

Charles Taylor and the Modern Moral Sources of the Self

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I. Introduction:

Human persons are self-interpreting animals,¹ but the materials and resources with which they interpret themselves change. The self is a self only within a particular framework. This framework, however, is fleeting and changing through time. In discussing the modern self, I draw greatly from the *Sources of the Self* where Charles Taylor discusses thoroughly his ideas on self and identity. Other terms in the title alone like sources of the self and the making of modern identity imply that Charles Taylor is offering a causal explanation of the development of modern self by aiming to “articulate and write a history of modern identity.”² He writes:

*The book is genealogical. I start from the present situation, from formative ideas, from our conflicting forms of self-understanding, and I try to unearth certain earlier forms from which they arise... it is not a complete historical reconstruction, it is a very selective step backwards to rediscover certain sources.*³

Charles Taylor, then, initiates a historical narrative of the development of the modern identity in its relation to moral goods and their sources. It is surprising that he never suggests adopting a culture less contaminated by Western individualism and science as the answer to the loss of spiritual and moral grounds. He looks for the solutions within the Western civilization, describing his work as an attempt to ‘retrieve’ the spiritual and moral grounds to “bring the air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the

¹Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 4. Henceforth, this text is referred to as HAL. See also Mark Joseph Calano, “Charles Taylor on Self-Interpretation: Understanding Interpreter and Interpreted,” in *Suri: The Official Journal of the Philosophical Association of the Philippines* (1:1, 2012): 72-90.

²Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), ix. Henceforth, this text is referred to as SOS.

³PPR, 110.

spirit.”⁴ Charles Taylor finds it vital to write a history of the modern self to illuminate the modern identity as it is lived today.⁵ Recounting this history contributes to self-knowledge by focusing on the historical rather than the ontological, for much of the human self come into being over time. “⁶[T]here is no self-understanding without historical understanding... and there is no historical understanding without self-understanding.”⁷

In adopting this analysis of the self, I hope that uncovering the complexity of the modern self will lead to the acceptance of the plurality of goods that Charles Taylor affirms.⁸ Knowledge of the modern self will also lead to an appreciation of other cultures and an appreciation of the spiritual and moral dimensions woven in their specific cultures. In what follows, I relate the birth of the modern self and outlines the four modern moral sources, namely, inner depths, disengaged freedom, expressions of authenticity, and the affirmation of ordinary life. The study concludes with how these different aspects of the modern self relate to each other in the three broad horizons of identity, which are the self, the larger order beyond, and the traditional theistic horizon.

II. Modern Moral Sources and the Distinct Self:

Strong evaluation is inescapable. Its presence situates the self in the moral ontology of modernity. Charles Taylor insists that this ontology include different goods: life goods and constitutive goods.⁹ On one hand, “[a] life good is a property which makes life worthy or valuable.”¹⁰ A modern man’s life goods consist in an ethic of benevolence, an ethos of universal respect and justice, the quest for individual self-realization and expressive fulfillment, the ideals of freedom and self-rule, and the avoidance of death and suffering.¹¹ On the other hand, constitutive goods are “features of the universe, of God, or human beings on which life goods depend

⁴ SOS, 520.

⁵Ibid., 319.

⁶ Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 257. Henceforth, this text is referred to as PHS.

⁷ Charles Taylor, “Comments on Ricoeur’s History and Hermeneutics” in *Philosophy of History and Action* Y. Yovel (ed.) (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), 24

⁸SOS, 112, 503, 511, 514, 520.

⁹PHS, 244.

¹⁰Charles Taylor, “Reply to Baybrooke and De Sousa” in *Dialogue* (Winter 1994), 126. Henceforth, further reference to this text shall be referred to as RBD.

¹¹SOS, 495.

and which command... moral awe or allegiance.”¹² These goods are qualitatively different from each other. This condition denies the possibility of having these goods harmoniously combined, rank-ordered, or reduced to a more fundamental good.

Constitutive goods are largely unarticulated metaphysical and epistemological ground on which life goods are constructed. Embracing a constitutive good enables the human person to generate whatever he has to affirm and adhere to a given life good. The point of articulating constitutive goods is “to clarify and make more vivid what is more involved in a certain life good and often to empower one by a more potent sense of the constitutive good as a source.”¹³ Taylor calls these constitutive goods ‘moral sources’ “insofar as [humanity] turns to them in whatever way is appropriate to them--through contemplation, or invocation, or prayer, or whatever-- for moral empowerment.”¹⁴

In relation to this, Charles Taylor identifies the salient features of the modern self as it is related to modern moral sources by developing under the impact of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. First is the sense of inwardness.¹⁵ Second is the notion of freedom as a radical disengagement.¹⁶ Third is the self’s sense of uniqueness combined with the egalitarian aspects of the modern self.¹⁷ This third aspect further leads to the discussion of authenticity in modern culture. This is the ethical imperative to be true to the human person’s particular self. And fourth is the affirmation of ordinary life. This cultural movement, the affirmation of ordinary life, further informs the modern person. Different, yet related to this cultural movement, is the ethic of benevolence, the modern self’s desire to minimize avoidable suffering.¹⁸ This is linked with another facet of the human person that all individuals must be entitled to a life of minimal pain, a dignity and respect attributed to all persons simply because they are human.¹⁹

Taylor is not claiming an ontological situation for the whole

¹²Charles Taylor, “Comments and Replies” in *Inquiry* 34 (1991): 243. Henceforth, this text shall be referred to as CAR.

¹³RBD, 130

¹⁴SOS, 311.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 12-13.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 394-95.

humanity as he tries to describe the distinctive modern self. This remains to be an on-going project where more and more people in more and more societies are converging. This happens at different times, at different speeds, and in different ways in various parts of the world. He is not describing “where everyone now is.” Rather, he is describing a collection of self-understandings that are alien and incomprehensible to those in pre-modern traditional cultures.

A. Sense of Inwardness:

The modern sense that the self is disconnected from a larger cosmic order is associated with the self’s inwardness. But, there is a direct connection between inwardness²⁰ and the attrition of cosmic orders of meaning. Taylor explains:

*For the pre-modern... I am an element in a larger order... The order in which I am placed is an external horizon which is essential to answering the question, who am I?... for the modern, the horizon of identity is to be found within, while for the pre-modern it is without.*²¹

Taylor traces the first of these features to Plato, but sees the modern emphasis on inwardness in St. Augustine and shows how this conception changed since then.²²

Plato’s insistence on the reign of order within the soul as a result of the submission of human desire to reason and its vision of the good manifests the first signs of the inward path. As the single laws of human thought and feeling, the soul achieves within itself a kind of unity. The person who is genuinely ruled by reason is both at one with himself and centered within oneself, rather than driven this way and that by conflicting desires. This centering becomes so important in Plato’s thinking that success in the world is no longer decisive, as he sees it, for personal happiness: the just life is the most advantageous life even if one should have to suffer for his acts of virtue.²³

But, Plato’s theory is only a precondition for the rise of a sense of inwardness. Its real emergence awaits Augustine’s transformation

²⁰SOS, 111, 114, 121.

²¹PHS, 258.

²²SOS, 128-129, 140, 177.

²³Ibid., 111-126.

of Platonic epistemology and ethics because it is only Augustine who created the distinction between 'inward' and 'outward'. St. Augustine's inwardness is both a path towards God and a path to a particular moral source. In Augustinian ethics, for example, there is the insistence of goods that are spiritual and immaterial over those that are merely corporeal and fleeting. In his epistemology, he transforms Platonic good into an interior guiding light, which makes thinking possible and is, in fact, an invariable standard grounding the very activity of human reason itself. In other words, with Augustine one can observe a shift towards 'radical reflexivity'. While all societies have a notion of reflexivity, not all have radical reflexivity. Radical reflexivity refers to a focus on the self qua self, the change in the focus of inquiry from the object to the subject of experience. Taylor contrasts radical reflexivity and reflexivity in the following manner:

If I attend to my wounded hand, or begin (belatedly) to think about the state of my soul instead of worldly success. I am indeed concerned with myself, but not yet radically. I am not focusing on myself as the agent of experience and making this my object... Radical reflexivity brings to the fore a kind of presence to oneself which is inseparable from one's being the agent of experience.²⁴

This movement is epistemologically decisive because the direction of one's attention to the world is refocused to one's activity as a thinking person, the radical act of knowing one's self. This radical reflexivity is a prerequisite to the birth of the disengaged subject of modern epistemology. Certainly, this is connected to the positive sciences' desire to know the world objectively. It is an imperative to identify what the knowing subjects contribute to the process of knowing.²⁵ However, Taylor points out that radical reflexivity developed in another way by providing the idea of the human person with inner depths.²⁶ Taylor argues that while both the disengaged subject and the understanding of inner depths are rooted in radical reflexivity, both approaches to the self soon diverged. While Cartesian disengagement urged individuals to abstract themselves from ordinary experience and idiosyncrasies,

²⁴Ibid., 130-131. Cf. PHS, 266-267

²⁵HAL, 112. SOS, 174-175, 232.

²⁶SOS, 173, 178, 183.

the recognition of inner depths encouraged a deeper exploration of the self immersed in its everyday peculiarity.²⁷ Descartes' disengaged self is not Augustine's self. The former is only a prelude to moving upward to God,²⁸ while the latter is a prelude to further self-exploration.

Charles Taylor further identifies the same pattern of 'inward' and 'outward' in Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau thinks that there is a close connection between the outside and the inside. Just as the natural world becomes a source of moral renewal so may an inward turn become a source of moral guidance and happiness.²⁹ So, the right thing to do, to be or to feel, is to be determined by an inward turn, not an inquiry towards the opinion of others.³⁰ Rousseau, in proposing that nature is a moral source, reacts against the disenchantment of the world and the promises of the positive sciences. As it seems, Rousseau is troubled by the seventeenth century scientific revolution, and fears the deleterious consequences of the hegemony of instrumental reason. Both, according to him, obscure human natural feelings, which are benevolent. This thinking was a great source of inspiration for the Romantic tradition and its reaction against the Enlightenment.³¹

B. Disengaged Freedom:

Modernity no longer sees the human person as situated in some larger cosmic order. The human person is no longer seen as part of a world of forms, nor situated in the hierarchy of God's creation. Since the disenchanted world denies any intrinsic moral meaning, the modern self is liberated from any preordained meaning in the world.³² The erosion of belief in an inherently meaningful world makes possible the nihilism of Nietzsche.³³ Taylor does not only look at the negative effects of this erosion, but reconsiders its positive effects. The positive effects include the finding of freedom and the advent of the disengaged self. From

²⁷Ibid., 175, 182.

²⁸Ibid., 132, 134, 136, 390.

²⁹Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 25. Henceforth, this text is referred to as HGL.

³⁰PHS, 272.

³¹SOS, 368-369, 429, 456-457.

³²PHS, 256-260. SOS, 18, 160, 395.

³³SOS, 16-18.

this perspective, the human person emerges as the subject, whose task is to understand and to give meaning to an objective world.³⁴ Taylor grounds this understanding of the self from the seventeenth century and identifies René Descartes, Francis Bacon, and John Locke as its major exponents.³⁵

The modern development of the private sphere, that valorizes discipline and self-reconstruction at individual and social levels, came from the neo-Stoic thinker Justus Lipsius. In his works, Taylor sees the self as able to reconfigure itself and its world in accordance with its will.³⁶ This new view builds itself on the idea of a disengaged self,³⁷ for just as he becomes vulnerable to external forces beyond his control, the self also aspires to master his passions and desires. The disengaged self is in full favor of objectification; he “has broken with religion, superstition, resisted the blandishments of those pleasing and flattering world-views which hide the austere reality of the human condition in a disenchanted universe. He has taken up the scientific attitude. The direction of his life is set, however little mastery he may have actually achieved.”³⁸

In this process, the self becomes increasingly insulated and more tightly bounded from the world.³⁹ Thus, he is “capable of objectifying not only the surrounding world, but also his own emotions and inclinations, fears and compulsions, and achieving thereby a kind of distance and self-possession which allows him to act ‘rationally.’”⁴⁰ This restricted conception of the self contributes to the development of exclusive humanism by isolating the self farther from the surrounding world. By ‘exclusive humanism’, Charles Taylor refers to a moral-cum-spiritual outlook that construes human flourishing in worldly terms, without reference to God, divinity, or transcendent goods. It gives an account of human development, of selfhood, society, and politics without reference to God, the divine or transcendent concerns. While many traditional doctrines see the human person as realizing himself only in relation to a wider cosmic order, this distinctively modern

³⁴HGL, 7 & 539. SOS, 188.

³⁵PHS, 258.

³⁶MTS, 308.

³⁷PAS, 66-78.

³⁸SOS, 46.

³⁹Ibid., 159, 161, 172, 174, 196-197, and 314-315.

⁴⁰Ibid., 21.

approach to the self is characterized by his capacity to understand and define himself in the absence of any attachment to this wider cosmic order.⁴¹ This, however, does not disclaim any belief in God or any other transcendent moral source in the modern age. What Taylor wants to say is that while individuals continue believing in a God or any other transcendent moral source, this belief no longer possesses an overarching, shared, public framework of meaning.⁴² It does not totally define the human person anymore.

This modern idea of a disengaged self develops further the emphasis on rationality started by Socrates. Being rational means striving to acquire mastery over self and the world. The disengagement is mental and intellectual.⁴³ Correct knowing depends on its process or method. The validity of knowledge is dependent in the validity of its methodology. This seems prevalent in Descartes, but Taylor sees its influence spreading far more widely in western culture. This epistemological doctrine seems to be an approach to selfhood for Charles Taylor. First, this doctrine constructs the self as detachable from the surrounding world. This thinking also allows the human person to be a subject in a totally objective world. Second, this disengagement is also applied to the self.⁴⁴ The reorganization of the material world includes the self.⁴⁵ This situation creates a radical disengagement from and towards the self, which Taylor calls as “a new, unprecedentedly radical form of self-objectification.”⁴⁶ Analyzing the work of John Locke, Taylor finds its fullest articulation and describing it thus:

The disengagement both from the activities of thought and from our unreflecting desires and tastes allows us to see ourselves as object of far-reaching reformation. Rational control can extend to the re-creation of our habits, and hence of ourselves... The subject who can take this kind of radical stance of disengagement to himself or herself with a view to remaking, is what I want to call the “punctual” self. To take this stance is to identify oneself with the power to objectify and remake, and by this act to distance oneself from all the particular features which are objects of potential change. What we are essentially is none of the latter, but what finds itself capable of

⁴¹HGL, 6-7.

⁴²SOS, 312, 381, 401, 491.

⁴³Ibid., 149.

⁴⁴Ibid., 161.

⁴⁵MTS, 303-304 & 308-309.

⁴⁶SOS, 171.

*fixing them and working on them.*⁴⁷

This modern aspiration to disengagement represents a moral ideal in as much as it does represent an epistemological ideal.⁴⁸ Correct knowledge of the self and the world leads to freedom from nature and determinism, a belief in the dignity that comes from human reason and the pursuit of truth, and the appeal to power and instrumental control.⁴⁹ These moral underpinnings and sources allow one to better appreciate this notion of the self.

The development of the disengaged subject by Descartes and Locke undergoes further elaboration in the course of Taylor's exposition of the contemporary sense of self. New emphases inevitably emerge, such as Kant's insistence on a morality that is grounded on nothing but the human rational will and his rejection of any and every form of heteronomy.⁵⁰ But even so one can see that with Descartes and with Locke the major elements of modern identity are already in place, a human person characterized by disengaged freedom.

C. Expressions of Authenticity:

Only one element needs to be identified for this picture of modern identity to be complete, namely, expressions of authenticity. To be true to one's self is another distinctive feature of the modern self. The self is an individual project where the human person needs to decide who he authentically is. Every human person is unique in his own way. This forbids the self's imitation of a pre-existing model or the self's adaptation of what is socially imposed. Each human person must discover an original way of being, recognize it as the true expression of himself, and take responsibility for it. Taylor sees the late eighteenth century as the bulwark of individual differences. Although differences in taste, temperament, preferences, values, abilities, and inclinations are recognized, they have not been invested with ethical salience.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸Compare MacIntyre, who describes the peculiarly modern concept of authority as one which excludes the notion of reason. This separation is "fashioned in a culture to which the notion of authority is alien and repugnant, so that appeals to authority appear irrational." Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2007), 41.

⁴⁹HGL, 9. HAL, 112-112. S, 152, 163, 168, 174-175, & 177.

⁵⁰SOS, 364.

As Taylor writes: "[N]owhere before the modern era was the notion entertained that what was essential to us might be found in our particular being. But this is the assumption underlying the identity question."⁵¹

While Taylor sees the climax of this ideal in the late eighteenth century, he acknowledges the traces of this ideal in the seventeenth century in the work of Michel de Montaigne, who initiated the movement toward self-exploration by recognizing that the search for a universal human nature can never resolve the issue of who humans as individuals are; and the movement gained further momentum in the eighteenth-century theory of moral sentiments.⁵² This French thinker illustrated a turn toward the self as a mystery to be unravelled. Taylor describes Montaigne's positions clearly:

*We seek self-knowledge, but this can no longer mean just impersonal lore about human nature, as it could for Plato. Each of us has to discover his or her own form. We are not looking for universal nature; we each look for our own being. Montaigne therefore inaugurates a new kind of reflection which is intensely individual... it is entirely a first-person study.*⁵³

The rise of the modern novel also furthered Montaigne's work, with its detailed portrayal of the lives of particular people. Instead of the archetype of mythology, the modern novel taught the lesson that it is in the particular stories of their individualized character that the real truth is to be found. Ultimately, who the human person is lies on the purposes and capacities that are there to be discovered within himself.⁵⁴

The notion of the self as a being with an inner depth is closely linked to the doctrine of expressivism. As Taylor explains:

*[O]nly with the expressivist idea of articulating our inner nature do we see the grounds for construing this inner domain as having depth, that is, a domain which reaches farther than we can ever articulate, which still stretches beyond our furthest point of clear expression.*⁵⁵

⁵¹Ibid., 375.

⁵²Ibid., 283-284.

⁵³Ibid., 181. Cf. PHS, 272.

⁵⁴Ibid., 286-287.

⁵⁵Ibid., 389.

This thought is clearly manifested in Taylor's expressivism. In trying to know a human person's identity, he is called to an inward path to get in touch with who he is. In expressing his discovery, he gives life to his identity. It is only him who can find his identity. It does not pre-exist and somebody cannot just retrieve it. As Taylor writes, "the idea which a man realizes is not wholly determinate beforehand; it is only made fully determinate in being fulfilled."⁵⁶ Thus, the involvement and uniqueness of the interpreter is crucial in this process of interpreting and expressing. Indeed, for Romantics, it is the very originality that marks individuals that ought to determine how each would live their lives. It ought to set the measure according to which all will be judged.⁵⁷

The connection between the individual and the larger world informs Taylor's analysis of post-Romantic art. This epiphanic art is considered as a part of the moral sources. Taylor speaks of this as he is talking about "the search for moral sources outside the subject through languages which resonate within him or her."⁵⁸ A particular art is, then, expressing a personal quest. Taylor's remarks on poetry apply to this:

*In the post-Enlightenment world, the epiphanic power of words cannot be treated as a fact about the order of things which hold unmediated by the works of the creative imagination... To be moved by the poem is also to be drawn into the personal sensibility which holds all these together. The deeper, more general truth emerges only through this.*⁵⁹

There is no way however that the ethics of authenticity negates the communitarian aspects of the self. The ethics of authenticity does not preclude any feature of the self. There is no proscription against gender, race, ethnicity, religion, class, et cetera. What Taylor is saying is that these shared features can only figure one's identity in so far as the person involved declares himself a part of these dialogical features. In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor claims that living according to one's inclinations is empowered by

⁵⁶HGL, 16.

⁵⁷SOS, 375-376.

⁵⁸Ibid., 510; original emphasis.

⁵⁹Ibid., 481.

a moral ideal.⁶⁰ The ideal of authenticity admonishes all human persons to find their own inclinations and ways of being and cast it in a moral vocabulary.

Taylor gives emphasis to the expression of one's authenticity: "Expressive individuation has become one of the cornerstones of modern culture. So much so that we barely notice it, and we find it hard to accept that it is such a recent idea in human history and would have been incomprehensible in earlier times."⁶¹ Taylor illustrates this by looking at the life of the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther. Martin Luther's rejections of Catholicism brought him into an identity crisis. This is due to the fact that his identity is situated in a moral space provided by Catholicism, the very system he is rejecting. In this situation, Luther can not just understand his experience in terms of expressive authenticity nor understand himself in terms of looking upon the ultimate horizon of meaning as a personal one. Rather, Luther finds meaning in his crisis by defining the condition of every human being as depraved by sin and redeemed by grace. According to Taylor, it is impossible to experience Luther's identity crisis in the same way we experience crisis today: Before such a crisis and such spiritual struggles could be described in terms of identity, it was necessary to conceive the ultimate horizon of each individual as being in some sense personal.⁶²

While the figure of Martin Luther is a good foil to the dimension of expressive authenticity, his position stands at the threshold when it comes to the affirmation of ordinary life.

D. Affirmation of Ordinary Life:

Distinctive of the modern civilization is the obligations and commitments of 'ordinary life' that embody moral and spiritual values worthy of respect.⁶³ In discussing the affirmation of ordinary life, Charles Taylor speaks of obligations of production, the making of things needed in life, and of reproduction, the life

⁶⁰Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 15-17. Henceforth, this text is referred to as TEA.

⁶¹SOS, 376.

⁶²Charles Taylor, "Identity and Modernity" in *Twenty-five years: Social Science and Social Change* (Princeton: Institute for Advanced Study, May 8-11, 1997).

⁶³SOS, 11-13; Cf. 211-212.

of marriage and family life.⁶⁴ The phrase ‘affirmation of ordinary life’ is a legacy of Protestantism that manifests itself now in a secular way. This distinctive feature of the self means that a part of identifying the person’s identity is expressed in the realm of work and family life.⁶⁵ Taylor compares this modern notion with the outlook of classical Greece. In classical Greece, production and reproduction were instrumental activities that made a person less human as compared to political activity and philosophical contemplation. A life of pure labor does not distinguish a human person from an animal.⁶⁶ According to him, the Graeco-Roman vision of good life allowed no space for an ethic of work. The same is the case with the moralists of antiquity and the Renaissance who are more concerned with ideals of honor and glory. The perspective is not altered with Christianity that simply replaced the worship of heroes with the worship of saints.

Protestantism denies that there are activities that are qualitatively higher than others, and proposes that all activities are worthwhile, depending on how they are conducted. This makes the most menial activity worth doing, provided that it is practiced with the appropriate attitude.⁶⁷ This perspective challenges not only the traditional aristocratic ethos, but also the traditionally Catholic one. The Calvinists attacked the traditional Catholic separation of the sacred and profane.⁶⁸ In place of the hierarchy of status and activity, there is another hierarchy of attitudes and dispositions.⁶⁹ This leads to a newly acquired significance of the worlds of production and reproduction. Working with dedication and diligence becomes more important than the type of work, and family life and marriage are devoted to God.⁷⁰ These things were not so much sources of personal fulfillment. They were rather always thought to lead humans to God. In due time, the religious justification lost its hold, and ordinary life was seen as a necessary ingredient to one’s personal identity.⁷¹ What was changed is the ethical significance with which production and

⁶⁴Ibid., 211.

⁶⁵HAL, 155 & 255.

⁶⁶PHS, 155-156. SOS, 13-14, 211, 314.

⁶⁷SOS, 13-14, 218, 221-224.

⁶⁸HGL, 9.

⁶⁹SOS, 214-217.

⁷⁰Ibid., 226-227 & 292.

⁷¹Ibid., 289.

reproduction were viewed. With the affirmation of ordinary life, production and reproduction came to occupy a primary place in the human person's sense of what makes life worth living; this is unprecedented.⁷²

The affirmation of ordinary life is aided by other social developments such as industrialization and its systematic separation of workplace from home, and urbanization and the rise of the nuclear family. Among all these social developments, the birth of Marxism leads to the furthering of the affirmation of ordinary life.⁷³ Marxism focuses on production as pivotal to human identity in a secular way. For Marx, the way human beings reproduce their material lives distinguishes the human person from animals. It is Puritanism that gave rise to an ethic of work and marriage serving as the main progenitor of a bourgeois scale of values in which 'ordinary life' came to be seen as sanctified.⁷⁴ Charles Taylor claims, "The full human life is now defined in terms of labour and production, on one hand, and marriage and family life, on the other."⁷⁵ By emphasizing on the value of work, Taylor emphasizes that in acting as 'producers', the human person is able to gain satisfaction by creating "the things needed for life."⁷⁶ Modern human person see themselves as the sources and creators of the values by which they live. This vision of a desacralized world, lacking a sense of God as an immanent force, appears to have come from Max Weber. Nevertheless, Taylor develops the argument by retracing the steps in a historical survey from ancient Greece to the philosophy of the Enlightenment.⁷⁷

The affirmation of ordinary life complements the image of a free disengaged self by becoming the site of self-discovery and emotional fulfillment for many. The privacy in family life further adds to this symbiosis. Taylor writes of:

[A] society in which (in principle) everyone has adequate private space for a full family life. This is central to the fulfillment of the man and wife, as companions and lovers, and also as parents. And it is also the locus in which the next generation is nurtured, so that the

⁷²Ibid., 292-293. PHS, 254-255.

⁷³PHS, 215.

⁷⁴SOS, 224-225.

⁷⁵Ibid., 213.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 211.

⁷⁷Ibid., 109-207.

*children in turn will be able to discover and seek their own affinities. The contemporary family ideally has not only the space to live an unmediated existence unhampered, but also the means to foster the development and self-discovery of its children.*⁷⁸

To affirm ordinary life is to believe that a significant part of one's identity is expressed in the realms of work and family life, and that what happens in these domains makes a substantial contribution to one's sense of the value or meaning of life.⁷⁹ Taylor is not saying that prior to the spread of the doctrine of affirmation of ordinary life people did not love their children or spouses not that they gained no satisfaction from their work. What changes is not the existence of these things but the ethical importance with which they are imbued. With the affirmation of ordinary life, family relationships and work come to occupy a central place in people's sense of what makes life worth living and this, according to Taylor, is unprecedented.⁸⁰ Despite the complexity and plurality of the modern self, its various strands unite in the same moral space.

Although Charles Taylor is describing conceptions of the good and the self "which are at home in the modern West",⁸¹ he thinks that this new culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century is radiating 'outward and downward' to the rest of the world ever since.⁸² In discussing the disenchantment of the world, Taylor thinks that, "deism did prepare the way for the radical Enlightenment."⁸³ The disenchantment of the world subsequently leads to the 'affirmation of ordinary life.'⁸⁴ Thus, in Taylor's words, this disenchantment of the modern culture "created the situation in which old horizons have been swept away and all frameworks may appear problematical."⁸⁵

However, there are also some strands of the modern self that are ambivalent with one another. While the affirmations of ordinary life, the ideal of authenticity, and self-fulfillment are complementary, they can also lead into opposite directions. For

⁷⁸PHS, 262.

⁷⁹Ibid., 155 & 2 55.

⁸⁰SOS, 292-293.

⁸¹Ibid., ix.

⁸²Ibid., 305.

⁸³Ibid., 266.

⁸⁴Ibid., 211-302.

⁸⁵Ibid., 26

some human persons, the particular call to authenticity and the desire for self-fulfillment can lead to the negligence of obligations to one's family life. As Taylor puts it, "[i]f my development, or even my discovery of myself, should be incompatible with a long-standing association, then this will come to be felt as a prison, rather than a locus of identity. So marriage is under great strain."⁸⁶ Another example of the different strands conflicting is Taylor's analysis of the Romantic expressivist self as a reaction against the disengaged free self.⁸⁷ At the same time, the Romantic self is building on the individualism of the disengaged self.⁸⁸ From these few examples of the different complexities and ambiguities in the modern notion of selfhood, I interpret Taylor's pluralism forcefully.⁸⁹

III. Homo Religiosus:

Charles Taylor traces the modern moral sources back to theism. For example, the ideal of disengaged reason and freedom is an offshoot from Christian roots.⁹⁰ The same is true in the value of scientific inquiry,⁹¹ and the Romantic aspiration to make contact with nature, and the like. These moral sources, according to him, are parasitic on constitutive goods that they do not acknowledge or may even repudiate.⁹² Further, Taylor goes to the extent of claiming that the values of freedom, individualism, reason, equality, and benevolence, which is accepted in modern western societies ultimately find their moral source in Christianity.⁹³ Thus, in insisting on the need to return to this constitutive good in order to understand the modern self, Taylor is clearly according considerable power to Christianity.⁹⁴ As Michael Morgan writes:

⁸⁶Ibid., 283.

⁸⁷HGL, 22-23 & 540. PHS, 270-271. SOS, 390 & 495.

⁸⁸PHS, 273, 276-277, 287.

⁸⁹PHS, 273, 276-277, 287.

⁹⁰SOS, 245.

⁹¹Ibid., 310 & 320.

⁹²Ibid., 339.

⁹³Ibid., 495-496 & 498.

⁹⁴In his 1996 Marianist Award lecture, Charles Taylor argues that he had kept his religious views implicit in his previous philosophical writings for two reasons. The first was that philosophical discourse requires a widespread appeal to all thinkers irrespective of their own belief-systems. Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity: A Marianist Award Lecture 1996* (Dayton, OH: University of Dayton Press, 1996), 13. [Henceforth, this book shall be referred to as ACM.] The second reason is that theistic arguments are generally not welcome in a predominantly secularist academic world. Ibid., 118-119.

[I]f Charles Taylor is right, the complexity of these narratives converges on a common conclusion, that the modern identity... cannot be properly comprehended without reference to its religious history. To understand who we are and what matters most to us necessarily involves retrieving the religious elements of our identity.⁹⁵

While Morgan affirms the theistic elements of Charles Taylor, the Sources of the Self is only implicitly hoping for a better world in the Judaeo-Christian theism,⁹⁶ and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human.⁹⁷ However, in A Catholic Modernity, Charles Taylor contends that the modern emphasis on universal benevolence is grounded on the desire to emulate God's divine and unconditional love.⁹⁸ In this sense, Taylor is somehow expressing his ideas in a more explicit way in the conclusion of the Sources of the Self.

Charles Taylor attempts to argue for the Christian idea of going beyond life by arguing that life does not exhaust the "point of things".⁹⁹ For him, this emphasis on transcendence means "aiming beyond life or opening yourself to a change in identity."¹⁰⁰ "The change here is not a mere cultural change from a modern western subject to a nonwestern subject, it is a change from self to non-self."¹⁰¹ This transformation is "a radical decentering of the self in

⁹⁵Michael Morgan, "Religion, History, and Moral Discourse" in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: Charles Taylor in Question*, J. Tully (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 49.

⁹⁶Taylor clearly accepts the problem he faces in putting forward Catholicism as a model for a better world. For example, he realizes that Christianity and Catholicism have resulted in atrocities such as the Inquisition but counters that secular philosophies that have tried to replace Christian faith have scarcely led to better results and in many cases have been much worse. ACM, 17-18. Hence, in his defense of Christianity, Taylor argues that where Christianity has been undermined in the past Christians like himself should see this as both 'humbling' and 'liberating'. Ibid., 18. The humbling aspect is a result of secularists who show the dark side of Christian beliefs. The liberating aspect originates in Christians like Taylor recognizing the truth in such a criticism and drawing appropriate conclusions. The problem with the negative aspects of the Christian past is that it stifles any positive discussions of modern Catholicism. Taylor argues that such negative aspects do not mean that Christians have nothing more to say. Ibid., 19. Although Christian past has its own wreckage which should be repudiated, Taylor urges to liberate the present from such outright dismissals and in this way liberate the past. Ibid., 107-108. Moreover, Taylor maintains that even the negative past also contains positive moments with "many spiritual forms, modes of prayer, devotion, of common life, that could help [the human person] revivify the love and service of God in the present. Ibid., 108. Taylor, then, is well aware of the difficulties he faces in trying to put forward a transcendent position within a Catholic framework; however, he is absolutely convinced that attempting to think beyond 'what is' is essential for humanity.

⁹⁷SOS, 521. Charles Taylor, "Reply and Articulation" in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: Charles Taylor in Question*, J. Tully (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 226-230.

⁹⁸ACM, 30-37 & 120.

⁹⁹Ibid., 20.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 21.

¹⁰¹Ibid.

relation with God.”¹⁰² For Taylor, “God wills human flourishing, but ‘thy will be done’ doesn’t reduce to let human beings flourish.”¹⁰³ The role of religion is to make God’s many potential wills clear and distinct. To acknowledge the transcendent is to acknowledge the will of God. With Taylor the believer, the ideal of promoting human welfare in favor of upholding God’s will is the flourishing of human life.¹⁰⁴

He explains:

In Christian terms, if renunciation decenters you in relation with God, God’s will is that humans flourish, and so you are taken back to an affirmation of this flourishing, which is biblically called agape. In Buddhist terms, enlightenment doesn’t just turn to you from the world, but also opens the flood-gates of metta (loving kindness) and karuna (compassion).¹⁰⁵

Agape is reached by embracing God’s will and affirming the flourishing of human life. This already exists according to Taylor. Agape, expressed in the concern to “increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity,” inspired the fourth movement of the modern identity; the affirmation of ordinary life from which the modern good emerged.¹⁰⁶ Taylor explains this relationship further:

With the affirmation of ordinary life, agape is integrated in a new way into an ethic of everyday existence. My work is my calling ought to be for the general good. This insistence on practical help, on doing good for people, is carried on in the various semi-secularized successor ethics, e.g. with Bacon and Locke. The principal virtue in our dealing with others is now no longer just justice and temperance but beneficence. With the internalization of ethical thought, where

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Taylor speaks of a “spiritual lobotomy,” which denies any consideration of the transcendent and instead focuses solely on human flourishing in the present [Ibid., 19.], and of his concern to reassert the importance of the transcendence in emphasizing that “more than life matters.” [Ibid., 24.] Taylor’s emphasis on both human flourishing, and spiritual transcendence can lead to a kind of dualism where such oppositions have been used to deny life. He clearly wants to avoid such dualism and suggests that we move back and forth these two moments of human flourishing on the one hand and going beyond life on the other. [Ibid., 109-110. Charles Taylor is sensitive to the tendency of the term ‘transcendence’ to lead to theological and spiritual dead ends. He actually admits his discomfort in using the term ‘transcendence’ as it does not quite capture exactly what he wants to say. Ibid., 105-106. He recognizes that the aforementioned term is both ‘abstract’ and ‘evasive’, but he uses the term because he wanted to say something general which could appeal to all people, not just Christians, in indicating how the human race needs to get beyond the narrow focus on the ‘exclusively human.’]

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 18.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 19

*inclinations are crucial, the motive of benevolence becomes the key to goodness.*¹⁰⁷

Charles Taylor looks at the Christian notion of agape, the “love that God has for humans which is connected with their goodness as creatures”¹⁰⁸ as more fecund than the humanist’s universal benevolence and justice. In the absence of agape, Taylor wondered whether humans are “living beyond [their] moral means.”¹⁰⁹

In all this Taylor hopes that uncovering the complexity of the modern self, and its different strands will free people from the tendency to deny and stifle the plurality of goods that modern selves effectively, if not always knowingly, affirm. Taylor shares with Nietzsche a powerful awareness of the multiplicity and complexity of the modern self, but it seems that for the former, the template for thinking about humans as intrinsically plural is theistic. This is evident in the idea that “human diversity is part of the way in which [humanity is] made in the image of God.”¹¹⁰

IV. Conclusion:

The modern self is a unity in diversity. This is clearly manifested in the different strands that comprise the self and that are mutually reinforcing. In the *Sources of the Self*, I read that Charles Taylor’s analysis of the modern self is divided into three broad horizons of identity. The first centers the individual, the second points to the larger order beyond, and the third is the traditional theistic one. Taylor thinks that identifying these three horizons allows the contemporary person to understand the changing notion of the self from the scientific revolution to the present day.¹¹¹ The first horizon focuses on the self and its capabilities. It includes the self’s desire to disengagement and to instrumental control of both the natural world and the non-rational parts of the self. At the same time, this individualist frontier encompasses the expressive powers of the self and its quest to articulate and live its own authenticity. The latter is, however, a reaction to the ideal of

¹⁰⁷ SOS, 258

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 516.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 517.

¹¹⁰ ACM, 14-15.

¹¹¹ SOS, 390, 495, 498.

disengaged freedom. What unites the former and the latter is that they center on the individual.¹¹²

The second horizon of identity refers to nature as the wider whole of which the human person is a part. The idea is similar to the theory of moral sentiments, that the world is a whole with particular entities. This is also manifested in the Romantic notion that nature is a source of good. Contact with the wider vista is possible only if the human person can make an inward and outward turn.¹¹³ The inward turn gives emphasis on the self and its powers, no longer as an autonomy, but in relation to the larger whole.¹¹⁴ The possibility of this explains Taylor's claim that modern individualism is not only manifested in selfishness and indifference.¹¹⁵

Just as the self and its powers, on one hand, intersect with the wider world, on the other hand, they both overlap on the third horizon of identity, which is the theistic one. Taylor's argument remains that the disengaged and punctual self that grew out of the scientific revolution is of theistic origins. Reason is given emphasis to prove the possibility of rational control over nature and the self. "The awesome powers of human reason and will are God-made and part of God's plan; more, they are what constitutes the image of God in us."¹¹⁶ In exercising reason, the disengaged subject is deploying a capacity given by God. This is why the rational capacity is closely related to human dignity. The same applies to the second horizon. Nature is good because God as an expression of His goodness and love created it.

On one hand, Taylor insists that the modern individual recognize that the modern culture has built 'higher standards' into "the moral culture of our civilization" than ever recorded in history.¹¹⁷ A modern person must accept that his inherited values and way of life are good, and constitute "something that [he has] to embrace,"¹¹⁸ even if his notion of 'good' is historically conditioned.

On the other hand, Charles Taylor suggests the right attitude

¹¹²Indeed, Charles Davis identifies modernity precisely with "the affirmation of an autonomous, self-legislating, self-related subject and the insistence upon a doctrine of immanence that refuses submission to anything that attempts to impose itself heteronomously

¹¹³SOS, 314-315.

¹¹⁴TEA, 91.

¹¹⁵Ibid., 35 & 40-41.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 315.

¹¹⁷SOS, 397

¹¹⁸Ibid., 347.

towards disenchantment by recounting the inadequacy of modern values. He sees the inadequacy from the vision of modernity as the offspring of the Enlightenment and Romantic movements. From the Enlightenment, the modern person acquires the atomized conception of the self. And from Romanticism, the modern person develops his inner nature and explores his potentialities. The result is an atomic conception of the self that is cut off from the wider sources of meaning and moral significance.¹¹⁹ This is unfair, according to Charles Taylor, because the human person has a “craving for being in contact with or being rightly placed in relation to the good.”¹²⁰ Taylor writes: “[The way people live] involves stifling the response in us to some of the deepest and most powerful spiritual aspirations that humans have conceived.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹Ibid., 37-40 & 495-521.

¹²⁰Ibid., 45.

¹²¹Ibid., 520.

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