of a transcendent (or Christian) humanism, but I argue here that his deeply pluralistic moral and religious thought, including his position on transcendence, is not limited to religious belief as a ground for morality. The pluralistic humanism that Taylor hopes for

and Philosophy, by Martha C. Nussbaum. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 18, no. 4 (December 1988), 805.

allows for both a religious and a non-religious fundamental understanding of transcendence, but requires the overcoming of the self-satisfaction in most forms of secular humanism, that is, overcoming humanity through self-transformation or decentering.

Taylor never elaborates on the details of what the other options are, although he does occasionally allude to alternatives along the lines of deep ecology, and neither do I in the present study. In the conclusion, however, I point out the promise of a pragmatist, especially a Deweyan, option for a non-reductive naturalist approach that emphasizes transcendence as transformation, even recognizes the necessity of the "religious experience" of self-transformation for a true humanism, but nevertheless remains entirely intramundane.⁸

Chapter Summary

In Chapter Two, "Challenges to Humanism and Transcendence in a Secular Age," which immediately follows this introduction, I offer a discussion of Taylor's secularity thesis, his claim in *A Secular Age* that the modern West is secular in a very specific sense, what he calls "secularity 3." I explain his understanding of "secularity 3," his name for what makes our age distinctive with respect to the believability of

⁸ Some pragmatists have called for a "pragmatist enlightenment," or what one might call an "enlightened enlightenment." I think Taylor's thought makes a contribution towards this wider goal as well.

transcendence relative to pre-modern ancestors. This chapter also includes a refutation of a recent challenge to Taylor's secularity thesis from Ruth Abbey, who is otherwise one of Taylor's best interpreters and a sympathetic reader and critic working today, and a clarification of Taylor's definition of "religion" in *A Secular Age*, in order better to understand the commonly misunderstood project of that book, and its relationship to the concept of transcendence. The aim of the chapter is to explain and to defend Taylor's secularity thesis, but also to lay the groundwork for subsequent chapters, all of which presuppose some familiarity with the main thesis of *A Secular Age*.

Chapter Two closes with an account of the problems that Taylor first broaches in the concluding pages of *Sources of the Self*, and which form the basis of his critique of exclusive humanism (Taylor refers to "Enlightenment humanism," or "Enlightenment naturalism," in *Sources*) and his implicit vision of a transcendent, or inclusive humanism in *A Catholic Modernity?* and *A Secular Age*. I explain the moral dilemmas that Taylor sketches in the concluding chapters of *Sources of the Self*, a set of problems unique to late modernity, focusing the discussion on what Taylor calls the dilemma of "mutilation" and the "maximal demand," on the one hand, and on the question of the adequacy of exclusive humanism to support our particularly demanding set of moral imperatives. "High standards," Taylor avers, "need strong sources" (SS 498), and he questions whether the naturalist secular sources available

in late modernity can genuinely afford the adequate affective allegiance needed to empower the commitment to the practical realization of the demands of the standards of morality to which we already find ourselves committed. Though not an exhaustive list, Taylor's favorite examples of the latter are universal benevolence and justice.

One of the difficulties faced when writing on Charles Taylor is that he often presupposes a familiarity with his earlier work, especially his philosophical anthropology from *Sources of the Self*. Some understanding of his earlier work is exceedingly helpful for an adequate understanding of his later work on religion, transcendence and secularity. A related difficulty is presented by the distinctive, and idiosyncratic terms he often employs in the presentation of his ideas. Although Taylor's philosophical training and long career in philosophy has been in the twentieth century analytic tradition, he writes in his own idiom a lot of the time, defining his terms to suit his wider project without always considering the commonly accepted vocabulary of the discipline. Because it engages more of Taylor's early work than other chapters, this chapter also takes up the challenge presented by Taylor's philosophical originality, and allows for some preliminary conceptual clarification.

Chapter Three, "Varieties of Transcendence in a Secular Age," anticipates the full account of Taylor's view of transcendence in Chapter Four. I briefly consider the

very idea of transcendence, and survey a recent influential taxonomy of philosophical positions on transcendence developed by the theologian Wessel Stoker. This chapter also includes a consideration of important concepts from Taylor's work relevant to transcendence, including further consideration of "exclusive humanism," and the notion of the "immanent frame," both of which are important to understanding Taylor's concept of transcendence.

The primary thesis is advanced in Chapter Four, "Transcendence as Transformation and the Promise of Inclusive Humanism." The justification for waiting until the fourth chapter to bring together the thesis is just that a fuller appreciation for Taylor's understanding of transcendence and the role it plays in his wider philosophical project and critique of modernity is greatly aided by the preliminary discussions of the first three chapters. This chapter begins with a more detailed consideration of Taylor on transcendence, and a consideration of other recent characterizations of transcendence in Taylor's work. It becomes evident that the basic structure or fundamental ideal of transcendence for Taylor is not limited to the understanding of transcendence as used in his working definition of religion "in the strong sense," but may be understood to encompass a broader range of transcending. This wider understanding of transcendence Taylor's philosophical position supports what I call an "inclusive humanism," and distinguish it from the "exclusive" variety that is one of the secular targets in *A Secular Age*. Inclusive

humanism recognizes that the desire to transcendence is more than an adventitious feature of human history, something to be sloughed off as unnecessary with the advent of modernity. On the contrary, according to Taylor, it is an important feature of our humanity and may be the best way to provide much needed support for the affirmation of our moral standards. At the same time, while inclusive humanism includes a role for transcending, it does not exclude possibilities for intramundane transcendence, so long as these allow for legitimate transformation, and the overcoming of the narrow self-satisfaction of exclusive humanism (SA 553).

There are two criticisms of Taylor on transcendence considered in Chapter Five, "Two Critics of Taylor on Transcendence." The appearance of *A Secular Age* created quite a stir in professional philosophy, and its publication was followed by a flurry of responses. It would greatly lengthen the present work if even half of these were considered here. Rather than attempt a comprehensive defense of Taylor on transcendence, I have chosen two representative philosophical critiques. I begin with Martha Nussbaum, who has had a longstanding conversation with Taylor on transcendence, beginning years before the publication of *A Secular Age*. Nussbaum also represents a distinctively external critique, and one that Taylor takes up explicitly in *A Secular Age*, and helps us clarify important points Taylor makes relevant to countering all three of the critics considered. Iain Thomson has made some of the strongest critiques of Taylor on transcendence. Thomson considers the

Heideggerian element of Taylor's thought, arguing that that there may well be a conflict between Taylor's robust pluralism on the one hand and his ontological commitments on the other. Thomson also puts forward a strong version of Nietzsche's critique of "otherworldly nihilism," as a foil to Taylor. Not only are Nussbaum and Thomson representative of the strongest critiques of Taylor, but they also compliment each other well, since the main line of Thomson's argument takes Taylor into very close proximity to Taylor's engagement with Nussbaum. In both cases our understanding of Taylor on transcendence is considerably clarified by consideration of two of his most thoughtful critics.

Although I argue that Taylor's understanding of transcendence as transformation is not limited to religious senses of transcendence, and that his pluralism commits him to at least some secular visions of transcendence which may support an inclusive humanism, I do not, however, explore what a non-religious inclusive humanism would look like in detail. In concluding Chapter Six, "Pragmatism and Inclusive Humanism," I do, however, suggest what I think is one of the most promising possibilities for a naturalist interpretation. I point to a certain compatibility of viewpoint between Taylor and pragmatism, perhaps especially John Dewey. Although I do not develop it in detail, I believe there is ample room for a constructive engagement between Taylor and pragmatism and suggest that Dewey's

thought is among the most promising directions a naturalist vision of inclusive humanism may take.

Chapter Two

Challenges to Humanism and Transcendence in a Secular Age

What does it mean to say that we live in a secular age? What are the consequences, losses, and gains? These are guiding questions in Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. As with his critique of modernity in general at the heart of his critique of secularity Taylor is concerned with what we might call the moral and spiritual health of late modernity. In this respect his theory of modern secularity may be read as a continuation of his earlier work, especially *Sources of the Self*. As in his earlier work, in *A Secular Age* Taylor also aims to "retrieve buried goods" so they may once again empower one to do the good, in his more recent work on religious belief under the conditions of late modernity Taylor aims to rescue, or at least rehabilitate, the viability of belief in transcendence in spite of what he argues is a strong bias against transcendence in our day. Taylor concludes *Sources of the Self* with the suggestion, without providing an argument that belief in transcendence may turn out to be the best solution to the moral and spiritual dilemmas that follow from the picture of the modern identity developed there. His reasons for holding this position are made explicit in his most recent work, where he advances an argument not only for the continued viability of belief in transcendence, but also for the need of a transcendence as transformation, in other words, for an understanding of humanism

that does not exclude the possibility of transcendence, nor privilege religious transcendence.

A Secular Age traces the development of modern secularity, or what Taylor calls “secularity 3,” understood as the global shift in the pre-theoretical background conditioning the horizon of possibilities available for religious belief. Taylor offers a Heidegger-inspired genealogy of the “largely unfocused background, “ or the “context of belief,” of the late modern West.⁹ Contrasting our age with our pre-modern ancestors, Taylor argues that the change from “a society in which it is virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” warrants calling our age secular in a radical sense that reaches to the very roots of lived experience for believers and unbelievers alike (SA 3, 19). Moreover, this development poses unprecedented difficulties for belief, including a weakening of the plausibility structures¹⁰ of transcendence, the apparent threat that a purely immanent perspective may eclipse transcendence.

⁹ The Heidegger-inspired elements of Taylor's thought in this case, and in his critique of epistemology, owe much to the influence of Hubert Dreyfus. Their long-standing collaboration on epistemology has culminated in their recent co-authored book, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ The term "plausibility structure" is taken from sociology of knowledge. For an interesting use of the term in the context of modernity and religious belief (or

While “secularization” remains a hotly debated topic in contemporary philosophy and other disciplines, especially sociology of religion, and the term “secular” or “secularization” remains contested as to its meaning as well as its appropriateness as a description of our age, it is safe to say, with Taylor, that there have been major changes with respect to religion since the advent of modernity. The change that Taylor is specifically concerned with in *A Secular Age* is the difference in terms of lived experience, not merely changes in belief or practice, or changes in the public place of religion. Taylor is especially keen to distinguish his notion of secularity from the sense in which it is used, perhaps most commonly, to refer to the real or apparent decline in religious belief and practice. Taylor denominates his specialized sense of secularity, “secularity 3,” in order to distinguish it from other, more common, senses of secularity. It is in relation to this specialized understanding of secularity that Taylor thinks the United States as a whole is secular, and this in spite of the persistence of religious belief and practice in most areas of American society. Taylor offers “the majority of Muslim societies, or the milieu in which the vast majority of Indians live” as contrast cases to the secularity of the United States. “It wouldn’t matter,” for his claims regarding secularity 3 Taylor avers, “if one shows that the statistics for church/synagogue attendance in the

unbelief) see Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angeles: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York, NY: Anchor, 1970).

U.S., or some regions of it, approached those for Friday mosque attendance in, say, Pakistan or Jordan (or this, plus daily prayer). That would be evidence towards classing these societies as the same" in terms of secularity 2, but this would neglect a remaining, more fundamental, difference in terms of the phenomenology of belief. Taylor is interested in exploring a more fundamental difference: "it seems evident," Taylor claims, "that there are big differences between these societies in *what it is to believe*, stemming in part from the fact that belief is an option, and in some sense an embattled option in the Christian (or "post-Christian") society, and not (or not yet) in the Muslim ones" (SA 3). We will explore this in more detail below, when we consider Ruth Abbey's challenge to Taylor's secularity thesis, that is, his claim that our age is secular in just this specialized sense of "secularity 3," that belief is an option, and we can opt out.

This difference in terms of lived experience, of "what it is like" to believe, which holds not only among our pre-modern forebears but arguably between the modern West and some contemporary non-western cultures, or a sub-set thereof, can be summed up as the fact that disbelief is even an option in our civilization, whereas for others (past and contemporary) disbelief is not a viable option.

"[W]hy," Taylor asks, "was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?" (SA 25).

Throughout *A Secular Age* Taylor develops his answer to this question through an account of this change in the form of a monumental history, a “grand narrative,” of the shifting conditions of belief in the West. Taylor distinguishes secularity 3 from two other senses of secularity, which are prominent candidates, or, as he says, “families of candidate,” for an understanding of secularity. Although secularity 3 is his primary focus, he also thinks that a deeper understanding of the conditions of belief will help us to understand the concept of secularity more deeply, and to some extent help account for the other senses in which we are usually taken to be a secular society.

The first major candidate for understanding secularity focuses on the place of religion in the institutional life of people in the modern West, in contrast to the pervasiveness of religion in the past, or in contemporary non-western cultures. Reference to religion has all but disappeared in modern western public life, whereas in the past it would have been impossible to avoid reference to religion in all spheres of public activity.

If we go back a few centuries in our civilization, we see that God was present ... in a whole host of social practices—not just the political—and at all levels of society... In those societies, you couldn’t engage in any kind of public life without “encountering God”... But the situation is totally different today. (SA 2)

The difference is even more stark when the place of religion in public spaces is contrasted with archaic societies, where “the whole set of distinctions we make

between the religious, political, economic, social, etc., aspects of our society ceases to make sense.” Religion was not set apart from these other spheres of public activity in archaic societies, but was integral to the purpose and meaning of the all activities that made up the public life of society. “[A]s we function within various spheres of activity—economic, political, cultural, educational, professional, recreational—the norms and principles we follow, the deliberations we engage in, generally don’t refer us to God or to any religious beliefs; the considerations we act on are internal to the “rationality” of each sphere...” (SA 2)

The second common understanding of secularity is more directly focused on the question of the decline of religious beliefs and practices. This is the sense in which the term “secular” is most commonly used, and probably captures the ordinary use of the term. This is the sense of secularity usually associated with sociological studies on religious belief and church attendance. It is also more controversial whether or not, or to what degree, contemporary western societies may be said to be secular in this sense, especially in the interpretation of statistics on religious belief.

Taylor recognizes the importance of these two common notions of secularity but he thinks that secularity 3 offers a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to be secular. Rather than focusing on the decline of reference to God or the transcendent, or ultimate reality, in the public life, or tracking the changes in beliefs

and practices of individuals in society, secularity 3 is about the shape of the background, or the changing resources for the moral and spiritual life in the modern West insofar as these present conditions represent a major development such that God, or the transcendent is displaced as the default option in the economy of moral or spiritual experience in the modern West. Secularity 3, then, is not a question of the content of belief, the number of believers, or level of religious practice; rather, it is a question of “the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual.” Taylor is trying to understand secularity at the level of lived experience, the sense in which it is “a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.” This “context of understanding” that is the focus of secularity 3 involves “matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of options, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocused background of this experience and search, its ‘pre-ontology,’ to use a Heideggerian term.” That is to say, in pre-modern society belief in transcendence, was integral to pre-reflective, or primary experience, and this made religious belief unproblematic and “naïve” (in a sense Taylor borrows from Schiller). Today, however, this kind of naivety is no longer an option, and has been replaced by a reflective stance, which problematizes transcendence. It is difficult to deny Taylor’s claims here, that belief in transcendence has somehow become destabilized in contemporary life, that it is “no longer axiomatic,” and

“there are alternatives.” Choice in this domain is inescapable, for believer or unbeliever alike (SA 3).

Ruth Abbey’s Challenge to Taylor’s Secularity Thesis

Taylor’s description of the secular situation that he explores, especially with respect to the way in which belief or unbelief show up as legitimate choices, makes his claims regarding secularity 3 difficult to deny. The close association of secularity 3 with secularity 2, the sense that focuses on belief and practice, however, has led to some misunderstandings about Taylor’s claim regarding the secularity of the contemporary West. Ruth Abbey, in particular, has challenged some of the claims of Taylor’s secularity thesis.

An important and sympathetic commentator on Taylor for many years, and a former graduate student of Taylor’s, Abbey has recently questioned his claims about the secularity of our society, arguing that we are not really so secular as Taylor seems to think, and in particular, that his fears regarding the threat to transcendence are unfounded.¹¹ She challenges Taylor’s depiction of our age as secular not in order to challenge the general insights and analysis of *A Secular Age*, but to “complement Taylor’s overall analysis.” Correctly identifying one of the

¹¹ Taylor supervised Abbey’s dissertation on Nietzsche. The best example of her influence as a commentator on Taylor’s work is her excellent monograph on Taylor. See Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, 2000).

main points in the book, which is to demonstrate “the tenacity of religion in modern western societies,” she thinks his claims regarding secularity 3 actually undermine his claims regarding the endurance of religion. “In short,” she claims, “Taylor’s own framework can be used to show that religious belief is not as marginal to the lives of most contemporary westerners as many of his remarks suggest.” Thus Abbey offers a kind of internal critique of Taylor. She claims that given Taylor’s rather wide definition of religion the empirical data (primarily in the form of opinion polls) contradicts his secularization thesis, while offering support for his claims for the endurance of religion. She argues that the data seems to support a picture of the modern West as still quite religious, in the wide sense that Taylor gives to “religion” in *A Secular Age*. She goes so far as to suggest a better title for *A Secular Age* would have been *What Secular Age?* (SA 9-10, 8).¹²

Abbey’s challenge to Taylor on the secularity of the age is ultimately based on a misreading of his position, especially what he means by secularity 3, and what it

¹² Ruth Abbey. “A Secular Age: The missing Question Mark,” in *The Taylor Effect: Responding to A Secular Age*, ed. Ian Leask, Eoin Cassidy, Alan Kerns, et al. (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 8. I note that aside from the problematic main thesis Abbey’s article is particularly enlightening in some of the ancillary interpretations she offers of *A Secular Age*. To cite just one example, she very helpfully points out the relevance of self-interpretation to secularity 3: “Readers familiar with Taylor’s though will recognize that this concern with what it is like to live as a believer or non-believer in contemporary western societies is an extension of his career-long concern with self-interpretations, with how individuals understand themselves” (SA 10).

entails with respect to secularity 2, or the decline in belief and practice. Abbey also doesn't adequately appreciate the nuances in Taylor's definition of religion, which leads her to an interpretation of his definition that appears to be much less expansive than she recognizes. Her reading of Taylor in both cases, though ultimately difficult to support, is understandable, since Taylor is often far from clear. Indeed, as Abbey points out, his writing does tend to evince a "flexible, open-minded and characteristically relaxed attitude towards matters of definition." It is instructive, therefore, to see how Taylor's "relaxed attitude" has led to a misreading of his position, and should aid us in a more precise understanding.¹³

One of the difficulties with Taylor's construal of secularity 3 lies in identifying the relationship between this third sense and the other two, especially the second, which centers on belief and practice, and whether this is in decline or not. Taylor points out that most people are interested in belief, rather than the conditions of belief. In particular Taylor is trying to articulate the difference between the earlier naïve acceptance of God, or the transcendent, and the modern turn to the possibility of taking a reflective stance on the question. And although Taylor recognizes that there are important relationships between the three different meanings of secularity, he also argues that "there is no simple correlation" between them. Abbey is not the

¹³ Ibid.

only sympathetic critic of Taylor who seems to have drawn too quickly a strong relationship between secularity 3 and secularity 2. Richard Bernstein has suggested that Taylor's distinction between the second and third senses is "merely heuristic."¹⁴ Abbey seems to think that the relationship is such that a society is secular in Taylor's third sense just in case there is a correlative decline in belief. We have already seen that this is not necessarily the case. For Taylor, secularity 3 is a condition of the possibility of a decline in religious belief but does not necessitate such a decline. It may follow as a symptom, but this is not necessary in order to classify a society as secular in the sense of secularity 3. In his initial discussion of the third sense Taylor specifically offers the United States as an example of a society that is secular, he thinks, "as a whole," but is hardly secular in the second sense (according to most studies of belief and practice in the U.S.). He admits that religious belief and practice can be high, without touching the defining feature of secularity 3, which is the possibility of choice between immanence and transcendence. It is just the fact that "belief in God... is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace." Whether or not, or just how extensively, the option for unbelief is taken, is strictly speaking irrelevant. "It wouldn't matter," Taylor points out, "whether one showed that the statistics for Church/synagogue attendance in the

¹⁴ Bernstein, "The Uneasy Tensions," 13.

U.S.... approached those for Friday mosque attendance” in Muslim countries, since the comparable rates of belief and practice between two societies does not account the possibility that there may yet be “big differences between these societies *in what it is to believe*, stemming in part from the fact that belief is an option.” Taylor might agree, as I have just indicated, that secularity 3 might play an important role in accounting for decline in belief and practice in a society where this has happened, but “there is no simple correlation” and it is perfectly conceivable that a society may *not* be secular in the second sense, but still be considered so in the sense of secularity 3. Indeed, this appears to be the case in the United States (SA 3).

Is Abbey correct to point out that Taylor commits himself to claims about the difficulty of religious belief under modern conditions and that it is “an embattled option,” which may be confirmed by empirical evidence? Abbey argues that Taylor’s “claims about the difficulty of sustaining religious belief in a secular age are quasi-empirical ones,” yet there is no such evidence for these claims, and furthermore, the evidence appears to support the opposite claim. Perhaps we should expect to see a statistical decline in religious belief if Taylor is correct about the embattlement claim. Nevertheless, it is the optionality of belief that is the defining feature of secularity 3, not the embattlement claim. And of course absence of any “hard evidence” for a decline in belief and practice offers nothing in the way of support for a claim about the experience one way or the other. Taylor’s

embattlement claim is perfectly consistent with a majority of people in a society opting for faith, which, for all we know, may well have been a difficult process of working one's way to belief (or unbelief) without the assurance of naivety in the turbulence of reflection. Taylor's claim on behalf of secularity³ only requires that it was an option at all.

It also seems that the question of just how difficult individuals in modern western societies experience the choice between belief and unbelief is clearly overdetermined by the available data. While opinion poll data that shows many, even the majority, of a society choosing the believing option may indicate the choice was unproblematic, it is conceivable that it also supports Taylor's embattlement claim. That is, widespread vague, undefined, or inarticulate belief may be evidence of a struggle.

There remains the question of whether, in Abbey's words, Taylor "undermines his own goal of showing religion's endurance in the modern western world by exaggerating the threat to religion" (SA 16). We can accept the charge of exaggeration, however, without committing ourselves to the stronger claim that the embattlement claim is false. Taylor doesn't, I think, exaggerate his claim in this respect. In each case, and in the many different ways that he asserts the embattlement claim, he is very careful to qualify the claim. For example, he says that for "*more and more* people, unbelieving construals seem at first blush the only

plausible ones,” or that “the presumption of unbelief has become dominant in *more and more of these milieu*; and has achieved hegemony in *certain crucial ones*,” or again, that “unbelief has become *for many* the major default option,” and so on.¹⁵ It is important to note that Abbey cites all of these instances and more besides in defense of her claim that Taylor exaggerates the difficulties facing believers in the modern West. Nowhere does Taylor assert that the majority of individuals in the modern West are unbelievers, nor does his embattlement claim entail that this is the case. As her last bit of evidence for exaggeration Abbey faults Taylor for offering “no evidence for his declaration that those who deny the existence of God outnumber those who believe such existence can be proven” (SA 17). Taylor may well have said such a thing, but it hardly qualifies as an exaggeration. Note that it only claims that *those who believe such existence can be proven* are in the minority, which seems to me perfectly consistent with the majority of people still believing in God, or the transcendent, indeed, with the persistence of religion. After all, if you can’t believe in God without also believing that his existence can be proven, then Taylor wouldn’t qualify.

There is a final reason for thinking that Taylor’s embattlement thesis doesn’t undermine his claims regarding the persistence, or as Abbey puts it, the

¹⁵ Italics are mine.

“endurance” of religion in the modern West. Indeed, rather than undermining Taylor’s claim for the endurance of religion, his embattlement claim would seem to be necessary; after all, endurance or persistence implies resistance or difficulty, in some form, to some degree. Taylor’s claim regarding the persistence of religion in the modern West, at its most basic, is that religion persists, or endures, *in spite* of difficulty, and *in spite* of the choice between belief and unbelief; that is, secularity 3.

Taylor’s Working Definition of Religion

Of course, secularity, no matter how one understands it, is about religion. This poses a difficulty not only for Taylor, but also for any theorist of secularity, insofar as it means that the controversial issue of the definition of religion has to be confronted. What, exactly, does Taylor mean by “religion”? He admits early in *A Secular Age* that religion “famously defies definition, largely because the phenomena we are tempted to call religious are so tremendously varied in human life... we are facing a hard, perhaps insuperable task” (SA 15). Taylor doesn’t claim to have a definition of “religion” that will fit all cultures, or all ages. Taylor settles for what he calls the “prudent (or perhaps cowardly)” approach to the difficulty of defining religion by limiting his use of the term to the way it is generally understood in the modern West, what people usually mean in the modern West when they use the term “religion.” In order not to be placed in the position of needing to “forge a definition which covers everything “religious” in all human societies in all ages’ (SA

15), he narrows the scope of his definition to “one particular civilization, that of the modern West” (SA 15). Thus, Taylor offers a definition of religion for the purposes of his analysis in *A Secular Age* that stipulates a provisional, working definition “in terms of the distinction transcendent/immanent” (SA 15). His rationale for this “prudent or cowardly” approach to the definition of religion is of a piece with his rationale for limiting the scope of his analysis of secularity to the modern West. In defense of the limited scope of *A Secular Age*, Taylor pleads his case against the impracticality of doing justice even to the variety of regional and national differences within the limited compass of the modern West, or even, as he sometimes puts it, the “North Atlantic world” (SA 21). Not wishing to “rush to global generalization,” Taylor limits his focus to “the civilization whose principal roots lie in what used to be called “Latin Christendom,” and recognizes that “secularization and secularity are phenomena which exist today well beyond the boundaries” of the West. Though he thinks that a global study of secularization and secularity is both possible and desirable, he argues for a more piecemeal approach that takes up the analysis of the phenomena “in their different civilizational sites” (SA 21). By the same token Taylor limits his definition of religion to the “particular civilizational site” of the former Latin Christendom.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Taylor has invited some confusion, and some criticism by his comparison between Christianity and Buddhism on this point. It is often unclear whether or not

The definition of religion in terms of immanence/transcendence, Taylor argues, is “tailor-made” for the modern West. This is because the very distinction (immanence/transcendence) is peculiar to western modernity, according to the “grand narrative” Taylor develops in *A Secular Age*. The immanent/transcendent distinction (or in its earlier version, natural/supernatural) is probably unique to the modern West. The idea that,

an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, or whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it” was “the great invention of the West. (SA 15)

This sense of the distinction between immanence and transcendence is a particularly *modern* distinction, and Taylor contrasts it with the understanding of transcendence we find in Plato. Although Plato is working with a conception of transcendence, it is not the strong sense we find in modernity, in which the transcendent is understood in strong ontological distinction and independence from the immanent order of

he intends the latter to fall within the scope of his definition of religion in spite of its different “civilizational site.” I would argue that in those places where he is making this comparison Taylor is really trying to illustrate only one aspect of the more narrowly drawn “western” definition of religion, one he thinks is shared by some forms of Buddhism. It is arguable that Buddhism would not fit his definition of religion in what he calls “the strong sense” because (by some accounts) it requires no belief in a transcendent deity. However, it does seem safe to say with Taylor that Buddhism includes a conception of self-transcendence, which it shares with Christianity, notwithstanding other major differences.

nature. "You couldn't foist this [distinction] on Plato," Taylor points out, "not because you can't distinguish the Ideas from the things in the flux which "copy" them, but precisely because these changing realities can only be understood through the Ideas" (SA 15). That is, for Plato there is an integral connection between the Universal Forms and particulars, whereby the transcendent forms in some sense explain or account for the existence of the particulars. Properly speaking, the sense of transcendence/immanence at work in Taylor's definition of religion is a strict dualism of separation. This is transcendence understood in strict opposition to a conception of nature understood and explained without recourse to anything beyond it. So the sense of transcendence that Taylor uses in his definition of religion is one that hinges on a very strong contrast inherent in the natural/supernatural or immanent/transcendent distinction. Whether or not the immanent/transcendent, or natural/supernatural dualism is indeed unique to the West, Taylor is correct in identifying this distinction, in this specifically modern form, to be particularly salient in the current debates over religion in our time, in that it largely defines the major opposing positions with respect to belief and unbelief, and that it distinguishes the dominant understanding of religion throughout modernity.

Belief in transcendence, or in a transcendent reality beyond the immanent order of nature, however, is not adequate to define religion in the modern West, according to Taylor. Thus Taylor supplements his definition of religion in terms of

belief in transcendent reality in the strong sense above, with the additional belief that this transcendent reality provides the goal for moral and spiritual orientation, one's identity, that is beyond life, or what is ordinarily understood as human flourishing. Thus, Taylor defines religion "in the strong sense... by a double criterion: the belief in transcendent reality, on the one hand, and the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing on the other" (SA 510). What makes this definition of religion "strong," is the first criterion, however, not the second. Taylor's initial gloss on this second sense of transcendence is in terms of "final goals." Taylor asks, "does the highest or the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing? In which case, 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" (SA 16). From his initial description of the second criterion, what we might call the weak sense of transcendence, it is clear that the object of aspiration beyond human life may remain ontologically indeterminate, admitting a plurality of interpretations which may or may not make essential reference to *the* transcendent understood to be ontologically distinct from the immanent order of nature.

We can think of these two senses of transcendence that together make up Taylor's definition of religion in the strong sense as distinguishable on the basis of

the strength of the ontological commitments each involves. The first criterion, belief in a transcendent reality, implies a strong ontological dualism, a strong contrast with the immanent order. In terms of the ontology of the self developed in *Sources of the Self*, the second criterion is a matter of what Taylor calls "hypergoods," which function as a source of the moral or spiritual identity, "something the undistorted recognition of which empowers us to do the good" (SS 342). The kind of transcendence in question is not the stronger ontological sense of a transcendent reality (agent, power, deity), but merely the weaker sense in which one's hypergood goes beyond ordinary human flourishing, or beyond life, and brings about a transformation, a new orientation, which radically changes identity by decentering it. Taylor's definition of religion can thus be understood to include any "hypergoods perspective." By "hypergood" Taylor means any conception of a good that provides the basis for strong discriminations (judgments) of higher or lower, better or worse. On some readings Taylor believes that hypergoods are necessary features of self-identity, and thus of any undamaged human being. The hypergoods in question go beyond ordinary human flourishing, but is also intimately connected with belief in transcendent reality in the strong sense. What Taylor ultimately thinks is the most important thing here is whether or not the hypergood can effect a transformation leading back to an affirmation of life. Although religious

hypergoods are clearly the best candidates here, nothing in the nature of Taylor's argument bars non-religious hypergoods.

Problems Arising from Taylor's Critique of Modernity in *Sources of the Self*

It is important to remember that Taylor's definition of religion in the strong sense is really only a working definition. The work that his definition is intended to contribute to is to advance the primary thesis of *A Secular Age*. His definition of religion is subordinated to this particular project, which is to describe the present spiritual shape of the modern West, which he calls secularity 3, as we saw above.

Many have made the mistake of taking Taylor's admittedly "monumental" work to be the book he claims would be necessary to fulfill the postponed expectations from the final chapter of *Sources of the Self*, where Taylor asserts that the central moral dilemma of the modern West may be overcome best by "Judaean-Christian theism," that our best hope for overcoming what Taylor calls the "dilemma of mutilation" lies in "the central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided" (SS 521). But *A Secular Age* is *not* that book. Taylor is best seen to be only tangentially getting to this kind of argument in *A Secular Age*. He is not arguing there for a superiority claim at all, although the final chapters, and substantive part V as a whole, may be read as his articulation of the religious (specifically Christian in structure) understanding that would certainly feature in any account he might offer of his defense of the superiority claim. The closest that

Taylor comes to advancing an argument for his claims regarding transcendence, and Christianity in particular, is his Marianist Award lecture, "A Catholic Modernity," yet even there he stops short of claiming that *only* religious transcendence will suffice.

Before we consider Taylor's view of transcendence in Chapter Four, we need to consider some of the problems to which he thinks transcendence (in some sense) provides an important part of the solution. The concluding chapters of *Sources of the Self* outline the set of difficulties that Taylor takes up again in *A Secular Age*, and it is beneficial to consider here his general statement of the problematic before continuing. I will briefly explain the modern moral situation as Taylor presents it at the end of *Sources*, with particular emphasis on the question of the adequacy of the sources of modern morality, on the one hand, and the question of whether any adequate sources are overly demanding, and as such threaten "mutilation" on the other. I will return to this in Chapter Four, where I consider how Taylor envisions his understanding of transcendence to be one possible solution to these problems, and how the emphasis on transformation is both integral to any acceptable form of transcendence, and that it is not limited to religious interpretations.

Now I turn to the question of what Taylor considers to be the primary problem faced by our secular age that, in *Sources of the Self* he describes as "our greatest spiritual challenge," the "dilemma of mutilation," and the associated

problem from *A Secular Age* that Taylor argues must be faced by both traditionally conceived religious transcendence, as well as exclusive humanists, "the maximal demand" (SS 521; SA 655).

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor takes it for granted that he is addressing modern western readers who are committed to a set of moral demands, demands the history of which he traces through parts II through V of the book. In the language he uses to describe the fundamental positions regarding transcendence in *A Secular Age* this means that Taylor has in mind those he calls exclusive humanists, who "exclude" transcendence, as well as the religious camp in the debate about transcendence. This "we," however, would exclude the "neo-Nietzscheans," as he calls them. At least it excludes the *consistent* neo-Nietzscheans, if there are any. This last is a complex question, cannot be taken up here, but in *A Secular Age* Taylor argues that most neo-Nietzschean critics of modernity, indeed of humanism, remain *practically* committed to the set of Enlightenment standards they theoretically call into question in spite of a professed commitment to the metaphysical primacy of life. Nevertheless, Taylor claims that we all face a dilemma peculiar to the modern West that he refers to, both in *A Secular Age* and *Sources of the Self*, as the dilemma of "mutilation." By this he means that we appear to be faced with a hard choice between abandoning transcendence as a safeguard against the negative effects associated with notions of transcendence, such as, and perhaps especially, the denigration of the body and

ordinary desires, our ordinary happiness, and the threat of violence. Abandoning transcendence, however, he asserts (without argument) also necessarily involves sacrifices. Taylor thinks that human beings desire to transcend, and limiting ourselves to immanence cuts us off from important moral sources, a situation he likens to a “spiritual lobotomy.” Ultimately he doesn’t think that this is impossible to overcome, that there is a way out of the dilemma of mutilation, but he stops short, in *Sources*, of making the case for his understanding of transcendence that would satisfy the demands for spiritual wholeness without (necessarily) involving a repudiation of this life as worthless. While we will take this up in more detail in the next chapter, here we focus on the dilemma of mutilation as Taylor sketches it in the final chapter of *Sources of the Self*.

In *Sources of the Self* Taylor argues that we of the late-modern West are inheritors of a set of moral imperatives that have a long developmental history, but took their present shape primarily in the Victorian age, something he examines in Chapter 22. As “inheritors of this development” he claims,

we feel particularly strongly the demand for universal justice and beneficence, are particularly sensitive to the claims of equality, feel the demands to freedom and self-rule as axiomatically justified, and put a very high priority on the avoidance of death and suffering. (SS 495)

These are the basic set of moral imperatives regarding life, or “life goods,” that Taylor thinks sets a foundation of broad moral agreement in contemporary western

culture, and it is easy to see how these figure in obvious ways as a kind of unquestioned set of moral presuppositions in the culture. Notwithstanding a broad agreement on these imperatives, Taylor argues that there is a deeper disagreement regarding moral sources that the surface agreement tends to obscure. The question at issue on this deeper level is just what constitutes these life goods as good. What is/are the appropriate constitutive goods, or moral sources, that we can appeal to in order to justify our commitment to these life goods which we always already find ourselves, one way or the other, committed to (at least in practice). It is at this level of moral sources that the real problem lies: “but under this general agreement, there are profound rifts when it comes to the constitutive goods, and hence moral sources, which underpin these standards. The lines of battle are multiple and bewildering” (SS 495).¹⁷

Taylor has offered what he calls a “schematic map” to help organize this confusing, indeed, bewildering disagreements on the question of sources for (adequately) undergirding our larger agreement. This map “distributes the moral sources into three broad domains: [first] the original theistic grounding for these

¹⁷ In Chapter 3 of *Sources of the Self* Taylor argues that this underlying disagreement over sources and their adequacy for supporting the generally agreed upon life goods is part of what motivates the development of procedural ethics without reference to the good. Procedural ethics basically brackets the question of moral sources and tries for justification of the life goods through procedure.

standards, a second one that centers on the naturalism of disengaged reason, which in our day takes scientific forms; and a third family of views which finds its sources in Romantic expressivism or in one of the modernist successor visions (SS 495). In effect, Taylor argues that the second two moral sources of our commitments to the life goods of modernity result from the breakdown, or collapse, of the “unity of the theistic horizon.” Thus, today the sources of these life goods “can now be found on diverse frontiers, including our own powers [i.e. naturalism of disengaged reason] and nature [i.e. Romantic expressivism]” (SS 496).

While admitting that “satisfactions of greater self-understanding” is certainly one of his motives for painting his portrait of the modern self, its “connections between the modern moral outlook and its multiple sources,” as well as “the evolving conception of the self and its characteristic powers,” Taylor also thinks that “getting this straight can give one insight into issues that are hotly debated in our time. In particular, one can understand better the standing areas of tension or threatened breakdown in modern moral culture” (498). There are three primary areas of stress in late modernity on Taylor’s “schematic map.”

The first is the issue about sources, which we have already mentioned, namely, “underneath the agreement on moral standards lies uncertainty and division concerning constitutive goods.” The second primary issue Taylor points to regards instrumentalism: “the conflict between disengaged instrumentalism and the

Romantic or modernist protest against it,” and finally there is the issue about morality, the question of “whether [our] moral standards are not compatible” with the sought for fulfillment in the Romantic critique of disengaged instrumentalism.

To clarify the third area: Romantic expressivism develops as a critique of enlightenment rationalism, specifically rational instrumentalism. This critique basically makes claims on behalf of authenticity, or fulfillment in terms of self-expression, which is what the Romantics understood to be placed under threat by instrumentalism. So, the third issue, that of morality, is a question of whether the “richer fulfillment” of expressivism, or the ethics of authenticity, are compatible with the moral standards or life goods, which are the focus of the disagreement in the first issue, that about constitutive goods—that is, which goods constitute or may constitute the life goods as good (499). All these areas of tension on Taylor’s schematic map play an important role in *A Secular Age*, and as such this map is helpful for navigating the considerably more difficult terrain of the latter book.¹⁸

¹⁸ In *Sources of the Self* Taylor takes up these “zones of potential conflict... from the standpoint of the picture of the modern identity” he developed throughout the book, and so does not offer any sustained argument for his claims. “My goal,” he says, “is less to contribute to the debate than it is to clarify further my portrait of the modern identity by indicating what this view inclines one to say, and I will take the license of a prospectus to be terse and dogmatic, to offer a number of beliefs without fully adequate proof” (499). The excuse he offers for his “dogmatism,” as he calls it, is that in order adequately to do justice to his claims he would need to write “another book, at least” (499).

Taylor emphasizes the second issue, that of instrumental rationality, in *Sources of the Self*, but here I want to look at the first in more depth, since it is the most relevant to the question of transcendence in the moral economy of the modern subject.

Many critics of modernity seize on the apparently wide range of differences, and disagreements on morality in modern culture as a point of departure for critique, Taylor, however, begins by pointing out just how much we late moderns *share* in our conception of morality. The disagreement, according to Taylor, is not about the moral standards of modernity, but about the appropriate sources underpinning, supporting, or constituting those goods as good. Regarding our commitment to universal benevolence and justice, Taylor argues, "[t]here doesn't seem to be an important conflict... We agree surprisingly well, across differences of theological and metaphysical beliefs, about the demands of justice and benevolence, and their importance" (SA 514). We experience these norms or demands of morality in a number of ways. We might, for example, experience them in a sense of guilt for failing to live up to them, or as a high when we do especially well in meeting them. But, as Taylor points out, these experiences are not the same as affective allegiance to the ideal of human dignity, or sense of intrinsic value of humanity as such. The distinction here is between the standards of morality, on the one hand, and their supporting, underlying, sources. Feeling good about living up to the exceedingly high demands of charity, in some particular case, is not the same thing as "to be

moved by a strong sense that human beings are eminently *worth* of helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value. Here we have come into contact with the moral sources which originally underpin these standards" (514). And it is at this deeper level of sources that Taylor thinks we moderns are in deep disagreement. Whereas in the past the practical moral dedication to universal standards of justice and benevolence were supported by the Christian notion of *ἀγάπη*, the advent of secular modernity has shattered the original source; our sources are now irremediably plural and incommensurate.

One natural response to this is to question whether it is even worthwhile to dig deeper to the "sources" at all. Why not just rest secure with the general, if not total, agreement at the level of life goods, or moral standards, and take the disagreement over sources as just one of the prices to pay for living in a liberal, pluralistic society? Taylor thinks that this is unacceptable, because of the potential cost in terms of the practical commitment to the realization of the demands of our rather demanding moral standards. Taylor doesn't think that merely coasting on our agreement on the level of standards is sustainable, in the long run because neither a feeling of inadequacy nor of accomplishment are adequate to bring about the kind of transformation necessary for sustaining our commitment in practice. As Taylor explains it,

High standards need strong sources. This is because there is something morally corrupting, even dangerous, in sustaining the demand simply on the feeling of undischarged obligation, or guilt, or its obverse, self-satisfaction. Hypocrisy is not the only negative consequence. Morality as benevolence on demand breeds self-condemnation for those who fall short and a depreciation of the impulses to self-fulfillment, seen as so many obstacles raised by egoism to our meeting the standard. (SS 516)

Of course, Nietzschean cynicism is one potential response, but Taylor rejects this as well; his whole project is an attempt to overcome the Nietzschean response. Taylor recognizes, however, that unless there is some available moral source powerful enough to give positive force to the affirmation of humanity, Nietzsche is right:

Nietzsche's challenge is based on a deep insight. If morality can only be powered negatively, where there can be no such thing as beneficence powered an affirmation of the recipient as a being of value, then pity is destructive to the giver and degrading to the receiver, and the ethic of benevolence may indeed be indefensible... [Nietzsche's] unsettling conclusion is that it is the ethic of benevolence which stands in the way [of an affirmation of being]. *Only if there is such a thing as agape, or one of the secular claimants to its succession, is Nietzsche wrong.* (SS 516)

It is my contention that Taylor does not believe his own Christian vision of ἀγάπη is the only way forward but that there are indeed viable secular variants. At the same time, however, these do not necessarily supersede the original theistic sources, as fragile as these have become in our secular age.

Taylor points out other potentially negative consequences of "our rather massive professed commitments in benevolence and justice" (SS 518), without an adequate moral source to sustain them. It comes down, however, to a question of

whether the sources of the modern West will continue to sustain the moral standards of the Enlightenment:

The question which arises from all this is whether we are not living beyond our moral means in continuing allegiance to our standards of justice and benevolence. Do we have ways of seeing-good which are still credible to us, which are powerful enough to sustain these standards? If not, it would be both more honest and more prudent to moderate them. (SS 517)

Taylor also thinks that overestimating the power of exclusive humanist sources because of the unacknowledged, unrecognized, reliance on religious sources in another sense. As Taylor argues at length (in Chapter 19), the naturalism underlying exclusive humanism is problematic because it is "parasitic" on the original religious sources. That is, exclusive humanism's affirmation of humanity is fueled by its rejection of what is taken to be religion's negative judgments on ordinary human desires, and the body; this affirmation of humanity is entirely based on rejecting what is taken to be a religious asceticism rooted in a hatred of life. Though in *Sources of the Self* Taylor speaks of Enlightenment naturalism, rather than exclusive humanism, which term he uses first in *A Secular Age*, his claims here about the former apply equally to the latter. As Taylor points out, complete victory of Enlightenment naturalism over religion would be a pyrrhic victory:

Is the naturalist seeing-good, which turns on the rejection of the calumny of religion against nature, fundamentally parasitic? This might be in two senses: not only that it derives its affirmation through rejecting an alleged negation, but also that the original model for its universal benevolence is *agape*. How

well could it survive the demise of the religion it strives to abolish? With the "calumny" gone, could the affirmation continue? (SS 517)

From the point of view developed in *A Secular Age* and *A Catholic Modernity*? Taylor questions whether non-transcendent sources are capable of the kind of transformation necessary for "benevolence on demand," or universal justice. In *Sources* he points to the need for a "transfigurative power" in this regard (SS 517).

There are other issues besides the question of the strength of our sources for our demanding moral standards. In *Sources of the Self* Taylor also points to the question of whether our continued commitment to universal justice and benevolence does not in itself simply demand too much of us, whether they in fact somehow exact too high of a price, that "the demands of benevolence can exact a high cost in self-love and self-fulfillment, which may in the end require payment in self-destruction or even in violence" (SS 518). This is one aspect of the standard Enlightenment critique of religious transcendence, what Taylor refers to in both *Sources* and *A Secular Age* the charge of "mutilation." This dilemma of mutilation is the subject of the final three pages of *Sources* and also a central focus on Chapter 17 of *A Secular Age*, and figures in both the Nussbaum's and Thomson's complaint against transcendence in Taylor's work. Here we focus on Taylor's formulation from the earlier book.

As it figures in Enlightenment humanism's critique of religion, the charge of mutilation is that because religion (in the strong sense) involves renunciation and self-denial, because it displaces ordinary human life as the final locus of human fulfillment--it charges us with a spiritual imperative to transcend humanity, and this aspiration to transcendence "actually damages us, unfits us for the pursuit of human fulfillment" (SA 626). The idea that goods transcending humanity in some way necessarily "stifle or oppress us has been one of the motives for the naturalist revolt against traditional religion and morality" (SS 519). Taylor, however, points out that the problem here, of mutilation, is not limited to religious or strongly transcendent, perspectives, but is common to any spiritual or moral outlook which sets the standards of morality as high as we are wont to in the West--it is the demands of universal benevolence and justice, commitments to which most forms of Christianity share with exclusive humanism, and as such pose a threat to human fulfillment in this world. Taylor's point is that it is the demanding moral standards that pose the threat, not the interpretation. He thinks that this is as true of humanist perspectives as well as of Christianity because "the general truth" involved here is that,

the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the most crushing burdens on humankind. The great spiritual visions of human history have also been poisoned chalices, the causes of untold misery and even savagery. From the very beginning of the human story religion, our link with the highest, has been recurrently associated with sacrifice, even mutilation, as though something of us has to be torn away or immolated if we are to please the gods... But the sad story doesn't end with religion. The

Kharkov famine and the Killing Fields were perpetrated by atheists in an attempt to realize the most lofty ideals of human perfection. (SS 519)

Taylor thinks that it is considerations such as these that motivate the embrace of a "sober, scientific-minded, secular humanism" that scales down our moral and spiritual aspirations to a more "human" scale, one compatible with human fulfillment in life (SS 519). Taylor rejects this as "too simple," and involves the "cardinal mistake of believing that a good must be *invalid* if it leads to suffering or destruction" (SS 519). Thus, for example, the Nietzschean strategy of unmasking Christian and humanist ideals as really motivated by *ressentiment*, presupposes that the negative consequences of the ideals is an invalidating feature of the moral values. It presupposes that, "the self-destructive consequences of a spiritual aspiration" is sufficient as a refutation of the aspiration. But surely Taylor is correct to point out that this is too simple, and that, "Not only can some potentially destructive ideals be directed to genuine goods; some of them undoubtedly are" (SS 519).

In *A Secular Age* Taylor calls the basic dilemma here shared by both exclusive humanism and religion the "maximal demand." The maximal demand is a question of the integrity, or moral and spiritual wholeness of human life. By "wholeness" here Taylor means getting the affirmation of ordinary life and our highest spiritual

ideals into a single vision--or to formulate our highest ideals in a way that doesn't involve unacceptable sacrifice or mutilation.

We can speak of dilemmas, or tensions, or even of attempts to square the circle. Whatever we call it, the basic form seems to be this: how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush or mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity? Let us call this the "maximal demand."
(SA 640)

The upshot of Taylor's discussion of these issues in *Sources of the Self* for my main thesis is that these are two of the primary moral and spiritual difficulties that exclusive humanism and religion (in the strong sense) face. It is what motivates Taylor's drive to rehabilitate religious transcendence, to retrieve the "buried goods" of the Judeo-Christian tradition, but it also underlies his broader picture of the role of transcendence as transformation, and the potential for an inclusive humanism that offers a better way of dealing with these problems than the stripped-down secular outlook.

Chapter Three

Varieties of Transcendence in a Secular Age

In this chapter I want to take a more precise look at Taylor's understanding of transcendence, especially as it figures in his solution to the set of problems that were the focus of the previous chapter. Transcendence, and more generally religion, has been central to Taylor's thought throughout his long academic career, but it takes center stage in his late work on religion and our late modern secular age. 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, or *the* transcendent. The other recent work of primary importance to any discussion of Taylor and transcendence is his monumental *A Secular Age*. It is important to note that the issues surrounding transcendence were also central to much of Taylor's prior work, though less explicit. Indeed, Taylor prefaces his Marianist Award Lecture with the following revealing comment:

I am very grateful... for this chance to raise with you today some issues that have been at the center of my concern for decades. They have been reflected in my philosophical work, but not in the same form as I raise them this afternoon, because of the nature of philosophical discourse (as I see it,

anyway), which has to try to persuade honest thinkers of any and all metaphysical or theological commitments.¹⁹ (CM 13)

As this comment indicates, any exhaustive study of Taylor on transcendence, religion and modernity could not be confined to these late works, and so at certain points in this chapter and the following it will be necessary to reflect on Taylor's larger philosophical vision, and his decades-long engagement with these issues in order to make sense of his approach to, and understanding of, transcendence.

With this in mind, this chapter lays the groundwork for Chapter Four, which explains Taylor's understanding of transcendence, and develops an account of his positive position on the viability and importance of a continued transcendent perspective in the late modern age, in spite of the pervasive secularity of the *immanent frame*. In this chapter I begin with a discussion of Wessell Stoker's recent "taxonomy" of philosophical and theological positions on transcendence in order to focus the broader question of transcendence, and generally to orient the reader to the wider philosophical possibilities and positions, of which Taylor's is particularly unique. I also consider two concepts that figure in *A Secular Age*, and bear on his view of transcendence, namely, exclusive humanism and the immanent frame. Exclusive humanism is the most relevant to the present discussion, as it represents

¹⁹ James L. Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity?: Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 13, (cited in text as CM).

the position that Taylor is specifically concerned to dislodge from its position as the default response to transcendence in our secular age.

On the Very Idea 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 of central importance, expresses regret for the lack of a more suitable substitute.²⁰ Ingolf Dalferth points out that “the term [transcendence] has a long and complex history with many different meanings that cannot be merged into a single coherent concept.”²¹ This leads him to develop a taxonomy of transcendence from Plato to Marion. Even Taylor recognizes the vagueness of the term on more than one occasion, admitting that it is a “very slippery,” word, and expresses regret that no better term is available to him (SA 16).

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

²⁰ See, “Concluding Reflections and Comments,” in Heft, ed., *A Catholic Modernity?*, 105–188.

²¹ Ingolf U. Dalferth, “The Idea of Transcendence,” in Robert Bellah, and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Cambridge University Press, 2012), 146–188.

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.”²² Though often opposed, “immanence” and “transcendence” do not necessarily contradict each other, a fact that will be important for later discussions. The spatial meaning of the root of both terms immediately suggests, of course, a metaphor for temporal dimensions of both transcendence and immanence. It is important to note that 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, and often contrasted with “horizontal” transcendence. The idea of vertical transcendence is perhaps most familiarly illustrated in Plato’s cave simile in *The Republic*, and this is the sense of transcendence that dominates the revolution in philosophical and religious consciousness that Karl Jaspers called “the Axial Age.” “Vertical” transcendence likewise gives powerful support to metaphysical dualism—it is, one might say, paradigmatically theological. The contrast case of “horizontal” transcendence

²² 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*, 4th ed., (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1910).

conceives of the “beyond” of transcendence without necessarily involving a commitment to metaphysical dualism. That is, “horizontal” transcendence is less metaphysical than 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. These two notions of transcendence, while they certainly contrast, are not contradictory. As 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.”²³ The distinction is an important heuristic tool, and the spatial metaphors “vertical” and “horizontal” are important

²³ Schwartz, qtd. in “The Idea of Transcendence,” 153. The theorists of the horizontal-vertical conception of transcendence mentioned by Dalferth are C. Pickstock, and W. Lowe. Another important philosopher who also endorses a view of the modern understanding of transcendence as a shift from a horizontal to a vertical understanding is H. Kunneman. Luc Ferry explicitly develops the idea of horizontal transcendence, and is an important interlocutor of Taylor’s on the idea of transcendence in *A Secular Age*. See especially pp. 677–78. For Ferry’s reading of the history and development of transcendence, see Luc Ferry, *Man Made God: The meaning of Life*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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. Indeed, Taylor engages both aspects of transcendence in his work, for example, in the moral ontology and account of agency developed in *Sources of the Self*. The horizontal dimension of ethical self-transcendence may be (and Taylor suggests *ought* to be) achieved through the vertical dimension by contact with the divine as a moral source.

Wessel Stoker offers an influential and helpful typology of transcendence that broadens our understanding beyond the basic vertical-horizontal distinction.²⁴ Stoker is also critical of the simplistic and overly general nature of the horizontal-vertical distinction, especially as a way of understanding the cultural and religious developments of modernity. Stoker clarifies the types of transcendence to include conceptions that run the gamut of contemporary philosophical discourse on the topic. He distinguishes between four fundamental types of transcendence that are prevalent in western culture since (at least) the Romantic period. The first understanding of transcendence in Stoker's typology is "immanent transcendence,"

²⁴ Wessell Stoker, "Culture and Transcendence: A Typology," in Wessell Stoker and W. L. van der Merwe, eds. *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2012), 5–28.

which he associates with Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Tillich (and I would add Emerson, in some of his moods). On this view human beings relate to the transcendent (God, or The Absolute, for example) through a discovery of an identity with a transcendent reality, which nevertheless remains infinitely beyond the finite individual—transcendent reality is “experienced in and through mundane reality.”

The second type of transcendence Stoker calls “radical transcendence”—“radical” because it posits a complete separation between transcendent reality and human beings. On this view God is understood as “wholly other,” and any “encounter of the human being with God is an encounter with a stranger”—immanent and transcendent reality are radically separated and any divine-human relationship must be initiated by the divine. Stoker thinks that Kierkegaard, Barth, and Marion fall within this category. Both immanent and radical transcendence, in Stoker’s senses, are clearly developments of the Christian cultural heritage of the West, and Stoker identifies the first with “metaphysical identity thinking,” by which he means the positing of some fundamental identity between the human and the divine, whereas the “radical” version, which Stoker associates with Heidegger, posits the ontological difference. Stoker finds a third type of transcendence, “radical immanence,” in Vattimo’s work on Heidegger and Nietzsche. Radical immanence relocates transcendence within immanence. “Both realities converge,” Stoker explains, “with the absolute emptying itself in mundane reality (κένωσις).”

Completing this typology of transcendence, Stoker identifies a version that he calls “transcendence as Alterity.” Like “radical transcendence” this view posits a nearly complete separation, but redefines the separation from the “wholly other” by rejecting the opposition between transcendence and immanence. Beyond the opposition “the wholly other can appear in every other.”²⁵

Stoker does not understand his typology to exhaust the varieties of transcendence available to late modernity, but rather as “forms” or “open concepts” that receive further specification and differentiation by the addition of content by the author or artist: “A type or form of transcendence is thus like a pattern or template that is filled in by content, by a certain type of spirituality.” His typology is presented as a useful “heuristic tool for analyzing the meaning, role, place, and even critique of transcendence” in many cultural domains. For our purposes Stoker offers a necessary, if incomplete, ground map for negotiating the contemporary landscape in the philosophical debates on transcendence. Although Taylor does not fit easily within any of Stoker’s ideal types, he offers four dominant forms of transcendence against which to measure his unique vision of transcendence.²⁶

²⁵ Wessel Stoker, “Culture and Transcendence,” 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11, 26.

The Immanent Frame

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 religious belief in transcendence in historically unprecedented ways. Taylor goes on to defend the possibility of belief in transcendence, however difficult such belief may be. The immanent frame, briefly, is the framework, or background against which the world, including ourselves, makes sense.

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 in principle. Developing his reading of William James, Taylor thinks that by dint of imaginative effort, and articulation, it is possible to stand in "the Jamesian open space" where you can "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 Jamesian 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.

Standing in the Jamesian open space requires that you have gone farther than this second state, and can actually feel some of the force of each opposing position. But so far apart are belief and unbelief, openness and closure here, that this feat is relatively rare. Most of us are at level one or two, either unable to see how the other view makes sense at all, or else struggling to make sense of it. (SA 549)

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 we can 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--this is what he calls the immanent frame.

Exclusive Humanism: The Modern Alternative to Religious Transcendence

It will be most helpful for the present purpose, that is, understanding the role, and sense of transcendence at work in Taylor, if we begin by considering the position that he opposes to his own view, a position he refers to most consistently as "exclusive humanism," in *A Secular Age*, and "A Catholic Modernity?" His usage is not consistent here, and he sometimes uses secular humanism as a synonym, or at

times merely “humanism” to refer to this primary contrast case to the traditional religious notion of transcendence in the West. Gaining clarity about exclusive humanism, the primary and most pervasive alternative to religious transcendence, will aid our later consideration of Taylor’s positive position. Likewise, understanding what Taylor thinks are the limitations, and seriously problematic nature of exclusive humanism will greatly aid in our later consideration of the demand that Taylor puts on any acceptable form of 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, in his sense of “secularity 3.” 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). 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.

It is helpful to consider a parallel with exclusive humanism and pre-axial religion that Taylor draws, in passing, in a recent work. Pre-axial religions are religions prior to what Karl jaspers called the “axial revolution.” This major shift in human religious and philosophical consciousness, which developed in the centuries leading up to the Common Era, involves a radical re-conception of the transcendent and of the human good, according to Taylor. The transcendent is relocated. It “may now be quite beyond or outside of the cosmos... [and] loses its ambivalent character, and exhibits an order of unalloyed goodness...” The second change that Taylor finds in the Axial Revolution is that,

the highest human goal can no longer be to flourish, as it was before [in pre-axial religions]. Either a new goal is posited, of salvation which takes us beyond what we usually understand as human flourishing, or else Heaven or the Good lays the demand on us to imitate or embody its unambiguous goodness, and hence to alter the mundane order of things down here. This may, indeed usually does, involve flourishing on a wider scale, but our own flourishing... can no longer be our highest goal.²⁷

²⁷ Charles Taylor, “What Was the Axial Revolution?,” in Robert Bellah, and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of the Cambridge University Press, 2012), 35.

In contrast to the post-axial understanding of the transcendent and human flourishing, pre-axial religions understood the transcendent or the divine as ambivalent powers, which, at best, must be placated in order to secure ordinary life goods. “What people [in pre-axial religions] ask for when they invoke or placate divinities and powers is prosperity, health, long life, fertility; what they ask to be preserved from is disease, dearth, sterility, premature death.” While this concern for the ordinary goods of everyday life is easily understood, even for us late moderns, relatively insulated from the daily risks faced in the ancient world, there is a great difference between this earlier situation and the post-axial age. In post-axial religions human flourishing, where human flourishing is understood in terms of life and the means of its preservation, does not exhaust the point of life. The parallel with exclusive humanism is helpful. Like pre-axial religion, exclusive humanism identifies human flourishing as the highest good. “What makes modern [exclusive] humanism unprecedented,” Taylor points out “is the idea that this flourishing involves no relation to anything higher.”²⁸

Exclusive humanism is still a bit of a vague notion, however. Part of the difficulty here, as Ian Fraser points out in his recent engagement with Taylor’s Marianist Award lecture, is that Taylor nowhere in that work “informs us which

²⁸ Ibid., 33, and 34. It might be suggested in passing that Richard Rorty is the best candidate for a representative of exclusive humanism.

thinkers fall under that rubric.”²⁹ *A Secular Age*, published after Fraser’s remark, 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 in the academy. 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. In terms of Taylor’s ontology of the self, exclusive humanism is a pervasive perspective. It is Taylor’s name for the condition of selfhood oriented by a conception of the good, which is 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

²⁹ Ian Fraser, *Dialectics of the Self: Transcending Charles Taylor* (Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2007), 35.

shaped by the two extremes, transcendent religion, on the one hand, and its frontal denial, on the other” (SA 20).

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. We will reconsider the role of these non-humanist options below, options Taylor often refers to as “neo-Nietzschean.” For now we only note that 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 enlightenment 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 reject humanism from a religious, transcendent perspective, as we see in MacIntyre, or reject transcendence along with ordinary

human flourishing (Nietzsche is Taylor's favorite example of this, although he also associates it with so-called "postmodernism"). Although exclusive humanism and the non-humanism are both anti-religion in so far as they deny transcendence (at least the ontological view of transcendence found in the first two versions of transcendence of Stoker's typology, namely immanent transcendence and radical 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 as we will see below in more detail, 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 stated aim in that work is merely 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 (and sometimes more than hints) at what his fourth option might look like, at the criteria for a suitable transcendent perspective, throughout *A Secular Age*. This fourth option is the focus of the following section of the present chapter, and the basis of what I call Taylor's inclusive humanism.

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.” It will also help us understand how this notion of transcendence fits into his proposed solution to what we might call the paradox of transcendence, and how it helps us to understand what he ultimately thinks may be the only way for a transcendent perspective to meet what he calls the “maximal demand.”

In both *A Secular Age*, and *A Catholic Modernity?* Taylor readily recognizes a paradox in any religious/transcendent perspective. He argues, however, that the paradox ultimately due to a deep 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.

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, which is paradigmatic for western culture, and the central concern in Taylor’s work, 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, and the obvious one for the West is Christianity, but we have seen how 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. In terms of

Stoker's typology this would restrict the paradox to at least some versions of the first of his two types, immanent transcendence and radical transcendence. In both of these types there is a strong vertical emphasis that locates the transcendent beyond life. 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 (and thus paradoxically) 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, especially post-Reformation forms.

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 that Taylor identifies with certain forms of Protestantism, especially Calvinism, “solves” the paradox by coming down on the side of transcendence against life and human flourishing. Taylor calls this the “stance of purity” and the relationship with the Protestant Reformation is clear. 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's³⁰) within the camp of transcendence as well as the camp of those who reject transcendence. 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 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

³⁰ 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. Taylor uses them in many places.

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.

From the perspective of his fourth corner Taylor contemplates the rise of exclusive humanism and the development of modern secularity with a mixture of humility and apprehension. On the one hand he is humbled by what he sees as the necessary decline in religious faith, and the rise of secularity for a true universalization of originally Christian moral ideals, such as modern rights culture, as well as the moral sources that empower them, such as the ideals of universal benevolence, authenticity, and modern freedom. So it is with a spirit of humility that Taylor explicitly repudiates the idea of "Christendom," as paradoxically antithetical to the advance of the very ideals it putatively symbolized (though never realized). On the other hand Taylor is apprehensive about the prospects for the

continuing commitment of these ideals. He identifies the threat to their continuance in the eclipse of the transcendent with the rise of unbelief in modernity. We'll explore this in more detail below when we consider Taylor's arguments for transcendence. It is clear, however, that Taylor views the development of a viable form of transcendence as an exigent demand determined by his commitment to the value of the enlightenment. Driven neither by confessional prejudice, nor philosophical point scoring, Taylor's work is compelling because it is driven by high moral purpose.

Besides the various ways in which modern secularity tends toward a closed perspective on transcendence, something we considered earlier in greater detail, Taylor identifies other more mundane 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.

As we saw, 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 from Nietzsche to Nussbaum, 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 slipping into an apologetic voice; 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 alters of renunciation” (CM 176).

Chapter Four

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.³¹

³¹ This idea, which I argue is central to Taylor's pluralistic standpoint, bears striking resemblance to the later thought of Jacques Maritain, the preeminent Roman Catholic philosopher of the first half of the twentieth century. Maritain agrees with Taylor on the problem, and 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]."

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 as he often says, "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

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*, edited by Otto Bird, Trans. Otto Bird, Joseph Evans, et al. [University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame: 1996], 154, 155, 197, 155).

picture of transcendence that emerges in *A Catholic Modernity?*³² Unsurprisingly, Taylor's recent work on secularity has gained the attention of theologians, and we will now take a brief look at two recent characterizations of Taylor's theological position. Carlos Colorado, in particular, has offered a very clear theological reading of Taylor's view on transcendence. Like Colorado, I also draw on 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. White's idea of "weak ontology" is also important to keep in mind as we consider some recent and influential objections to Taylor on transcendence in the next chapter. Also, the idea that Taylor is working with a "weak ontology" helps us appreciate his resistance to

³² 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. Originally published in Maria Antonaccio and William Schweiker, eds., *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3-28. This work is noteworthy for a number of reasons. It sheds light on the extent of the influence that Iris Murdoch had not only on Taylor's moral thought, often remarked, but also on his religious thought. It is telling that much of this essay is repeated verbatim, or with slight variations in terminology, in Taylor's Marianist Award lecture. In particular, many of the passages on transcendence in *A Catholic Modernity?* find nearly exact matches here, only with the Buddhist-inspired trope of the "forest" substituted for the term "transcendence." He also has more to say about the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity.

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 in the relevant form implied here, does not 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 contest), 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, as we saw above in an earlier discussion of the difficulties Taylor faces in defining religion, and the potential for confusion it has caused.

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, for reasons we considered in Chapter Three.

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.³³ 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.³⁴ Taylor offers

³³ 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.

³⁴ 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

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 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).³⁵ 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

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. Of course, this also distances Dewey from Nietzsche.

³⁵ It is important to note that a "stable identity" does not rule out changes in identity. Taylor is also 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.

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 of 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 transcends life. The possibility of self-transcendence would seem to be sufficient to avoid the stifling of the human spirit.³⁶

The first sentence of Stout's objection is entirely correct, but it is hardly an objection to Taylor's view on the matter. As we saw above, 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. Stout certainly seems to make what is not an uncommon inference (implicitly or explicitly) by critics of Taylor from his faith commitment to

³⁶ Jeffrey Stout, "Review of *A Catholic Modernity?*," by Charles Taylor, et al., *Philosophy in Review*, 18, no. 6, (2001): 426. One element of Stout's position that Taylor would, I think, take issue with but which I do not take up here for lack of space, is the question of whether one can "*aim* at a change in identity," or if one could, whether such an intentional change would count, for Taylor and others such as John Dewey, as an authentic case of self-transcendence.

the idea that he might be pressing a religiously motivated agenda. It should now be clear that 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*.³⁷ 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

³⁷ 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 Warner, Michael, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 316.

humanisms.³⁸ But not all 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, however, that from what we have already seen that 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.

³⁸ Richard Bernstein, a sympathetic, if critical reader of Taylor, makes a closely related objection to Taylor's "suggestion, which seems much more than a suggestion, that the believer in a transcendent beyond, the Christian believer experiences a sense of fullness and spirituality that is deeper and more meaningful than his more agnostic colleagues. I do not believe this and I wonder if Taylor believes this" (Bernstein, "The Uneasy Tensions," 14).

I think the case could be made that fears such as those of Stout and Bernstein could be allayed by a further consideration of Taylor's theory of selfhood. 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, such as Bede, 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 or Bernstein without a more detailed explanation of Taylor's theory of the modern subject, which would take us too far away from the questions surrounding transcendence.

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.³⁹

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 in an important discussion of Taylor's notion of transcendence, Taylor believes that there is a kind of transcendence that does not thwart human flourishing; on the contrary, there

³⁹ 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.

remains the possibility of an openness to *agapeic transcendence* that promotes the very affirmation of ordinary life."⁴⁰ Vanheeswijck's term "agapeic transcendence" excellently captures what is distinctive about Taylor's understanding of Christian transcendence, his theological 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.

⁴⁰ Guido Vanheeswijck, "The Concept of Transcendence in Charles Taylor's Later Work," in Wessell Stoker and W. L. van der Merwe, eds., *Looking Beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2012), 68.

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.⁴¹ 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,

⁴¹ 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." The theological concept of *κένωσις* is also central to Gianni Vattimo's concept of "weak thought," but it plays a very different role than it does for Colorado's reading of Taylor. For an interesting, and very recent statement by Vattimo on religion, Christianity and "weak thought" see Richard Kearney, and Gianni Vattimo, "Anatheism, Nihilism, and Weak Thought: Dialogue With Gianni Vattimo," in Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, eds., *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 76-92.

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 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.⁴²

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. To avoid this

⁴² Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strength of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Colorado, "Transcendent Sources and the Dispossession of the Self," 85.

misconception, White is explicit: "One might think of such usage as a kind of ontological turn in the social sciences, but that is not what I have in mind."⁴³

What White *does* have 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 recent 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.⁴⁴ White argues that what he sees as an "ontological turn" in recent philosophy stems from the

⁴³ *Sustaining Affirmation*, 4.

⁴⁴ 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.

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.⁴⁵

At the same time White finds that philosophers such as Taylor, George Kateb, Judith Butler, and William Connolly, in spite of this contingency and conventionality, argue that *some* stability is necessary to make sense of ourselves and our moral life.⁴⁶ 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*."⁴⁷ 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

⁴⁵ Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁷ *Sustaining Affirmation*, 9. Italics are mine.

unproblematic acceptance of an ironic stance toward even our most cherished moral and political commitments.⁴⁸

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

⁴⁸ I've used Richard Rorty as a contrast to Taylor here because he proudly wears the postmodern mantle, and fairly well fits the caricature of the anti-metaphysical thinker that White has in mind, an ideal type, as it were. The contrast is also evident in Rorty's later thought touching on religion. He disavows his earlier aggressive atheism for a more conciliatory stance on religion, a stance that might be called "ironic atheism," a form of "atheism" difficult to distinguish from nihilism. Rorty's position on religion invites the possibility of an "ironic theism," differing from his "atheism," only insofar as it excludes "God," or the language of religious belief as part of a final vocabulary that is useful only for private self-creation. Rorty's understanding of irony incorporates both his anti-metaphysical views as well as his insistence on the division between the private and public within a person's "final vocabulary." In *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* Rorty defines "final vocabulary" as the "set of words which [human beings] employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." A human being's final vocabulary "is final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative recourse." Final vocabularies are not final in the sense of an unchanging or immutable body of "truths," but the words we use to define ourselves and our relationship to others. In this sense the finality of final vocabularies expresses Rorty's anti-metaphysical stance. Anyone who possesses a heightened awareness of the radical contingency of her final vocabulary, Rorty calls an "ironist," that is, one who has moved beyond the desire for metaphysical certainty. We might, at this point, make the contrast with weak ontology by pointing out that Taylor recognizes the desire as legitimate, and in need of satisfaction, whereas Rorty takes it to be a nostalgia to be overcome. Rorty contrasts the ironist with White's strong ontologist, or "metaphysician," who refuses to question the "platitude which says there is a single permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances" as well as the ordinary person of "common sense" for whom an inherited final vocabulary is merely accepted uncritically" (Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 73, 80).

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."⁴⁹ 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

⁴⁹ On this point White suggests that Alasdair MacIntyre counts as a strong ontologist in spite of his "willingness to engage alternative perspectives in a sustained and sensitive fashion" because "there is behind his philosophical reflections a core of absolute certainty when he contrasts his own Catholic tradition with others." I agree with 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 (Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 7 n.9).

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 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.⁵⁰

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 convincingly argues that White is correct to read Taylor as a weak ontologist, and this in spite of his avowed commitment to theism. White calls Taylor a "weak ontological theist," that is, his

⁵⁰ Stephen White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, 8.

theism informs his moral and political life without allowing it to determine absolutely in a way that excludes all margin of contestability.⁵¹

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."⁵²

In fact, I believe that 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

⁵¹ White's characterization of weak ontology fits Taylor remarkably well--nearly too 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.

⁵² Carlos Colorado, "Transcendent Sources," 85. Italics are mine.

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).⁵³ The BA principle (although it only yields what Ruth Abbey calls a "falsifiable realism," since it remains open to challenges and falsification by a "better" account) 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 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

⁵³ 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, no. 6 (June 2003): 305.

approach as each individual explores sources in their own way.⁵⁴ 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 in many ways, and although his emphasis 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."⁵⁵

⁵⁴ 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.

⁵⁵ Colorado, "Transcendent Sources," 87.

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. Indeed, if White is correct in his reading of Taylor as a weak ontologist, even faith commitments are questionable as to their objective validity, if not their spiritual strength to power practical dedication to high standards.

Chapter Five

Two Critics of Taylor on Transcendence

Criticism of Taylor on transcendence has been robust, especially as responses to *A Secular Age* continue. Leaving aside those who object to the idea of transcendence in any sense (e.g. Rorty), the most important and sympathetic recent critiques fall into two broad camps. On the one hand, there are those who question the ontological commitments and implications of Taylor's insistence on transcendence "beyond life," especially the unavoidable theistic overtones in this idea. Martha Nussbaum and Iain Thomson both mount strong criticisms of this sort. The other broad criticism of Taylor on transcendence is internal; these critiques claim to uncover inconsistencies between Taylor's thought on transcendence and his larger philosophical project. The following discussion takes up Nussbaum's objections first, followed by those of Thomson. Taylor himself has engaged Nussbaum on this matter in a dialogue that extends over several published exchanges, and Taylor considers her objections at considerable length in *A Secular Age*. Taylor's response to Nussbaum is developed in the context of outlining what he takes to be the "romantic" critique of transcendent religion by nonbelievers. In this case he takes Nussbaum to be an outstanding example of the romantic critique. I dwell longer on Nussbaum than Taylor's other critics because her agreement on some aspects of the

question of transcendence help clarify Taylor's sense of transcendence as transformation as much as her criticisms does.

Inspired by Heidegger *and* Nietzsche, Thomson's argument against *some* forms of transcendence are especially important for deepening our understanding of Taylor's pluralism. Also, because it challenges the consistency of Taylor's position, Thomson provides a transition to the category of internal critique.

Martha Nussbaum on Internal Transcendence and Drawing the Line

Taylor initiated a dialogue with Martha Nussbaum on the issue of transcendence in a 1988 review of her book *The Fragility of Goodness*.⁵⁶ Taylor's discussion of transcendence in this review article is one of his earliest direct discussions of transcendence. His interest in transcendence is especially apparent in the fact that this is an extensive review; clearly Taylor has been thinking about the issues he addresses here for some time. As Nussbaum herself points out, in response to Taylor's review, "Taylor's article is of far more substance and interest than the usual review article, and can be warmly recommended to anyone with an interest in the issues."⁵⁷ Writing one year before the publication of *Sources of the Self*, and nearly

⁵⁶ Charles Taylor, Review of *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, by Martha C. Nussbaum. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18, no. 4 (December 1988), 805.

⁵⁷ Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 369. Hereafter *Love's Knowledge*.

twenty years before *A Secular Age*, the article attests to Taylor's claim that the question of transcendence had been in the background of his philosophical thought many years before his recent work where, for the first time, transcendence takes center stage. In this early article Taylor adumbrates his later developed notion of transcendence, relates it to elements of his broader critique of modern moral philosophy and suggests, as he does elsewhere, that the desire for transcendence is a necessary feature of selfhood, part of human nature.

In his review Taylor is very appreciative of Nussbaum's work, and he finds common ground with her critique of a tradition in moral thought going back to the Greeks that tries to come to terms with the insecurity and vulnerability of the human condition at the cost of, in Taylor's words, "denying and forgoing central human goods."⁵⁸ While the motives of invulnerability, control and commensurability are understandable as strategies for preserving the good against the vicissitudes of fortune by identifying it with the intention of the agent, thereby placing it under the purview of the will, as with Kant among moderns, and the Stoics among the ancients, Nussbaum, Taylor argue that the cost, in terms of the goods of human life, is too high:

What above all falls victim to [these strategies] are the goods of friendship and love. To love humanly is to love particular people, and hence to be

⁵⁸ Taylor, "Review of *Fragility*," 807.

terribly vulnerable to fortune; it is to be open and receptive, and is incompatible with the drive to dominate; and it places us squarely in the realm of the incommensurable: someone really loved is precisely *not* replaceable by another with the same universal properties.⁵⁹

Finally, Taylor endorses Nussbaum's interpretation of Aristotle's ethics presented in *The Fragility of Goodness*, and registers his enthusiastic agreement with her Aristotle-inspired "commitment to a kind of *all-inclusive humanism*, an aspiration to leave no human good in principle outside the purview of our aspirations, even though in particular circumstances we may be forced to make hard choices. In principle we seek *the whole human good and won't settle for less.*"⁶⁰ The question, however, that Taylor raises at this point is whether, for Nussbaum, "the whole human good" includes the desire for, or aspiration to, transcendence.

It is important to note that Taylor's framing of this challenge to Nussbaum, his question of the place of transcendence in the "whole human good," anticipates his later more developed thought on transcendence, especially *A Secular Age*. His endorsement of what he calls Nussbaum's "all inclusive humanism," helps us to understand better just what Taylor means by the contrast case "exclusive humanism," which is so central to his later critique of secularity. Taylor also distinguishes between "two possible readings of... "let's have the whole human

⁵⁹ Ibid., 807. Italics in original.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 811. Italics are mine.

good”.” This distinction is important for understanding his later critique of exclusive humanism. One reading excludes transcendence from any conception of the human good, and posits an inherent paradox between renunciation and affirmation, as I framed the issue above. As he frames the issue in his review of Nussbaum, “there are various defenses of this [principle, “let’s have the whole human good”] which define Platonic (or other forms of) self-transcendence as the adversary. These represent mistaken or self-destructive forms of understanding which lead to self-mutilation and related forms of social oppression. This has been the basic form of critique of religion since the Enlightenment.” As I pointed out above, Taylor takes this narrow view to miss both the possibility of an understanding of transcendence that overcomes the renunciation-affirmation paradox, and the possibility of understanding any form of the human desire for transcendence to be necessary for the full affirmation of human flourishing and the integrity of selfhood. This criticism is implied in his initial engagement with Nussbaum, but is explicit in his more recent work, especially *A Catholic Modernity?* On his account, this reading of the principle assimilates any desire for transcendence to the overly simplified platonic, or purist/reform context, sidelining an alternative reading of the principle that “includes (at least some form of) this aspiration [to transcendence] in the human good,” and he is quick to point out that from the point of view opened up by this second possibility of interpreting the principle “the

standard Enlightenment critique is itself in breach of the principle, since it is depreciating this fundamental human aspiration.”⁶¹

It is clear from our earlier discussion that for Taylor an “*all* inclusive humanism,” must conceive of the “*whole* human good” as necessarily including a desire for transcending human limitations. He offers the following succinct initial statement of the latter position which he doesn’t explicitly defend until many years later in *A Secular Age*: “The striving to surpass ourselves can also be seen as essentially human (on the inclusive interpretation). And what is more, the transcendent can be seen as endorsing or affirming the value of ordinary human attention and concern, as has undoubtedly been the case with the Judaeo-Christian tradition.”⁶²

Taylor raises this issue in the context of his review of Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness* in part because of the absence of any clear indication on her part which interpretation of the basic principle she endorses. At issue between them, and what provoked her response, is the question of just how inclusive her “all inclusive humanism” really is. Nussbaum offers her detailed response in “Transcending

⁶¹ Ibid., 812.

⁶² Ibid.

Humanity,"⁶³ the concluding essay in the collection *Love's Knowledge*. In turn, Taylor returns the favor by making Nussbaum's position on transcendence a central focus of his attention in a crucial discussion of transcendence in *A Secular Age*.

Nussbaum admits to what she calls her "unexplained silence" in *The Fragility of Goodness* on what she considers "an issue of real importance," and a "philosophical question that eminently calls for further examination," that is, whether or not she endorses what Taylor calls an "inclusive" view of "the whole human good" or what in his review he calls a "narrower view" (which he will later call "exclusive humanism").⁶⁴

Rather than directly responding to this question, however, Nussbaum takes an indirect approach. She begins with the very concept of transcending humanity as such, and points out certain difficulties with the very idea, arguing that there is something incoherent in the desire for transcendence. She goes on, however, to develop a conflicted view regarding the legitimacy of the desire to transcend humanity within certain boundaries, and given restrictions rooted in the ideal of human excellence. In "Transcending Humanity," Nussbaum can be read as following up on her claims regarding the independent attraction of transcendence in

⁶³ This was originally delivered as her William James Lecture at Harvard University.

⁶⁴ Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 369.

her interpretation of Plato. There she admits that there is more to Plato's desire for transcending humanity than just a sublimated desire for overcoming human finitude, weakness, and vulnerability, and that there is a real attraction for the transcendent which is independent of humanity's exposure to an uncertain fortune.

She summarizes her position in "Transcending Humanity" as follows:

I argue that the negative motivation to escape from vulnerability and pain cannot suffice to explain Plato's position: for we must also take note of the positive draw of transcendence itself, a positive draw that is... not only intelligible without reference to inadequate or obscure metaphysical conceptions, but actually a powerful part of human ethical experience.⁶⁵

At the same time, in *The Fragility of Goodness* Nussbaum seems plainly to endorse a reading of the Aristotelian understanding of the human good that seems to limit it to the *human* good, and thus to contradict her claims regarding the legitimacy of the aspiration to transcendence in her discussion of Plato in *The Fragility of Goodness*.

⁶⁵ Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 368. In "Transcending Humanity" Nussbaum also responds to a critical question from Taylor regarding her interpretation of Aristotle's ethics. The related but tangential question is whether Aristotle Platonizes in the direction of transcendence in his understanding of the divine life, and whether this is consistent with his view of human flourishing set out in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. At issue, basically, is whether we can square Aristotle's conception of the divine life of thought with his notion of *ἑυδαιμονία*. Aristotle, for example, sounds quite like any good member of Plato's Academy at *Nicomachean Ethics* 10, 6-8: 1177b 31-34. For a discussion of this problem, Nussbaum's response, and its larger relation to Taylor, see Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame IN, 1997, pp. 1-23, especially pp. 16-18.

In her reply to Taylor Nussbaum develops an understanding of transcendence that is an attempt to reconcile both aspects of her own position. On the one hand, she wants to defend the legitimacy of the desire to transcendence, indeed its importance for the moral life of a human being. On the other hand, she wants to understand the limits of legitimate striving to transcendence that does not involve the incoherencies of transcendence she believes beset the idea as usually understood in the tradition going back to Plato. The distinction she makes is between what she calls "internal transcendence," and "external transcendence." As the language of internal/external implies, Nussbaum wants to draw the line between acceptable and illegitimate aspiration to transcendence at the boundary of human life. That is, she tries to make the case for a form of, or understanding of transcendence, that would rule out a kind of vertical, Platonic version of transcendence (or at least without "reference to inadequate or obscure metaphysical conceptions"), but would retain a robust enough notion of transcendence for the requirements of morality and human flourishing that is incomprehensible without the drive to overcome human limitation.

Nussbaum develops her criticism of the human desire to transcend the human in terms of the Homeric Greeks and the (rather peculiar) relationship they had with their gods. Taking sides with the Greeks on the matter of transcendence comes down to recognizing, and living with, a tension in the Greek image of

divinity. On the one, hand the lives of the immortal Olympians are best understood as an object of human desire, that is, life without the limitations that can make life for so many so miserable. Thus the gods are an “image of divinity [as] an image of human self-transcendence, the image of an anthropomorphic perfection made visible by imagining the removal of constraints that make human life a brief, chancy, and in many ways miserable existence.” Surely, Nussbaum asserts, anyone would desire such a transcendent life for themselves or their loved ones, given the opportunity. “Who, given the chance to make a spouse or child or parent or friend immortal would not take it?” she asks rhetorically, adding, “I would grab it hungrily, I confess at the outset.” This image of human transcendence presented in the gods, however, is in tension with another aspect of the Greek relation to the divinities: their lives are not always cast as human lives only better, as though the gods were humanity squared. As Nussbaum points out, their lives were also understood to be “totally, strangely different,” that is, lacking something integral to human, in contrast to divine, excellence. The form of life of the gods, “lacking, as it does, the characteristic movement and structure of human life, lacking the constraints imposed by mortality, lacking vulnerabilities of many kinds, lacking the

demands and the finitude of the mortal body, will of necessity lack, as well, some of the forms of life that we now find valuable and pursue as ends.”⁶⁶

Nussbaum’s primary example here is the athletic contest. The activity of the athlete depends for its excellence upon the human limitations against which the athlete strives. Human achievement “has a point and value only relatively to the context of the human body, which imposes certain species-specific limits and creates certain possibilities of movement rather than others. To excel is to use those abilities especially fully, to struggle against those limits especially successfully.” From the perspective of species-specific human excellence, the form of life of the Homeric gods appears not to be an “image of human transcendence,” a perfected humanity, but a different life altogether. On this view the good life for a human being could never really be that of the gods, who, lacking human possibilities and limitations also lack properly human excellence and achievement. Both the point and the interest in a footrace would be lost on “swift Hermes.” As Nussbaum puts it: “many of the activities we now prize and consider fine will not figure in a divine life, consistently imagined.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Nussbaum, “Transcending Humanity,” 371, 368, 372.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 372.

This tension between the Homeric gods as an image of human transcendence, and therefore an object of human aspiration on the one hand, and the apparent incoherence of this aspiration in light of the species-specific excellence for human beings on the other, is found in the realm of human virtue as well--the gods are not political beings. Here Nussbaum is following Aristotle, for whom the political life is unique to human beings. Sounding very much like John Dewey's critique of religion in *A Common Faith*⁶⁸, Nussbaum points out that for Aristotle "[p]olitics is about using human intelligence to support human neediness; so to be truly political you have to have both elements. Beasts fail on one count, gods on the other."⁶⁹ So too does Aristotle deny the life of virtue to divinity. Moral virtue is incoherent without human limitations. Certainly Nussbaum is correct to claim that the undying gods could not properly be courageous, for example, and that such a life would necessarily lack human moral excellence altogether.

⁶⁸ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962). Here Dewey argues that "Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor" (46). Taylor makes nearly the opposite claim that secular sources inevitably motivate merely ephemeral commitments to improving social conditions, or the realization of a better world.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

[W]e see... that each of [the virtues] will seem pointless, more or less unintelligible, in the god's life; and yet, each has a claim to be an end in itself for a human life. Courage is the clearest. Homeric gods usually cannot and do not have it, since there is nothing grave for them to risk. On the other hand, courageous action seems to be a fine *human* achievement... Moderation will go out too, since for a being who cannot get ill or become overweight or alcoholic, there is not only little motivation to moderate intake, but also little intelligibility to the entire concept. On the other hand, moderation is a challenge and a fine thing in human life: there are so many ways to go wrong here, so few ways of finding what is truly appropriate.⁷⁰

But perhaps the starkest difference Nussbaum notes between the life of an unlimited god and the life of a human being is that the gods do not experience death or suffering. Although human beings are worse off than the gods with respect to death and suffering, "their morality is a response to the fact of suffering." Indeed, from our human point of view the transcendent perspective of the immortal gods is strikingly *inhuman*. If, Nussbaum points out, "we prize compassion, we have to say that *in their dealings in our realm*, the gods are not just indifferent, but worse." Indeed, she correctly identifies Taylor's position regarding the adequacy of Christianity as a transcendent source of morality, and concedes his point that "Christianity has turned us back to our own world with new attention and concern," pointing out that "the universal compassion for human suffering which one associates with Christianity at its best is difficult to imagine apart from the paradigm of human suffering and sacrifice exemplified in Christ." Likewise, she concedes

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 374.

(with the important qualification “*if it can be made coherent*”) that the Christian doctrine of the incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ is consistent with the “thought that god actually loves the world.”⁷¹

What are these reflections on the Greeks and their gods supposed to show us with respect to the human good? Ultimately, Nussbaum is arguing for the incoherence of the desire for transcendence if it means giving up limitations which are necessary conditions for human excellence, physical or moral. “Human limits structure the human excellences, and give excellent action its significance. The preservation of the limits in some form... is a necessary condition of excellent activity’s excellence.”⁷²

So it would seem that, in Taylor’s terms, she settles on the reading of “the whole human good” with the emphasis on “human.” That is to say, she rejects the aspiration to transcendence as incoherent insofar as the achievement of a good beyond life is inconsistent with the goodness of *this* life. To put this in terms of Taylor’s terminology in *A Secular Age*, we might say that it appears that Nussbaum is taking sides with the “neo-Nietzscheans” in the three (or four) cornered debate. How deep is her sympathy with “Nietzsche’s analysis of the many ways in which

⁷¹ Ibid., 376. The word “god” is not capitalized in the original. Italics are mine.

⁷² Ibid., 378.

directing our aspirations toward a “true world” has led to a denigration of our actions and relationships in this one”? Although she has explicitly left out consideration of the consequences of the desire to transcendence in “Transcending Humanity,” focusing instead on whether it is coherent, she appears to challenge the coherency of the desire to transcend life on the grounds that it conflicts with what makes life valuable, and provides the conditions for human excellence. Her vision of a conflict between the transcendent life of the gods and the central qualities that make human life worth living--family, physical and moral excellence, virtuous activity, even love--it seems that this is very close to a charge of “mutilation,” to use a term from Taylor. It would seem, at the very least, that Nussbaum is arguing that “the whole human good” cannot include the desire to transcendence, and that it is limited to “this-worldly” life directed toward (and by) the range of goods embodied in the human striving for species-specific excellent activity, which is incompatible with the desire to transcend the conditions under which such excellent activity is attainable. This view of Nussbaum, however, takes for granted that Taylor’s question to Nussbaum regarding the range and extent of the human good presents two mutually exhaustive positions, namely, human excellence plus transcending, or just this-worldly human excellence without any desire to transcend. Nussbaum,

however, suggests that Taylor has over-simplified. "I believe," she says, "matters are more complex."⁷³ She still has room in her account for legitimizing a certain understanding of transcendence that not only does not contradict human achievement, but may be a further condition.

To avoid what we might call "Taylor's fork" (the choice of including or excluding transcendence as an integral element in the full human good), Nussbaum suggests qualifying the desire to transcend in a way that allows for an understanding of transcendence that doesn't threaten the conditioning limitations of human excellence. "[T]here are," she maintains, "various forms of transcendence. And there is a great deal of room, within the context of a human life... for a certain sort of aspiration to transcend our ordinary humanity." In the first place, she points out, one does not have to posit humanity in a fallen state for there to be room to overcome ordinary human failings. Indeed, even those who reject original sin are still faced with the reality that "it is all too plain that most people are much of the time lazy, inattentive, unreflective, shallow in feeling; in short, that most human action falls well short of the fully human target of complete virtue set up by Aristotle's view as I have described it." Adopting a view on the matter largely influenced by Aristotle, Nussbaum argues that the difficulty inherent in the very

⁷³ Ibid.

achievement of the human good opens up a field for transcending in this life that offers more than enough work of overcoming, of “this-worldly” self-transcendence, to keep us busy in this life. As Nussbaum points out, this is not unlike Aristotle’s view of the life of virtue as both “common to many,” but also “a very difficult business, requiring much experience and practice, much flexibility and refinement of thought and feeling. The point of imagining the virtuous choice as a “mean” is... to place a tremendous emphasis on the difficulty of finding the point of rightness among all the many points that would be wrong.” This is a transcendence of “our ordinary humanity—transcendence, we might say, of an *internal* and human sort.”⁷⁴

Nussbaum contrasts “internal transcendence” with other forms of transcendence, including “religious or otherworldly or even contemplative transcendence.” All of which presumably contrast with her understanding of “internal transcendence” in that they are external in the specific sense that they turn one away from life toward a final good (or some among a range of final goods) beyond or external to life. Essentially, Nussbaum’s notion of internal transcendence

⁷⁴ “Transcending Humanity,” 378—379. Nussbaum cites *Nicomachean Ethics* 1106b28-32; cf. also, 1109a24-29, “Hence also it is no easy task to be good. For in everything it is no easy task to find the middle... any one can get angry—that is easy—or give or spend money; but to do this to the right person, to the right extend, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way, *that* is not for everyone, nor is it easy; that is why goodness is both rare and laudable and noble” (*The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*).

posits the “whole human good” to be achievable entirely within the natural scope of a human life. It also requires, within that life, a constant effort to overcome the difficulties in the way of the pursuit of the good. Likewise, the desire to transcendence may for Nussbaum be adequately satisfied by the pursuit of such an internal transcendence: “There is so much to do in this area of *human* transcending... that if one really pursued that aim well and fully I suspect that there would be little time left to look about for any other sort.”⁷⁵ The question for Taylor, however, is always whether or not this stripped-down secular view is compatible with the affirmation of the high moral standards of the modern West.

Nussbaum associates Henry James and Marcel Proust with her notion of internal transcendence, arguing that they exemplify the ideal of internal transcendence in their novels. On her reading, both authors take “the artist’s fine-tuned attention and responsiveness to human life” as a model for moral excellence.⁷⁶ For Nussbaum, James and Proust advocate the cultivation of “precision of feeling and thought” as analogous to the way an artist, perhaps especially the novelist,

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 379. Italics are Nussbaum’s.

⁷⁶ There is also a strong Emersonian ring to her reading of James. I think it would be worthwhile, although beyond the scope of the present treatise, to consider whether Nussbaum’s notion of internal transcendence may be traced back to Emerson, at least from James. Likewise, I think there is likely to be a link between the immanent transcendence of Dewey and the influence of Emerson on his thought. For Emerson on this topic, see *Essays: First Series*, especially “Art,” and “Friendship.”

cultivates her ability to perceive the beauty and excellence unachieved in the human world, even in the “dullness and obtuseness of the everyday.” In their literary work James and Proust show their readers the possibility of “a more compassionate, subtler, more responsive, more richly human world...[and] this is a view about transcendence.”⁷⁷ It is this sense of internal transcendence that Nussbaum takes to be integral to any adequate account of the “whole human good,” but it is not one that reaches, or strives to reach, beyond the “whole *human* good,” in the terms of Taylor’s original question.

Drawing the Line

One difficulty with her view on internal transcendence, a difficulty Nussbaum forthrightly acknowledges, and one that Taylor takes up in *A Secular Age*, is the problem of drawing the line between acceptable internal forms of transcendence, and unacceptable external forms of transcendence. In Nussbaum’s conception of the importance of the desire to transcendence for the moral life, transcendence, even of the “internal” sort, involves a constant effort in the direction of overcoming human limitations. The difficulty, she admits, is that it is hard to say when the aspiration to transcend human limitations becomes incoherent by aspiring to overcome limitations that condition the possibilities for human excellence and so undermine

⁷⁷ Ibid.

what we find valuable in this life and inform our aspiration to transcendence in the first place.

Nussbaum embraces this difficulty of distinguishing consistently, between internal and external transcendence while continuing her adherence to the importance of internal transcendence. *“There is, and should be, no clear answer”* to the question “when does the aspiration to internal transcendence become the aspiration to depart from human life altogether?” What is important to avoid on her account (and this is significant for understanding Nussbaum’s reluctance to accept the outright non-transcendent horn of Taylor’s dilemma) is the situation where we fail to legitimate a form of transcendence that involves a movement to a next, or farther set of demanding limitations, and dissatisfaction with unrealized possibilities inherent in our actual or present conditions. The thought that we might have arrived at the necessary and sufficient conditions for determining the proper limits of human striving for perfection may have consequences more dangerous than any the striving for transcendence may bring with it. It is a question of moral motivation: “It would be a disaster for humanity if the type of argument I am presenting were taken to imply that the desire to push our limits back further was an illegitimate desire, and that we should just live on the earth as we find it.”⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Nussbaum, "Transcending Humanity," 380. Italics are mine.

Nussbaum's reluctance to reject all transcendence as illegitimate has an analogue in John Dewey's notion of growth as the highest good.⁷⁹ Dewey also retains a version of what Nussbaum calls internal transcendence, and for reasons similar to those advanced by Nussbaum. In fact, her position on transcendence is very close to the (largely underdeveloped) position of John Dewey. The primary difference between the two is that Nussbaum remains much closer to the classical Greek ideal of the human good, whereas Dewey distances himself from the tradition of understanding ethics in terms of the "highest good," whether after the thought of Plato or of Aristotle. Rather, and this is one of Dewey's most original contributions to ethics, he remains within the (broadly construed) eudaimonistic tradition in the western ethical tradition while proposing a (radical) pluralism regarding the human good. On the one hand, for Dewey every particular "situation" has its own end, what he calls the "end in view." In this spirit Dewey develops an idea of the highest good as *growth* itself. Although Nussbaum does not go as far as Dewey in rejecting the notion of the finality of the good, her reluctance to "draw the line" is motivated by a similar concern for the role that the desire for transcendence plays in human striving to overcome present limitations, and achieving the demands of the good.

⁷⁹ On the question of Dewey's notion of "growth as the highest good," and the relationship between his perfectionist moral view and Emerson's, see, Naoko Saito, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

This aspect of Nussbaum's critique of religion also demonstrates the essentially romantic strain in both of their critiques of religion, something not lost on Taylor, who describes Nussbaum's critique of religion under the heading of "romantic" in *A Secular Age*. Her critique is a variation on the romantic replacement of religion with art--something also evident in Nietzsche.

Another element in Nussbaum's critique of (external) transcendence that is anticipated in Dewey's work, and parallels a similar critique in Nietzsche, concerns the question of moral motivation. This question is also central to Taylor's defense of some version of external transcendence, especially in his openly confessional work, *A Catholic Modernity*. We may note here that both Nussbaum and Dewey make the opposite assertions from Taylor regarding the merits of externally transcendent goods when it comes to motivating and maintaining moral commitment. The claim that non-transcendent, or really non-transformative, sources are insufficient to sustain the demands of morality is integral to Taylor's argument for religious-transcendent sources. Dewey and Nussbaum both believe that belief in transcendence may actually hinder necessary human efforts to continue to strive against human limitations, or, in Dewey's terms, threaten the human effort to grow.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Another important difference between Nussbaum and Dewey is that if you take into consideration the latter's distinction between "religion" and "*the religious*,"

Returning to Nussbaum's account of internal transcendence, she recommends a recovery of the Greek notion of *hubris* as the best guide to determining when to press harder against our human limitations, and when to hold back in the face of threats to the constitutive conditions of our humanity. She recommends a fallibilistic approach to the question of drawing the line. On her account, "there is a kind of striving that is appropriate to human life; and there is a kind of striving that consists in trying to depart from that life to another life. That is what *hubris* is—the failure to comprehend what sort of life one has actually got, the failure to live within its limits..., the failure, being mortal, to think mortal thoughts."⁸¹

Nussbaum on the Incoherence of Immortality

But if it is hubris to think immortal thoughts, and such a desire for eternity is actually incoherent and may even hinder one's desire to pursue the good in this life, does this imply that one should not wish immortality for oneself or (especially) for those one loves? As already noted, Nussbaum admits to feeling the desire to have her loved ones live forever, that given the chance she would "grab it hungrily."⁸²

The question remains whether having shown this desire to be incoherent, or at least

he may be read to be in essential agreement on the importance of the kind of "religious" dedication and concomitant transformation (conversion to the good) required for any metaphysically and practically adequate account of ethics.

⁸¹ Ibid., 381.

⁸² Ibid.

paradoxical, does this mean that this desire for the immortality of the beloved must be surrendered and that one's affective reality must give way to reason? Is the conflict unavoidable, and should one "*actually not want the people one loves to live forever?*"

Nussbaum has a nuanced view here, and once again points to what appears to be an inescapable paradox: We want our loved ones to live forever, and this feels perfectly legitimate, something that, if lacking, might actually bring the profession of love into question. Yet the incoherency here lies in the fact that it is just such an achievement of immortality that would eliminate all one finds valuable in the life of those we love. "[W]hat we actually love and prize would not survive such translations" to eternity. Nussbaum returns here to her athletic analogy: "We shouldn't, perhaps, imagine that we can coherently wish for immortality. And yet it seems reasonable to fear death, for oneself and for another, and to seek to avoid it, at any time when active living is still going on in a valuable way." Nussbaum finds a similar paradox faced by the athlete, where "complete victory," over our human, physical, limitations "would be disaster and emptiness—or at any rate, a life so different from our own that we could no longer find ourselves and our valued activities in it."⁸³

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 368, 381, 368, 380-81 (italics are mine).

Her response, consistent with her position on drawing the line, is to embrace the tension in the paradox as part of the tragic dimension of human life, and itself part of the best life for a human being.

This tension, which is close to being a contradiction, seems to be a part of the best human life. It is difficult enough to understand it, far less to live it. In this sense, the best human life in my own conception contains more tension and conflict around this issue of transcendence than Aristotle's best life... Not enough, perhaps, to make it Taylor's "inclusive view." But more than his "narrow view."⁸⁴

Taylor responds to the question of drawing the line between legitimate and illegitimate versions of transcendence in *A Secular Age* in the course of complicating the question that underlies conflict in the usual course of the debate.⁸⁵ He argues that partisans of both immanence and transcendence face some of the same moral dilemmas that are too often thought to be problematic only for the opposition.

The Maximal Demand

In *A Secular Age* Taylor takes up Nussbaum's response to his review article, and rejects the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of transcending,

⁸⁴ Ibid., 381.

⁸⁵ Complicating the usual paradigm of discussion (academic and otherwise) is a signature move on Taylor's part, and one of the aspects of his work that makes it both challenging (because it disappoints our expectations rooted in the usual run of debate) and rewarding (because it opens up possibilities of understanding and critique outside the taken-for-granted state of debate). Not unlike John Dewey, Taylor is at his best when breaking inherited, unquestioned, cultural categories.

whether along Nussbaum's original lines of "internal," and "external," or anything else. He is, in a way, actually in agreement on the relevance of transcending for the moral life. In fact, Nussbaum comes close to a partner in what I call "inclusive humanism," and it is not a coincidence, I think, that it is in his engagement with Nussbaum that Taylor coins the term. What is most clearly missing from Nussbaum, that leaves her position outside the pale of a more inclusive humanism, is an adequate account of transformation.⁸⁶

I now want to turn to two important areas of *disagreement* between Nussbaum and Taylor, which center around two issues Taylor first explicitly raised in the concluding chapter of *Sources of the Self* regarding the adequacy of sources, on the one hand, and the problem of "mutilation," on the other. Regarding the first issue of adequacy, Nussbaum (in substantial agreement with Dewey) argues not only for the adequacy of immanence (or "internal transcendence") as a motivation for morality,

⁸⁶ For an interesting discussion of one of their most salient points of convergence, see Stephen Mulhall, "Can There be an Epistemology of Moods?", in Anthony O'Hear, ed., *Verstehen and Humane Understanding: Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement: 41* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 191-210. Mulhall offers a very clear discussion of the role of passions, moods, or emotions in Nussbaum, Heidegger, Taylor, Cavell, Emerson and Wittgenstein, for all of whom the affective life is necessary for knowledge of the world (and not just the moral world). I would add John Dewey to the list. Moods, or "quality of an experience" are central to his inquiry-based epistemology. See also, William Blattner, "What Heidegger and Dewey Could Learn from Each Other," *Philosophical Topics*, 36, no. 1, 2008, 57-77.

but goes farther than this to claim that externally transcendent sources are harmful for a flagging moral commitment (not to mention dogmatic religious institutions). Although their reasons for this appear to be the same, Nussbaum merely suggests that for which Dewey offers a direct argument.⁸⁷

The question of the charge of mutilation in Nussbaum is complicated, in part because she specifically eschews any direct philosophical engagement on this issue.⁸⁸ In spite of the fact that Taylor directly questions her on this issue, she specifically declines to address his question regarding the consequences of external transcendence, focusing instead on the question of coherence beyond passing (though pointed) remarks. Her basic viewpoint, as both Taylor and Fergus Kerr point out, can be gleaned from her other works, especially the chapter on Beckett from *Love's Knowledge*.⁸⁹ Taylor's engagement with Nussbaum in *A Secular Age*

⁸⁷ John Dewey, *The Later Works: 1925–1953*, volume 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydson (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981–1992), 27. Hereafter cited parenthetically as LW followed by the volume and page number.

⁸⁸ Nussbaum does return to this question in more depth in Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2000). We leave out a discussion of it here because that work is more focused on literary criticism, and less a work of philosophy. For an excellent discussion of Nussbaum and Taylor on transcendence from the point of view theology, see Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1997). Kerr, a Roman Catholic theologian, also accuses Nussbaum of a "Nietzschean hatred of religion," 7-10.

⁸⁹ Fergus Kerr, *Immortal Longings*, 7-10.

focuses on this question of mutilation and he develops his criticism of her in the context of outlining what he calls the “romantic axis” of the modern critique of religion. That is, he takes Nussbaum’s critique of religion in general, and of Christianity in particular, to be paradigmatic to this "romantic" axis of critique.

In Taylor’s scheme for categorizing critiques of religion, Nussbaum’s critique qualifies as romantic because her concern is motivated by the thought that transcendence poses a threat to the integrity of life, to its goodness, and is driven by a will to rehabilitate the body and ordinary human desires.⁹⁰ To put it in Taylor’s terms, the thought is that transcendence poses a threat to a human being’s sense of fullness, and thus “mutilates,” or renders us unfit for happiness in this life. This is the charge that there is something intrinsic about transcendence such that it "actually damages us, unfits us for the pursuit of human fulfillment [and] does so by inducing in us hate and disgust at our ordinary human desires and neediness," or otherwise "poisons the joy we might otherwise feel in the satisfactions of human life as it is" (SA 626).

⁹⁰ It is also interesting to note that this aspect of romanticism, the charge against religion for devaluing life, is not as explicit in John Dewey. In general Dewey doesn't seem to bristle very much at the thought of religion, something he thinks (or hopes) will die out in its present form and (with the aid of intelligence) find a replacement in democratic society. Nietzsche is free from the hatred of religion that characterizes some of Nussbaum's work.

Rather than defending transcendence from this attack, Taylor takes a different approach. He spends much of *A Secular Age* (especially Chapters 17 and 18) arguing that this general problem is not limited to transcendent perspectives only, but must also be faced by exclusive humanism as well. exclusive humanism do not realize that this criticism of Christianity (and other strongly transcendent religions) is something they also face, that "their highest aspirations too run the risk of mortifying ordinary human life" (SA 641). There is no easy solution to the threat of mutilation, whether we embrace a secularist or a religious, inclusive or exclusive, perspective. The general problem here Taylor refers to as the "maximal demand," that is, the demand for wholeness, where "wholeness" means, in the terms Taylor used in his review of Nussbaum, "the whole human good." In the late modern West, however, this can be problematic. The whole human good includes both ordinary life, and the fulfillments of the body and desire, as well as the lofty moral and spiritual ideals. According to Taylor, there is a tension in late modernity between the demands of our morality and the satisfactions of ordinary life, the life of work and family, production and reproduction. "Running through modern culture is the sense of the wrong we do, in pursuing our highest ideals, when we sacrifice the body, or ordinary desire, or the fulfillments of every day life" (SA 640).

We all of us late moderns face a dilemma, according to Taylor. This involves the modern subject's demand for wholeness, for defining "our highest spiritual or

moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity" (SA 640). This Taylor calls the "maximal demand."

The maximal demand matters for us late moderns because of the strength with which we demand the affirmation of ordinary life, and the concomitant critique of the pursuit of ideals that threaten to "mutilate" to ruin possible satisfaction with ordinary life. It is of central concern to modernity that "ideals [should not] be pursued at the expense of purging, or denigrating ordinary fulfillments" (SA 640). Taylor traces this to the reformation critique of what was taken to be the monastic pursuit of a "higher life" to imply a denigration of ordinary life, a critique eventually leveled against Christianity itself, thus paradoxically an originally religious motivation to save the ordinary which yields the most pervasive modern critique of Christianity. High moral and spiritual ideals demand sacrifices of ordinary life that we late moderns are loath to make, but neither are we willing to take the path of Nietzsche and "repudiate a basic constraint on the maximal demand: that it reconcile higher aspirations and ordinary fulfillments for *everyone*" (SA 642; italics in original).

Taylor argues, echoing a theme that runs throughout his career, and which I have already pointed out as one of the central problems he considers in the conclusion to *Sources of the Self*. According to Taylor the difficulty lies with the *universality* of the humanistic moral commitments to universal benevolence, human

rights, equal justice. For Nietzsche, as Taylor points out, if we deny the demand for universality "the way is open to see that an élite of the truly exceptional is capable of bidding for excellence either without sacrifice, or in joyful acceptance of it." For Nietzsche, "the fact that this achievement may weigh heavily on the masses is neither here nor there" (SA 642).

Can the maximal demand be met and the dilemma overcome? Taylor, of course, believes he has discovered the answer through his articulation of Christianity and what he calls the transformation perspective, but he also recognizes that there is not an easy or straightforward religious answer to the maximal demand. As he points out, "there are clearly wrong versions of the Christian faith," versions that solve the dilemma by rejecting the goodness of ordinary life, and which, along with Plato, are the target of Nietzsche's hatred of religion. Whether or not exclusive humanism can meet the maximal demand, Taylor says, with a note of pessimism, "remains very much an open question" (SA 642).

Any solution, however, would require a transformation perspective, as we saw in Chapter Four, but it is now possible to add that the transformation in question cannot take the form usually attributed to Plato, and attacked by Nietzsche. In Taylor's reading of Plato the transformation of philosophy, being led to the vision of the Good, "means that some things which mattered very much to us before cease to do so. This is the strategy of achieving commensurability in ethical values by

discounting one or the other of those in competition.⁹¹ The Platonic transformation is predicated on giving up appearances for reality. Or, as Taylor characterizes the Platonic transformation, it is just,

the nature of a far-reaching transformation. It's no use protesting that our present desires will be frustrated; these will disappear, because we will come to see that they aren't really important, not part of what is required to realize the Idea of a human being, which in turn means to come fully into attunement with the Idea of the Good. (SA 643)

As we have seen already in Chapter Four, for Taylor, all far-reaching transformations require the kind of sacrifice implied in the mutilating critique. Some, including articulations of Christianity and Buddhism, involve a transformation that returns one to the world, to human life, with renewed concern, compassion and love. A transformation that renews and sustains an affirmation of humanity and the goodness of life is what matters on Taylor's view. Furthermore, although his own best account requires articulation in a Christian context, the vision of transcendence as transformation in his account can take non-believing forms as well. In any case, what Taylor clearly thinks is important is an account of transcendence that reconciles renunciation with affirmation through transformation.

⁹¹ Of course, this reading of Plato is likely to be criticized. But Taylor is making a larger point, and the "received" version of Plato, for better or worse, reads him to renounce life and the body in light of allegiance to the form of the Good.

The second main problematic that Taylor thinks any transcendent perspective needs to solve--a challenge he argues exclusive humanism cannot meet adequately--relates to the strength of the moral sources of modern exclusive humanism over the original religious roots. Taylor defends his religious vision of transcendence in *A Catholic Modernity?*, but that this is not to be taken as the assertion of the absolute superiority of his Roman Catholic faith, should be clear from Chapter Four--this is his (personal) best account. Taylor recognizes competing accounts, and is open to a variety of paths in an inclusive humanist perspective rooted in his understanding of transcendence as transformation.

The (In)Adequacy 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. The examples will already be familiar from previous chapters. "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 doesn't come at a cost, or without 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*, something I raised as well in Chapter Two. 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 deeply 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 uncontroversial. 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 just 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. For Taylor things are not so easy, as we briefly considered in Chapter Two. The motivation to practical engagement with the goal of healing of 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*,⁹² the human failure practically to live up to these demands inevitably risks turning humanism against itself, and powering a 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?

⁹² We will return to this question below, when we consider Thomson's argument that the problem is because the ideals of transcendence in the strong sense are *in principle unrealizable* allows us to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable senses of transcendence.

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."⁹³

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 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

⁹³ Nicholas H. Smith, *Charles Taylor*, 231.

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's weak ontological theism is one possibility for an inclusive humanism, but it does not 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.

Thomson on Ontological Inconsistencies and Drawing the Line

In "Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche," Iain Thomson argues that there is an internal inconsistency in Taylor's ontology and that while it may be difficult in hard cases to determine where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable appeals to transcendence, it remains possible to draw a line between *some* cases of transcendence.⁹⁴ Building on his own influential reading of the later Heidegger's understanding of metaphysics as ontotheology, Thomson challenges the consistency of the Heideggerian element in

⁹⁴ Iain Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism: Taylor, Heidegger, Nietzsche," *Inquiry*, 54, no. 2, (April 2011): 140–159. This article was part of a special issue published by *Inquiry, The Secular and the Sacred*, which included work by Taylor, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, Mark Wrathall and Morganna Lambeth, Peter Gordon, and Albert Borgmann.

Taylor's thought. Thomson argues that the inconsistency lies between Taylor's commitment to both a "theoretical pluralism" and an "ontological monism."⁹⁵ Although bringing his thought in line with the later Heidegger would make Taylor's position more consistent, Thomson also notes that this compromises any commitment to a strong sense of transcendence, since Heideggerian ontological pluralism is incompatible with the existence of God as traditionally understood by the western metaphysical tradition. Beyond the question of the consistency of Taylor's pluralism, however, Thomson also develops a Nietzschean critique of some forms of transcendence, suggesting a Nietzsche-inspired criterion for drawing the line between acceptable and unacceptably "nihilistic" senses of transcendence.

⁹⁵ See Iain D. Thomson, *Heidegger and Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). In the first chapter Thomson provides a convincing interpretation of Heidegger's understanding of western metaphysics as ontotheology, which provides the "master key" to Heidegger's later philosophy, that is, his deconstruction of metaphysics after he abandons the project of fundamental ontology for an historicized ontology. Thomson explains that Heidegger's understanding of ontotheology begins with his insight into the ambiguity of the questioning of reality, namely, "What is a being?" This question can be heard to interrogate either the "what" or the "how" of a being. The first aspect prescribes an ontological answer; it asks for that without which a being *is* not, what it shares with all else that is. This is the ontological ground. The second aspect of the question prescribes a theological response. It asks, "how is it that a being *is* at all?" Thus the initial metaphysical question has an "onto-theological" structure, questioning both the external and the internal "ground" of beings. Thus, ontotheology holds the successive, contingently stable "constellations of intelligibility," or epochs, in play while they last, and gives the trajectory and narrative arc to the development of the horizon of possibilities for an understanding of the being of entities.

Thomson's second argument is especially important to consider here because it is a particularly strong version of the Nietzschean critique of transcendence, one that focuses on Taylor's strategy for insulating the transcendent from neo-Nietzschean critique. At the same time, it is instructive to consider Thomson's critique insofar as it allows us insight into some of the subtleties of Taylor's understanding of transcendence. I argue here that Thomson's position regarding the consistency requirement for theoretical pluralists is correct, but that because Taylor is not committed to a strong version of ontological monism he escapes Thomson's critique. Second, although Thomson's powerful version of Nietzsche's attack on "otherworldly nihilism" does allow for a principled way to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable nihilistic versions of transcendence, a closer consideration of Taylor's position shows that he has the resources to respond to Thomson, although ultimately I do not think a clear victor emerges. Finally, a consideration of Thomson's arguments yields not only a clearer view of Taylor on transcendence, but also highlights the depth of his debt to Heidegger by showing that he is closer to Thomson (and thus to Heidegger) than it initially appears. I end this chapter with a brief consideration of some of the directions that Thomson has himself taken Heidegger beyond Heidegger in the direction of a more inclusive humanism.

Thomson questions Taylor's emphasis on the human quest for meaning as a quest for one unified meaning, although the obvious suspicion falls on Taylor's religious commitment to (some form of) monotheism.⁹⁶ Taking up the view of the later Heidegger, whereby the very idea of a single overarching, unified meaning of human life is part of the tradition of western metaphysics as ontotheology that Heidegger thinks should be overcome, Thomson suggests that his reading of Heidegger on this matter is more in line with Taylor's commitment to pluralism⁹⁷ since it involves an understanding of the meaning, or mattering of life to be discovered interstitial plurality of meaning, rather than a strict unity.⁹⁸ Heidegger's account is incompatible, according to Thomson's influential reading, with the

⁹⁶ Ruth Abbey has recently defended Taylor against Stuart Hampshire's charge that monotheism necessarily conflicts with moral pluralism. See, Ruth Abbey, "The Primary Enemy?: Monotheism and Pluralism," in James Boyd White, ed., *How Should We Talk About Religion: Perspectives, Contexts and Particularities* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 211-229.

⁹⁷ Thomson develops his plural realism further in *Heidegger, Art and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁹⁸ I take the term "interstitial" from Taylor, which he uses to characterize a similar position developed by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly in *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011). What most distinguishes Thomson's view from Dreyfus and Kelly is that for Thomson (and Heidegger), the interstitial experiences of the discovery of meaning are more of an individual affair. See Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

traditional role of a monotheistic God anchoring the meaning of existence beyond the world. As Thomson reads Heidegger,

the very idea that there is (or even could be) a single meaning of being in general is something that the later Heidegger argues we should transcend as part of the ontotheological legacy of western metaphysics--*along with the very idea of a creator God who stands outside the secular world, implicitly unifying the meaning of existence... from his God's eye perspective or "view from nowhere."*⁹⁹

In short, Thomson reads Heidegger as an ontological pluralist, one who holds the view that meaning is irreducibly plural. He concludes that given the unavailability of an ontotheological creator God, we late moderns may best discover a realm of meaning independent of our subjective projection by attending to the many meanings of being and cultivating an attentiveness to their appearance in ordinary experience, to "cultivate a poetic sensitivity to multiple meanings," rather than continue the quest for "some overarching or underlying unity to all things."¹⁰⁰

It is this view of the multiplicity of the meaning of being that Thomson argues one would expect in Taylor, but Taylor remains committed to the idea of a unified meaning of existence. Thomson also points out, correctly, that Taylor is committed to a "theoretical pluralism," or the idea that the meaning of reality cannot be captured in any one articulation. As a theoretical pluralist, Taylor is committed to

⁹⁹ Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem of Otherworldly Nihilism," 142.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

the idea that our articulation of meaning is always overdetermined by phenomena. What is missing from this account, and what seems to be required for the sake of consistency, is an endorsement of ontological pluralism. Furthermore, Thomson stresses the "phenomenologically realist intuition" informing Heidegger's ontological pluralism. On this reading Heidegger holds that "it is the inherent pluralism of what we like to call "reality" that *lends itself to* our multiple ways of taking it up."¹⁰¹ That is, for Heidegger "reality" is an independent plurality, which affords a concomitant multiplicity of expression or articulation.

On the other hand, Thomson reads Taylor to hold the "more idealist intuition" that reality is a unity but "our ways of taking it up are multiple."¹⁰² Thomson suggests that this view is motivated by Taylor's faith commitment to an ontological creator God who transcends the world. Taylor, on Thomson's reading, offers no rationale for his insistence on the unity of meaning, no rationale "perhaps, but faith: If one believes in an ontotheological creator God who stands beyond space and time,

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Immediately following this quotation Thomson offers a parenthetical explanation using Heidegger's own terminology of "earth," and "world." I also note Thomson's original, and highly helpful, term "rift-structure" to describe this difficult concept from Heidegger. "In Heidegger's terms of art, the border between our intelligible "worlds" and the inexhaustible "earth" that "juts through" and supports these worlds but also withdraws from them should be understood as a "rift-structure," that is, as a texture of rifts, edges, and partial borders that divide being itself asunder, fracturing and pluralizing the source of historical intelligibility" (143).

¹⁰² Ibid.

implicitly unifying the meaning of creation, then one's ontological commitments include an appeal to something outside the limits of possible experience, something on which our best theoretical efforts can gain no purchase."¹⁰³

I think it is helpful at this point to parse this criticism of Taylor in terms of Stephen White's distinction between "strong" and "weak" ontology. Although Thomson is correct that Taylor would be inconsistent if he advocated a theoretical pluralism while also maintaining a strong foundational role for God, on closer examination it becomes clear that Taylor does not hold an unacceptably inconsistent view. A strong ontology would prescribe a unitary moral and political vision anchored in a single overarching meaning. Even if this vision prescribed tolerance, however, tolerance of difference is not pluralism.

As I argued in Chapter Four, however, Taylor is not a strong ontologist, or not a strong ontological *theist* to be more exact.¹⁰⁴ Taylor simply does not think it is possible to have certainty in the matter of *the* transcendent. As he explicitly states in a recently published conversation with Richard Kearney, "we need to acknowledge that we [Christians] are all part of one hermeneutical family, accepting that we know

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Although I do not expand the discussion here to the theological, it is interesting to consider what effect the Christian doctrine of the trinity may have on Thomson's reading.

nothing for certain about the transcendent--that there is always a messiness and fragility about all our efforts to get a hold on what is ultimately important here," adding that this "doesn't mean we stop trying."¹⁰⁵ White's reading of Taylor is also helpful for negotiating Thomson's challenge on this point insofar as the idea of weak ontology helps us to understand how Taylor can (as he quite often does) sound a lot like what Thomson would call an ontological monist. But as we have seen Taylor is best understood to be taking a weak position here, one that posits the idea of God or the transcendent in order provisionally to make our way through the exigencies of a troubled late modernity.

Thomson's secondary critique of Taylor is relevant to Nussbaum's insofar as it involves the question of "drawing the line," and a version of the "romantic" charge against transcendence. There remain important differences between Nussbaum's critique and Thomson's, however. Thomson makes the case for a principled way to draw the line, and he also makes the case for mutilation along the lines of Nietzsche's attack on "otherworldly nihilism." While Nussbaum expresses sympathy with Nietzsche, she does not explicitly take up his position. Although Taylor does mention Nietzsche regularly throughout *A Secular Age*, he does not seriously engage with either Nietzsche or the so-called "postmodernists." This lack

¹⁰⁵ Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred*, 80-81.

of sustained engagement with Nietzsche, especially in the discussion of what he calls the "romantic" critique of transcendence, represents a serious gap in Taylor's argument. I hope that my consideration of Thomson's argument makes up for Taylor's avoidance of Nietzsche.

Thomson develops the basic picture of Nietzsche's argument that any attempt to anchor the meaningfulness of life beyond life results in "otherworldly nihilism," that is a meaningless world relative to the anchor in an illusory beyond. Nietzsche makes a version of the mutilation charge against Christianity. As Taylor sometimes puts it, the charge here is that the aspiration to transcend

actually damages us, unfits us for the pursuit of human fulfillment... by inducing in us hate and disgust at our ordinary human desires and neediness... inculcat[ing] a repulsion at our limitations which poisons the joy we might otherwise feel in the satisfaction of human life as it is. (SA 626)

Of course, Nietzsche makes this charge not only against Christianity, but also Platonism and Buddhism. In short, for Nietzsche, any aspiration to transcend implies a negative judgment on life as it is lived, the life we actually live, relative to an "otherworld" beyond life. Thus does transcendence "mutilate" because it necessarily involves renunciation of this world, or life in *this* world. This renders the world, the "earth" and life meaningless and so leads to nihilism. This is Nietzsche's, by now classic, charge against Christianity that Thomson builds on in his critique of Taylor.

In a succinct explanation of Taylor's challenge to exclusive humanists to draw a principled and defensible line between acceptable and unacceptable senses of transcendence, Thomson homes in on the requirement that any such distinction must show us late moderns how to overcome complacency, or self-satisfied humanism, without sacrificing the goodness and legitimacy of the enjoyment of ordinary life that is a perennial risk to all moral views involving universal moral standards. Thomson explains Taylor's position on drawing the line as follows:

Taylor challenges the secularizing proponents of any closed immanent perspective to draw a defensible distinction between "immanence" and "transcendence," a distinction which does justice both to our recurring lack of satisfaction with our existing world and to our ongoing efforts to transcend the limits of the world as we find it.¹⁰⁶

At the heart of Thomson's critique is his suggestion that while there may be no principled way to draw the line in all cases, there are *some cases* where a defensible distinction is clear. "The fact that night and day blur together during dawn and dusk does not mean that we cannot distinguish night from day in ordinary cases," Thomson points out, and he argues that immanence and transcendence, in the relevant cases, can adequately be distinguished in a principled way that he takes from Nietzsche's "otherworldly nihilism" argument.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 149.

Focusing on what he takes to be the core of Nietzsche's argument, Thomson makes a stronger version of the mutilating charge against transcendence. On this more subtle reading, it is only "the unfulfillable desire for the other-worldly that generates a false sense of the meaninglessness of this world." It is this dynamic that Thomson thinks is the main point of Nietzsche's complaint against religious transcendence, that it denigrates "even the best that we living human beings can attain in the name of something we cannot; our "earthly" aspirations are devalued by comparison to unfulfillable "otherworldly" dreams." How can we know in advance, however, that our highest goals are unattainable? In more provocative terms, Thomson distinguishes acceptable, non-nihilistic goals (in principle attainable), from those unacceptable nihilistic "goals which require one to die first, as part of the price of admission--and that the traditional religious understanding of Heaven is one such goal." Surely, this is as clear as the day is from the night.¹⁰⁷

In Taylor's defense, I think that he has the resources to push back against Nietzschean view Thomson develops in a number of ways. (1) Taylor challenges what he takes to be a too simplistic understanding of renunciation. The assimilation of all forms of "otherworldly" transcendence to the basic Platonic picture obscures important and relevant distinctions. (2) Next, there is the question of whether

¹⁰⁷ Iain Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem," 150, 151.

Nietzsche's critique (and *a fortiori* Thomson's) applies only to strong ontological visions of "going beyond." (3) Finally, there is an issue as to whether or not Taylor has successfully shifted the onus of proof to the exclusive humanist insofar as the question is really a matter of the adequacy of our moral sources *for a humanistic moral view*. Nietzsche's critique leaves the question of adequacy intact, at least for those of us who are not *Übermenschen*. Let me take each in turn, briefly.¹⁰⁸

Taylor challenges the fundamental presupposition behind Nietzsche's nihilism charge. Must all who believe in a good beyond life, *after death*, a good to which they look to as an anchor for the meaningfulness of the activities and enjoyments of this life be, in Nietzsche's words, "despisers of life"?¹⁰⁹ Taylor, as we have seen above, agrees that there are certainly some forms of religious transcendence that fall afoul of this criticism--that it is a trenchant critique, and has force for us because of legitimate reasons, which he calls "homecomings to the

¹⁰⁸ An additional potential problem with the position Thomson explores in his paper is the question of whether Thomson's position from the point of view of late Heidegger would find Nietzsche's subjectivistic solution to the "creation" of values an acceptable answer to the otherworldly generated nihilism. If not, another form of nihilism looms in the wake of the death of God, and an adequate solution is needed. I conclude the present chapter with a consideration of some of the contributions Thomson has made toward a non-religious response.

¹⁰⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, quoted in Iain Thomson, "Transcendence and the Problem," 149.

ordinary."¹¹⁰ Taylor also readily admits that Nietzsche's attack gets some (more than some) purchase in certain instances. "There are," he agrees, "clearly wrong versions of the Christian faith" (SA 643). There are, however, other visions of the spiritual economy at play in Christianity (and likely Buddhism). Taylor points out that the renunciation of the world, of the value of life relative to the love of God (or hope for eternity) is in many cases predicated on the *value of this world, of ordinary life and of the body*. As we saw in an earlier chapter, he contrasts the deaths of Socrates, for whom death was a "healing," and the suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, whose sacrifice is incomprehensible "unless living the whole span [of life] were good" (SA 17). This relationship between renunciation and affirmation,

¹¹⁰ In *A Secular Age* Taylor links this critique to the protestant reformers' rejection of the ideal of the monastic vocation, and their rehabilitation of ordinary life. The perspective of Reformed churches monastic life was part of a general Catholic rejection of the goods of ordinary life, the life of production and reproduction. Reformers viewed monastic life as one in which people "had dedicated themselves to unreal ideals of austerity to which they were not called by God, turning aside from the ordinary human path where they were supposed to do his will" (SA 627). As Taylor has it in his narrative of the rise of secularity, this charge was generalized, in time, to religion as such. In both cases the sloughing off of the earlier ascetic demands of religion and perceived renunciation of ordinary life was experienced as a sense of recovered value of the ordinary, of a "sense of the value of unspectacular, flawed everyday love, between lovers, or friends, or parents and children, with its routines and labors, partings and reunions, estrangements and returns--a homecoming. Taylor argues that this experience is legitimate, and indeed, constitutive of modernity because the affirmation of ordinary life is of such importance for us as a moral source. At the same time, he thinks the blanket critique of religion and/or transcendence ignores important nuances in historical development that tends to obscure alternative viewpoints.

Taylor points out, "often seems difficult to understand. It would be easy to understand why you should give up the fullness of flourishing, if there were something wrong with it. And that's how unbelief reads Christian renunciation, as a negative judgment on human fulfillment" (SA 645). Taylor is not, as elsewhere, "scoring points," but is making the case that the issues involved are more complicated than the old polemics took them to be. It is the nature of sacrifice, and not only in a religious or Christian context, that that foregone is understood to be of value. If that given up has no value, there is no sacrifice.

Second, we ask whether Taylor escapes Nietzsche's and Thomson's critique because of his weak ontological theism: does the critique of otherworldly nihilism presuppose belief in a strong ontological God or a literal afterlife? As Thomson points out, correctly, Taylor keeps his "views close to the vest" on these questions in *A Secular Age*. Taylor doesn't think that a return to a pre-modern "enchanted world" is either desirable or possible, and a major thesis of *A Secular Age* is that we are all "cross-pressured," believer and unbeliever alike. His claims regarding the legitimacy of religious transcendence in *A Secular Age* ultimately come down to the weak claim that such beliefs are not, *pace* Nietzsche, illicit comforts. I don't think Taylor gives us enough to settle the question, although it does seem that Nietzsche's critique requires a strong belief in an afterlife.

The third possible response Taylor might make at this juncture is that Nietzsche is not a humanist. If Nietzsche is correct in his attack on Christianity, then his argument also holds against the whole Enlightenment project, which is how he understood it. Here Thomson diverges from Nietzsche, arguing that it is only the "in principle unattainable" goals that are a threat to the worth and meaning of the earth, and our ordinary life. This is the strongest point in Thomson's critique.

The problem might be put differently in terms of the onus of the argument. I take it to be integral to Taylor's strategy to shift the onus of argument to the side of unbelief by challenging exclusive humanism to offer non-transcendent sources that are powerful enough to effect a transformation to sustain the affirmation of their own humanist values.

Suppose Thomson's Nietzsche-inspired critique is correct, and only strongly otherworldly goals that require "death as the price of admission" are ruled inadmissible. This still raises the question of whether the remaining goals are adequate to the task of upholding modern humanistic visions of morality. Nietzsche didn't think so, and it didn't bother him. He was (so he claimed) ready to welcome with joy the death of God and to celebrate the consequences. In Nietzsche's words, the death of God ushers in not only the collapse of Christianity (and its cognates), but "what was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it." And he specifies: "for example, the whole European morality." The "free spirit," of course,

rejoices at this, and embraces the consequences, is "not at all sad and gloomy but rather like a new and scarcely describable kind of light, happiness, relief, exhilaration, encouragement, dawn." Certainly Nietzsche (and the neo-Nietzscheans) excludes transcendence, but he also rejects Enlightenment humanism. On my reading of Taylor, *A Secular Age* and his other works directly relevant to religion and transcendence, are aimed not only at recovering the lost or damaged Christian "moral sources," but also at the project of discovering possibilities for a new, inclusive, humanism. As I argue below, this situation places Thomson closer to Taylor's side in the "four-cornered" debate on transcendence.¹¹¹

Returning to the question of drawing the line, another issue arises that I considered briefly in the discussion of Taylor's challenge to his opponents for an account adequate to sustain dedication to high demands of modern morality. Thomson argues that he can draw the line between adequate and inadequate transcendence by Nietzsche's criterion. Thomson's argument seems simple: Any goal is ruled unacceptable, if it is conceived of as "otherworldly" in the strong sense of implying that you have to die to achieve it. Perhaps, Thomson concedes, most cases will be difficult to call, but *this case* seems a clear case of unacceptable transcendence.

¹¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 279.

I think there is a reply that Taylor could make, but does not. Taylor makes the case that we late moderns are in a dilemma, and that we lack the resources to maintain the kind of dedication to universal benevolence and unconditional justice that can withstand the continual failure of human beings to live up to them. In other words, Taylor might conceivably reverse the claim, and point to the weakness, or inadequacy of in principle achievable but unachieved goals relative to the unachieved because unachievable (in this life). He might fault the latter, which are in principle *achievable* but which are nevertheless unachieved, due to weakening the resolve in the modern subject's practical motivation to achieve their realization. Likewise, it seems that an in principle *unachievable* goal may be an inexhaustible well from which to draw a sustaining love of humanity that powers an unconditional devotion and practical effort on behalf of the species. If living to see the accomplishment of the goal is part of the goal, we are faced with the prospect of utter disappointment in the interesting cases. Again, it seems that it may be better to lower our standards or expectations, something that Taylor believes is an unacceptable admission of defeat.

Either side of this question about drawing the line based on whether the goal is realizable in life or not is, in the end, inconclusive. I think that this is a matter of temperament--something that Taylor would agree with. Depending on any number of contingencies one way or the other may appeal to an individual, and then again

these things develop and change over time as identities evolve. This is central to Taylor's vision of both the modern secular age and the modern self, which seeks a meaning to ordinary life, as well as struggling to live up to moral standards it is impossible to achieve.

To conclude this chapter on critiques of Taylor I would like briefly to consider Thomson's contribution to a more inclusive humanism. Here I sketch two paths that might be taken in the development of a neo-Heideggerian approach to the maximal demand. The first involves some insights into the potential for a Heideggerian deep ecology, and the second involves a reading of Heidegger's notion of "dwelling" as revealing a motive for selfless action and overcoming the complacent self-satisfaction of exclusive humanism. This is a view of moral self-transcendence predicated on a concept of an immanent non-human good that potentially has the power to take us beyond merely human flourishing, yet not beyond the things of this world. It is also an excellent coda to our discussion of Thomson's critique of Taylor because it shows that although he comes at the questions from a very different angle and philosophical temperament, Thomson also evinces a keen sensitivity to the cross-pressures of a secular age, though perhaps he does not find himself in Jamesian open space.

The first contribution toward an inclusive humanism in Thomson's work is his suggestion for overcoming a problematic anti-humanism in some versions of

deep ecology. In "Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy," Thomson engages the "eco-phenomenology" movement from the perspective of later Heidegger.¹¹² Identifying some of the unacceptable "anti-human implications and anti-democratic conclusions" of many of the attempts to develop a phenomenological approach to the environment, Thomson suggests these difficulties may be avoided. Thomson suggests that we answer the question "Which entities deserve intrinsic rights?", with "All *Dasein*," that is, all entities whose being is an issue for them, and only those entities."¹¹³ In this Thomson is clearly aligned with Taylor against the (so-called) postmodernists, or what Taylor calls neo-Nietzscheans throughout *A Secular Age*. Thomson rejects appeals to "life *per se*" as an acceptable criterion to determine which entities have intrinsic rights. Rather, he suggests that "a life that has a temporally-enduring world that matters to it explicitly" as the appropriate way to settle the question in terms of a *Dasein*-based deep ecology.

The motive for such a *Dasein*-based deep ecology brings us to the second consideration from Thomson's paper. Thomson, correctly I think, suggests that a motive for such a Heideggerian response lies in the individual experience of

¹¹² Iain Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics at the Intersection of Phenomenology and Environmental Philosophy," *Inquiry* 47 (2004).

¹¹³ Iain Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics," 401.

"dwelling" whereby the inherently inexhaustible meaningfulness (*not* "value") of things is revealed independently of the will.¹¹⁴ Such a "conversion," or "transformation," by providing a contrast case, will also reveal the roots of the present dilemma in ontotheology. Thomson suggests, along with Heidegger, that this conversion may be precipitated by "any appropriately thoughtful encounter with the myriad" of "humble things... in which we recognize entities as being more than resources awaiting optimization."¹¹⁵

The connection between dwelling (transcendence as transformation) and Thomson's suggestion that having an intelligible "world" is a sufficient condition for having intrinsic rights, is that only *Dasein* can dwell, and it is just in dwelling that *Dasein* achieves an opening to the independent mattering of the earth, or the environment. Dwelling holds out some promise as an adequate basis for a deep ecological ethic, an ecological ethic that is rooted in the meaningfulness of the environment independently of its use value. In Taylor's terms, Thomson seems to argue that dwelling is the best secular hope for revealing the environment (earth or

¹¹⁴ There is some overlap in the Heideggerian notion of "dwelling," and the question of whether it can be under the purview of the will, whether one can determine to achieve transcendence in the relevant sense. This is most clear in Emerson (in certain moods), but is also very prominent in the later Dewey. You cannot aim at a transformation, nor is "dwelling" to be achieved by willing. See, also, my discussion above in footnote no. 35.

¹¹⁵ Iain Thomson, "Ontology and Ethics," 402.

nature) as a moral source that also allows a principled way of assigning human beings (*qua Dasein*) a very high value in nature.¹¹⁶ Heidegger's romantic ideal of nature as a moral source is revealed clearly in the following passage, quoted by Thomson, from "The Fieldpath": "The message of the fieldpath *awakens* a spirit who loves the open air and, at a favorable place, leaps over even heaviness into an extreme serenity... The expanse of all grown things which dwell around the fieldpath bestows the world."¹¹⁷

The emphasis in Thomson's reading of Heidegger is on what I would call the *intimacy with things* in the experience of dwelling, rather than in shared collective experiences. Elsewhere Thomson explains this aspect of his work as an expression of his "enduring respect" for a "strand of anti-theological religious thinking... which valorizes social alienation and the radical individuation it facilitates as an alternative and at least equally genuine and important dimension of religious experience."¹¹⁸ This shift of emphasis is key to Thomson's reconciliation of a Heideggerian self-decentering with humanist moral intuitions, that is, his vision, too, supports an

¹¹⁶ For an interesting comparison both to this approach, and Taylor's, but one which is more resolutely naturalist, see, George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 404 (italics are Thomson's).

¹¹⁸ Iain Thomson, *Heidegger, Art, and Postmodernity*, 164.

inclusive humanism. This also contrasts strongly with Taylor and others, such as Sean Kelly and Hubert Dreyfus, who emphasize shared, collective experiences of meaning. Thomson's emphasis on the *individuating intimacy with the things of this world* revealed in their inexhaustible meaningfulness offers a striking contrast with Taylor. At the same time, the seriousness of Thomson's obvious concern for finding some principled way to reconcile human rights with deep ecology shows that he has more in common with Taylor than may be at first apparent.

Chapter Six

Pragmatism and Inclusive Humanism: Taylor and Dewey

Richard Kearney, in a recently published conversation with Charles Taylor, 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."¹¹⁹ 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 a viable 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 asks, "is atheistic humanism not enough? Why is a Christian or transcendent humanism so important for you?"¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Richard Kearney and Charles 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), 77.

¹²⁰ Kearney, *Reimagining the Sacred*, 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."¹²¹

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."¹²² 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

¹²¹ Ibid., 77-78.

¹²² Ibid., 78.

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.¹²³

At certain points throughout the previous chapters I have noted the relevance of John Dewey's thought, and hinted at some of the directions this might take.

¹²³ 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.

Although I cannot develop it in detail here, I think that pragmatism in general, and John Dewey's thought in particular is very well suited to a constructive engagement with Taylor on the subject of religion, transcendence and the future of humanism. In the rest of this conclusion I would like to bring out what I think are some of the resources from the pragmatist tradition for just such a secular, though inclusive, humanism. In particular, I think that the often-overlooked religious philosophy of Dewey is best suited for the task of developing a pragmatic intramundane transcendence as a basis for a secular inclusive humanism. I do not propose to develop a Dewey-inspired *all inclusive humanism* in these concluding remarks, but only to demonstrate a broad affinity Taylor shares with the classical pragmatists, especially Dewey.

Taylor and Dewey: The Potential for a Constructive Engagement

John Dewey's Terry Lectures, delivered in 1934 at Yale University, and published as *A Common Faith* the same year, are probably best described as a highly idiosyncratic attempt at a "third way" in the polarized debate surrounding religion in the 1930s. The mainstream protestant theological debates of the period tend to fall into two camps, both characterized by their reaction to Darwin and to a deepening disenchantment of the world in the wake of a dawning realization of human

contingency.¹²⁴ This conciliatory approach, the attempt to remain above the popular debate, is something that Dewey has in common with Charles Taylor. Dewey's "little book," which runs to just over eighty pages, and Taylor's "big book," *A Secular Age*, which is nearly ten times as long, complement each other in surprising ways. Both works are aimed at disabusing the reader of any simplistic view of the problem of religious belief in the modern world, nor do they neglect the important role in morality that religion has played, and the importance of confronting the potential impact on the ethical shape of modernity. Both works address the reader who finds belief in the supernatural or transcendent, as these terms are usually construed, to be difficult or impossible. Taylor is focused on those who experience the decline in religious belief as a loss, those who dwell in what he calls the "Jamesian open space," and feel pulled in two directions, and who recognize something valuable in religious experience but nevertheless find it difficult or impossible to believe.¹²⁵ Dewey is also concerned for those conflicted about religious belief in the modern world. A major difference between Dewey and Taylor here is

¹²⁴ For a fuller characterization of the historical milieu in America, and Dewey's place in the debate, see Melvin L. Rogers, *The Undiscovered Dewey: Religion, Morality, and the Ethos of Democracy*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009).

¹²⁵ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), see also, *SA*.

that Dewey emphasizes the potential for a naturalized context for religious experience, for the function of religious experience "emancipated" from institutional religions and the supernatural (LW9: 1), whereas Taylor is primarily focused on defending the viability of robust religious belief, in an institutional (or at least communal) context. Dewey is addressing the "threat" posed to those unable to accept belief in the supernatural, and who think that genuinely religious experience is impossible without belief in supernatural entities. He argues that this need not be the case, and that religious self-realization,¹²⁶ or what I called above, pragmatic intramundane transcendence, remains a viable possibility within the context of his naturalism. Taylor, on the other hand, makes the case for keeping open the transcendent window; he argues that it is impossible to foreclose this option. It should be clear from the argument from previous chapters, however, that Taylor seeks a *via media* between radical positions--as does Dewey. Of course, this means that they also share the circumstance of pleasing very few in their quest for a

¹²⁶ The term "self-realization," has, unfortunately had a difficult time since Dewey used it in the 1930s, especially as it is often featured in relatively superficial "self-help" movements throughout the 1960s and '70s. However abused, I think it remains useful. Dewey uses it in a way that reveals a strong Emersonian streak in his thought. I read *A Common Faith* as Dewey's attempt to unpack Emersonian self-reliance in intramundane terms, one of Dewey's post-Romantic gestures, which quite bewildered his secular humanist contemporaries. By "post-Romantic gesture," I mean to capture something of Taylor's writing on post-Romantic art, specifically that it implies transcendence, "points beyond itself," but remains "ontologically indeterminate" (see SA 620 ff).

solution that satisfies everyone. Still, there is strong potential for bringing these two thinkers together in a constructive engagement on a particular set of problems facing religious belief in modernity, and I think it remains worthwhile. I hope my closing comments will serve as an inspiration for further work on Dewey and Taylor.

Taylor's direct engagement with neo-pragmatists has been occasional, if long-standing, but is largely focused on his disagreements with Richard Rorty. These disagreements illuminate as much about the shortcomings of Rorty's brand of neo-pragmatism as they do about the narrowness of Taylor's conception of pragmatism. Taylor's engagement with Rorty may have colored his conception of pragmatism, and occluded a range of connections with his own philosophical outlook.

One question that I will not answer in what follows is just who really counts as a pragmatist, although I think the discussion as a whole will contribute, if indirectly, to the general idea of pragmatism. That pragmatism is notoriously difficult to pin down by way of a definition is often remarked. Richard Rorty sometimes seems to talk as though the defining feature of pragmatism is its anti-foundationalism, and that feature does seem to be the focus of much of what he finds praiseworthy in the classical pragmatists, but there is far too broad a range of thinkers in the anti-foundationalist camp for this alone to serve as an adequate indicator of pragmatism as a unique school of thought. Alternatively, there is the

Peircian “pragmatic maxim,” and pragmatism is sometimes understood as primarily a certain stand on the question of truth and meaning. Agreement on this score, however, among those self-consciously working in the pragmatist tradition, boils down to the very vague notion, widely interpreted, that “truth is what works.” In the end it looks like pragmatism will have to remain a big tent, and we will have to live without a precise definition. This in itself seems a fitting characteristic. Perhaps the best suggestion, which was first suggested by Hilary Putnam in *Pragmatism: an Open Question*, is that focusing on the primacy of practice as a way of overcoming representationalism most clearly unites the disparate band of pragmatists. Pointing out Wittgenstein’s affinity with pragmatism Putnam suggests that “a central—perhaps the central—emphasis with pragmatism [is] the emphasis on the primacy of practice.”¹²⁷ It seems safe to say that the primacy of practice comes close to a necessary condition for pragmatism. But is it a sufficient condition? To take the primacy of practice as a sufficient condition would count a number of philosophers as pragmatists who are not generally thought of as pragmatists, including, for example, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and, indeed, Taylor himself.

But Taylor is not a pragmatist, and no attempt will be made here to assimilate him with that tradition. Ultimately, Taylor may be, in his words, “some kind of

¹²⁷ Hilary Putnam, *Pragmatism: an Open Question*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

pragmatist,” but only if we take the primacy of practice as a sufficient condition for counting as a pragmatist, rather than merely (at best) a necessary condition.

Attempting to offer a definitive answer to the question of whether Taylor is a pragmatist, however, would be helpful neither for understanding Taylor’s, nor Dewey’s thought. Rather, this section offers a survey of Taylor’s thought in relation to the pragmatist tradition, and his affinity with it.

Taylor shares a range of common philosophical commitments with pragmatists besides the primacy of practice, for example, anti-foundationalism, anti-representationalism, and pluralism. The primary philosophical influences that brought Taylor to philosophical positions that overlap with many pragmatists, however, are rooted in Oxford Philosophy of the 1950s, and the continental tradition, rather than a close reading of the classical pragmatists James, Dewey, and Peirce. In the following brief survey of their thought we will see that Dewey may be the pragmatist closest to Taylor, as paradoxical as this might sound to those familiar with the thought of both. It is fair to say that Taylor is a “fellow traveller” with pragmatism—he is, as it were, the American pragmatists’ Canadian cousin.

If the question of whether Taylor (or anyone else for that matter) really counts as a pragmatist is idle, for the purposes of the present work it is important to ask just how far Taylor does travel, so to speak, along with the classical pragmatists, and those self-consciously working within the pragmatist tradition. In an essay titled

“What Is Pragmatism?”--a contribution to a *Festschrift* in honor of the pragmatist Richard J. Bernstein’s seventieth birthday, *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein*--Taylor considers this question himself. Prudently, he ultimately leaves the question in his title unanswered, but rather points out what he takes to be some of the core insights from the pragmatist tradition with which he agrees. He acknowledges an intellectual debt to Bernstein, and recognizes that his longstanding critique of the modern epistemological tradition runs parallel to a similar critique to be found in the works of many contemporary pragmatists. In light of his proximity to pragmatism on the question of the epistemological tradition Taylor muses, “So perhaps I too, am some kind of pragmatist?”¹²⁸

The only sense in which Taylor suggests he *might* be a pragmatist of *some kind* is that he accepts a broad understanding of the pragmatist critique of the epistemological tradition, a critique that he finds he has in common with many pragmatists. Taylor defines the target of this critique he shares with pragmatists in terms of a set of “priority relations” in traditional epistemology that underlie the general “picture of individuals as knowing agents, who build up their understanding of the world through combining and relating, in more and more

¹²⁸ Charles Taylor, “What Is Pragmatism?,” in Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, eds., *Pragmatism, Critique, Judgment: Essays for Richard J. Bernstein* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 73–92, citation on p. 74.

comprehensive theories, the information they take in and that is couched in inner representations, be these conceived as mental pictures (in the earlier variants), or as sentences to be held true in the more contemporary versions.”¹²⁹ Taylor enumerates three “priority relations” that support this picture:

(1) Knowledge of the self and its states comes before the knowledge of external reality and of others. (2) Knowledge of reality as a neutral fact comes before our attributing to it various values and relevances. And, (3) knowledge of the things of “this world,” of the natural order, precedes any theoretical invocation of forces and realities transcendent to it.¹³⁰

The tentative understanding of pragmatism that Taylor proposes is that pragmatism reverses some of these priority relations underlying the epistemological tradition. “In particular,” Taylor says, “the target would be (2).” Denying, or reversing, the second priority relation amounts to an affirmation of the primacy of practice, whereby our representations and beliefs arise from a pre-theoretical engagement with an already meaningful world through our everyday background practices. As Taylor puts it, “we are from the very beginning at grips with the world,” and “our entire understanding of things comes to be framed only within this committed and active perspective.” Thus Taylor singles out, along with Putnam, the primacy of

¹²⁹ Ibid, 74.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

practice as the best candidate for a necessary condition for defining pragmatism.

“This might,” he adds, “be the core meaning” of pragmatism.¹³¹

Further, Taylor suggests that the first priority relation is so tied to the second that the denial of the latter is implied by the denial of the former, so that the “pragmatist tradition early on begins to challenge the primacy of the monological agent in the epistemological tradition.” Understood, or tentatively defined in this way, it is clear that a number of philosophers not usually thought to be in the mainstream of the pragmatist tradition would be counted as pragmatists, and Taylor mentions Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, as well as himself, as thinkers who would, on this thin criteria, count as pragmatists. He calls this understanding of pragmatism the ““broad church” definition of the family of pragmatists.” Besides the “broad church” understanding of pragmatism, Taylor also identifies a “narrower” or “more radical sense of pragmatism” that includes a denial of the correspondence theory of truth.¹³²

With the suggestion of a tentative “broad church” definition of pragmatism Taylor is similar to Robert Brandom’s suggestion that pragmatism should be understood along similar lines. In *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and*

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

Contemporary, Brandom identifies what he calls “fundamental pragmatism,” based on the same criteria of the primacy of practice, parsing this idea as a matter of “understanding knowing *that* as a kind of knowing *how*... That is, believing that *things* are thus and so is to be understood in terms of practical abilities to *do* something.”¹³³ Drawing, in part, on the work of Stephen Levine on Brandom and the classical pragmatists, in chapter four, below, we will revisit this question of the primacy of practice, and the theory of truth, and ask whether Brandom and Rorty count as fellow communicants with Taylor and Dewey in the “broad church” understanding of pragmatism. There we consider Taylor’s engagement with Rorty and Brandom in order to situate Dewey’s pragmatism closer to Taylor than either of these latter-day pragmatists on the primacy of practice, the philosophical relevance and nature of experience, as well as the question of truth and objectivity in ethics.

The rest of “What Is Pragmatism?” is interesting primarily as Taylor’s first engagement in print with one of the classical pragmatists. Taylor goes on to discuss William James’s works *Varieties of Religious Experience*, and *The Will To Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. He defends a reading of James on religious belief and experience that assimilates him to the “broad church” idea of pragmatism, that locates James on his side (as opposed to Rorty’s) of the question of truth. “So what

¹³³ Robert Brandom, *Perspectives on Pragmatism: Classical, Recent, and Contemporary*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 9.

kind of pragmatist is James?" Taylor ponders in the final paragraphs of the essay, concluding that, "It seems clear to me that he is the "broad" kind, rather than a "radical." There is a continuing invocation of unreduced truth in his argument."¹³⁴ By "radical" pragmatist Taylor seems to have Rorty's critique of truth primarily in mind. But Taylor's reading of James is tendentious, or at least highly selective, limiting his interpretation of James to only two of his works.

Taylor returns to his discussion of James in a more recent book, *Varieties of Pragmatism Today: William James Revisited*, where, besides repeating much of the material in the earlier essay (some of it verbatim), Taylor adds a criticism of James for lacking an adequate appreciation for, or indeed a rejection of, any role for religious community, or communal practice, in his psychology of religious experience. In this regard it is especially unfortunate that Taylor does not engage Dewey's *A Common Faith*, since Dewey does include a role for the community in his religious thought. In fact, Taylor does not mention Dewey or Peirce anywhere in his published work. The only other pragmatist from the classical period whom Taylor mentions is George Herbert Mead, but only as an aside, or in a footnote.

In spite of the fact that Taylor does not even so much as mention John Dewey anywhere in his extensive body of work, there are a number of parallels and points

¹³⁴ "What Is Pragmatism?," 90.

of convergence, not all of which bear directly on the question of the meaning of pragmatism, or who counts as a pragmatist. At the same time, there are significant differences in their thought. Besides Taylor's agreement with some of the general features recognized, roughly, to be shared by many pragmatists, contemporary or classical, there are several more specific points of convergence with the thought of Dewey in particular. There are also differences. The most significant difference is that Dewey is a dedicated naturalist, and this commitment extends to his moral and ethical work, whereas Taylor inveighs against naturalism in ethics. The question of naturalism in ethics is one of the biggest challenges to developing a constructive comparison between Dewey and Taylor. This challenge may, however, be overcome by consideration of a deeper underlying agreement on ontology. While Rorty rejects metaphysics outright, and regrets that his hero, Dewey, wrote an entire book dedicated to the "generic traits of existence." This too helps us in the present project. While Dewey is, like Rorty on the most charitable reading, a non-reductive naturalist, he also offers a rich ontology that informs his thought on selfhood and ethics comparable to Taylor in important ways that distance his thought from Rorty's. Stephen White's concept of "weak ontology," especially as he applies it to Taylor, is an important part of overcoming the gap between Taylor and Dewey on ethical naturalism. It is plausible to read Dewey also as advocating a version of "weak ontology." "Weak ontology," as explained above, can be thought of as an

ontological position falling somewhere between foundationalism and non-foundationalism, or between an absolute grounding for objectivity, and Rortian irony, or Vattimo's "weak thought." Besides assisting in the comparison with Taylor, the concept of weak ontology also helps to highlight Dewey's distance from Rortian irony. In fact, many aspects of Dewey's thought either downplayed or rejected by Rorty are just those elements of Dewey's thought that bring him close to Taylor, and make the present work possible, and fruitful.

Other similarities, or points of convergence between Taylor and Dewey, emerge from a consideration of their moral philosophy, including their respective philosophical anthropology. Although Dewey does not develop his ontology of the self in detail, it is an important presupposition in his ethical thought, and while he does not rely on "sources" of the self as Taylor does, he does include a notion of a highest good in his idea of growth. Also relevant in this regard is Dewey's understanding of ends-in-view, which informs his moral philosophy and is integral to understanding his religious philosophy of self-realization in *A Common Faith*, including his defense of the possibility of a naturalized moral theism (his argument for retaining the name God). Other aspects of Dewey's moral philosophy are also relevant to our focus on his and Taylor's religious thought. Dewey, again unlike Rorty, but like Taylor, defends objectivity in ethics. Indeed, both Dewey and Taylor argue for moral realism (on quite different grounds). Dewey also rejects the

distinction between ethics and morality, settling, like Taylor, on “morality” as his preferred term for both. Both thinkers advance a form of eudaimonism, or a moral theory focused on human flourishing. As Taylor often phrases it, the focus is on what it is “good to be,” rather than what it is “right to do.” An emphasis on self-realization through transcending, or decentering the self (what Taylor calls transformation) is also a salient point in the moral and religious thought of both. Likewise, as Ruth Abbey points out in a footnote to her monograph on Taylor, both philosophers are “theorists of the background.” This reference by Abbey is one of the rare occurrences of a comparison of Taylor and Dewey in the literature. Noting this similarity, she quotes Dewey at length, from *Democracy and Education*:

The things which we take for granted without inquiry or reflection are just the things that determine our conscious thinking and determine our conclusions. And the habitudes which lie below the level of reflection are just those which have been formed in the constant give and take of relationships with others.¹³⁵

Alan Ryan, in *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, however, makes what is perhaps the most striking claim regarding the striking similarity between Taylor and Dewey. Ryan baldly states “Charles Taylor is for the most part a Deweyan without knowing it.” While Ryan’s hyperbole goes farther than the

¹³⁵ Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 227 n. 13.

present thesis, I think that he is correct to point up the, often striking, similarities between these two philosophers.¹³⁶

In their political philosophy there are strong similarities, as well as important differences, between Taylor and Dewey. The strongest similarity in this area is what might be called the liberal-communitarian aspect of both thinkers that is tied to a theory of individuality advanced by both, and which supports an abiding faith in democracy. Likewise Taylor's and Dewey's political thought is critical though affirming of modernity (though for different reasons). Difficulties, however, also appear at the level of political thought. Dewey's political thinking, in spite of the fact that he is perhaps the most optimistic partisan of democratic politics, is open to an internal critique by way of exposing a potential totalizing tendency inherent in his over-emphasis on science, and his faith in instrumental reason. This is a good example, however, of how it is constructive to bring Dewey's and Taylor's thought into a constructive engagement. Dewey's concept of "intelligence" is a potential point of contact with Taylor's ideal of practical reasoning.

¹³⁶ Alan Ryan, *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (W. W. Norton: New York, NY, 1995, p. 361). For another more recent discussion of Taylor and Dewey, see Michael Kühnlein and Mattias Luz-Bachmann, eds., *Unerfüllte Moderne?: Neue Perspektiven auf das Werk von Charles Taylor* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2011), especially the contribution by Ludwig Nagl, "The Jamesian open space: Charles Taylor und der Pragmatismus," 117-160.

Finally, there are points of comparison between our two philosophers that are of a more personal nature. Dewey and Taylor both fit the bill as “public intellectuals” more perfectly than any other philosopher of their respective generations. Dewey was deeply involved in education reform, as well as education theory, and engaged in nearly all the major political and social matters of urgent importance during his near six decades-long professional life. Taylor too has been and remains deeply engaged with the pressing issues of his time, going further than Dewey by standing for public office several times in the 1960s, and he has been deeply involved more recently in Canadian politics in his home province of Quebec. Likewise their passionate commitment to their work is tempered by an unpretentious writing style that usually avoids the technical jargon of academic philosophy – something that has been cause for misunderstanding of both by their peers in professional philosophy. And both men are optimistic about the future of humanity, and indeed, each in their own way, are true believers.

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