5. The Secularization of Agape (II): Moral Sources and Fullness in A Secular Age

In this chapter, we intend to examine the history of the secularization of *agape* in *A Secular Age*, as we did previously with *Sources of the Self*. In that earlier work, Taylor treats *agape* as interchangeable with grace and concludes with a tentative theistic "hunch": that *agape* may offer the most adequate framework for sustaining contemporary moral commitments to solidarity. *A Secular Age* represents the long-awaited continuation of that problematic (cf. Costa, 2022, pp. 32–33). Yet its central aim is not to develop the theistic map suggested in *Sources of the Self* but to clarify what it means to live and believe in a secular age by reconstructing the historical path that has brought us here (Taylor, 2007b, pp. ix–x).

This historical path is directly connected to the concern raised at the end of the previous chapter: the increasing difficulty modern moral frameworks face in sustaining unconditional concern for the weakest and most vulnerable. As Taylor suggests, once the transcendent horizon of *agape* recedes, moral motivation is progressively relocated within the subject—into conscience, sentiment, and inner discernment—producing what he elsewhere calls the disengaged self. This inward turn does not abolish realism about the good, but it does help explain the growing distance between our elevated moral standards and the motivational sources capable of supporting them, as well as the broader distancing from the world, from the Other, and from transcendence that characterizes modern experience. The question here is: How did we arrive at a moral landscape in which such disengagement became imaginable, and even dominant?

Taylor's answer unfolds through his account of "exclusive humanism,"[111] which charts the rise of a self-sufficient humanism that recog-

111 This term may be borrowed from Henri de Lubac (1995), one of the theologians Taylor admits has influenced him the most (cf. Taylor, 2013b, p. 77; see also Hillebert, 2021, pp. 62–63; Rober, 2018).

nizes "no final goals beyond human flourishing, nor any allegiance to anything else beyond this flourishing" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 18). By referencing human flourishing, Taylor draws a distinction between self-sufficient positions and those open to transcendence or "beyond life."[112] Much of *A Secular Age* reconstructs how exclusive humanism, once marginal and elite, came to be widely available and socially plausible. The book thus traces the transition from a social world in which belief in God was almost inescapable to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is "one human possibility among others" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 3).

Indeed, this situation of an optional faith within a situation of pluralism of approaches to belief and morality, in which all alternatives are weakened in their cogency by the others, represents Taylor's distinctive approach to secularization (Cf Taylor, 2007b, pp. 303–304, also 556, 595, 833–834 n.19). Beyond focusing only on debates on normative causes of the decline of belief in the West or on working around the privatization thesis (cf. Casanova, 1992, 1994, 2009), he focuses on the "conditions of belief" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 3) and on the "possibility or impossibility of certain kinds of experience in our age" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 15). In a nutshell, the intention of *A Secular Age* can be summarized as rehabilitating belief by examining its conditions of possibility today from an approach centered on the concept of fullness. In the background program, therefore, is the search for the conditions of the possibility of *agape* as a moral source open to the transcendent at a time when the majority option in the West seems to be that of the sources close to it.

An important part of Taylor's originality lies in providing a genealogy of secularization in which religion and the secular share the same path until our age. Specifically, Taylor's program is to construct "the *Entstehungsgeschichte* of exclusive humanism" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 26), that is, a history of the genesis of a mental frame in which explanations of meaning and significance are possible without appealing to any transcendent entity.[113] Living in a secular age is shaped mainly by a closed-to-transcendence worldview, or "immanent frame."

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112 In chapter 8, we will focus on fullness and its relation to transcendence and *agape*.

113 The reference to the concept of emergence in its German word leads us to think of the use of genealogy by Nietzsche and authors who have followed him,

In any case, the book's ultimate goal is to show the plausibility of the option from the secular world to keep the windows to transcendence open:

> "The immanent order can thus slough off the transcendent. But it doesn't necessarily do so. What I have been describing as the immanent frame is common to all of us in the modern West, or at least that is what I am trying to portray. Some of us want to live it as open to something beyond; some live it as closed. It is something which permits closure, without demanding it." (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 543–544).

However, such a situation does not result from a decline of religion in favor of modernity, as explained by the "master narratives of secularization" or "subtraction stories."[114] Taylor instead presents "an anti-reductionist position whereby religious beliefs cannot be reduced to psychic or social factors, but rather are able to unfold their own motivational power" (Koenig, 2016, p. 30). In that sense, parallel to Taylor's narrative of the emergence of secularism, it is possible to trace a proper story of the secularization of *agape* as a distinctive history of the motivation towards serving the least, as we will try to reconstruct in this chapter.

The story thus runs parallel to the history of the emergence of exclusive humanism. Here the underlying question is still how we have arrived at the present situation of coexisting a great moral demand for the stranger with the suspicion that the secular ethic of altruism has left something behind that is nevertheless essential in the Christian outlook and in the moral articulation oriented to love the neighbor (cf. Taylor, 1989a, p. 22). Hence, our task in this chapter will be to look at the *fate of agape* to better understand its relevance and possibilities today.

Thereby, we can reformulate the question that begins Taylor's historical narrative ("Why 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?" Taylor, 2007a, p.

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such as Michel Foucault. We will see the importance of this type of genealogy at the end of the present chapter (cf. Nietzsche, 1887; Foucault, 1984).

114 "Concisely put, I mean by this stories of modernity in general, and secularity in particular, which explain them by human beings having lost, or sloughed off, or liberated themselves from certain earlier, confining horizons, or illusions, or limitations of knowledge" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 22).

25, also 539). Let us rephrase it as follows: Why in the 1500s was it almost impossible to understand the love of neighbor from a moral source other than Christian *agape*, whereas today, we find a plurality of sources and high moral standards for altruism?

Taylor's own suspicion is that "somewhere along the road, this culture ceases to be simply Christian-inspired—although people of deep Christian faith continue to be important in today's movements" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 371). As he did in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor finds that exclusive humanism, "in addition to being activist and interventionist, had to produce some substitute for *agape*" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 27). We talked at length about displacements and *slippages*, provoking that *materials* that were present in the Christian *agape* would have been moved sometimes from the surface to the bottom so that the terrain changes completely. Thus we explained the "secularizing transpositions" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 22) that had given rise to the plural landscape of moral sources for the ethics of altruism.

Now Taylor will use a much more complex picture, which he calls a "*zig-zag* account" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 95), as an alternative to the "straight path accounts" given by the subtraction stories. For Taylor, history, seen as a whole, teaches more discontinuities than continuities. It is full of unintended consequences whose meaning can be understood when the entire historical development is seen as a whole (cf. Taylor, 2016, p. 203). Taylor is less interested in historical events, nor is he so interested in the content or normativity of ideas, as he was somewhat more inclined to do in *Sources or the Self*. Rather, Taylor looks at cultural developments that have been profoundly relevant both in the shaping and evolution of interpretive frameworks and in the resulting changes that account for the multiplication of possibilities in the realm of socially shared ideas, personal beliefs, and moral values (cf. Wils, 2011).

Broadly speaking, we might say *zig* would refer to *agape* in this historical narrative, or what Taylor calls "transformation," a way of understanding wholeness that is connected to openness to transcendence, that is, in the case of *agape*, to grace, to the intervention of the divine in the human, of the supernatural from the natural. Nevertheless, as we will see in the last chapter, this transformation is in tension with the fullness we can achieve in this life, even without openness to transcendence. Fast forward to our narrative, this tension will give rise to the "reform," which is the beginning of

the *zags*. By *zag*, we can understand either the currents that try to counteract the demands and consequences of the *zig* of transformation or, linked to it, the series of transformations that will give rise to structures closed to transcendence and eventually to the sources of immanent morality. Nevertheless, detailing these alternative sources is only part of the problem. In the last chapter, we will focus on two concrete models with which Taylor contrasts his proposal open to transcendence and sensitive to the human good with what he calls "secular humanists," such as Martha Nussbaum, and with the neo-Nietzschean "anti-humanists" (see Taylor, 2007b, pp. 623–656).

The story we will offer is a lengthy excerpt from Taylor's dense and crooked narrative. On the one hand, we will concentrate on how *agape* has been understood, or rather lived, in each of the turns that have given rise to the imaginary of solidarity of the present.[115]

On the other hand, we will dwell briefly at some points on the practice of neighborly love in each period of history. Approaching this practice from the point of view of the formation of moral orders will offer us a history that, while not entirely original to Taylor, is an alternative to histories of humanitarianism (cf. Barnett, 2013; Stamatov, 2013).[116] As we shall see, a*gape* survives through all of the *zig-zags*, but perhaps not in the original form.

Finally, we will end the chapter by assessing Taylor's secularization narrative. We will see that elements of Hegelian dialectic and Nietzschean/Foucaulian genealogy are identifiable in his account. However, understanding the story told by Taylor from the perspective of *agape*, as we are about to do, does not quite explain why this source has survived despite its mutations, eclipses, losses and reappearances throughout the different periods. As we will show, we believe that Taylor's narrative on *agape* is best explained by his *catholic attitude*, manifested in the ontological fecundity of meaning

115 We can briefly outline the story as Taylor later did in *The Language Animal*: "We have come through a long, drawn-out process, which includes Axial revolutions, the great world religions, philosophical developments like Stoicism and the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment(s), and in more recent centuries, the great campaigns against slavery, colonial conquest and exploitation, imperial rule, to this recognition of universalism" (Taylor, 2016, p. 203).

116 Taylor's narrative can be complemented by Paul Josef Cardinal Cordes' account (2008) on the secularization of neighbor-help, albeit his taking has a clear apologetic approach to the role that religion can play in the field of charities and social assistance.

with which he examines each historical period, the teleological sense that can only be understood beyond history, and the vocation to recover moral sources reminiscent of tradition.

5.1. The Axial Religions

Taylor's narrative begins with the emergence of the so-called "Axial Revolution."[117] Right from the introduction of *A Secular Age*, Taylor emphasizes two relevant points for his understanding of religion: religion is a relationship with transcendence and the search for fulfillment as a human constant. Elsewhere, Taylor locates a fundamental religious-moral shift in the Axial Age, where the greatest good to which man can aspire is in the transcendent sphere. In his words, the Axial Age

> "was a shift from a mode of religious life which involved 'feeding the gods'—where the understanding of human good was that of prospering or flourishing (as this was understood), and where the 'gods' or spirits were not necessarily unambiguously on the side of human good—to a mode in which (a) there is notion of a higher, more complete human good, a notion of complete virtue, or even of a salvation beyond human flourishing (Buddha) while at the same time (b) the higher powers

117 The concept of the "Axial Age" was introduced by Karl Jaspers in 1949 in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* based on some of the ideas contained in the thought of the Weber brothers: "It would seem that this axis of history is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C. It is there that we meet with the most deepcut dividing line in history. Man, as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the 'Axial Period' (…) What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world, is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. (…) In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created" (Jaspers, 1976, pp. 1–2). Two of those categories are indeed the binomial of transcendence-immanence (see Abrutyn, 2021). Today, the debate around Axial Age has also gained much relevance thanks to the comparative historical sociology of Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt (cf. Bellah, 2005a, pp. 7–6; see Eisenstadt, Werner-Reimers-Stiftung, Makhon le-meḥḳar 'al shem Heri S. Ṭruman, & Mosad Ṿan Lir bi-Yerushalayim, 1986; Árnason, Eisenstadt, & Wittrock, 2005; see also Bellah & Joas, 2012a).

according to this view are unambiguously on the side of human good" (Taylor, 2011d, p. 268).

The key innovation is thus the relocation of the good: no longer embedded in the cosmic-natural order, but situated in a transcendent moral horizon. This is the beginning of the long process Taylor calls disembedding, a shift that alters not only religious practices but also the moral space in which human action becomes meaningful (Taylor, 2007a, p. 151, 2011c, p. 371).[118] Post-axial traditions—Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and even Platonic philosophy—develop what Taylor later calls the "way of transformation," grounding human excellence in a good that transcends immanent flourishing.

Although Taylor does not dwell extensively on the implications of the Axial turn for practices of altruism, historical sources show that this shift also reshapes imaginaries of poverty and responsibility. In the Ancient Near East, systems of social assistance were typically embedded in political order, with the king acting as guarantor of justice and care (cf. Assmann, 2012, p. 396, see also 1990). In Israel, however, the moral basis of such care is decisively reframed: responsibility for the poor is articulated not through royal authority but through the divine law of the covenant. As Lutterbach notes, the Torah "deprived earthly kingship of its traditional legislative function," grounding obligations toward the vulnerable in the will of a God described as loving and just (Lutterbach, 2022, p. 12).[119] Laws concerning the immigrant, widow, and orphan (e.g., Lev 19; Deut 15) express a novel linkage between justice, compassion, and transcendence.

What matters for Taylor is the emergence of a new moral grammar: care for the weak becomes tied to a transcendent good, and transformation of the self is inseparable from social and political responsibility. Care for the poor begins to be linked to justice and good that comes from the transcendent. Justice and goodness are achieved through keeping the commandments. Although notions of

118 In that sense, Taylor provides an overview of the axial age from the "idea of an unqualified good around which the other aspects of Axial culture can be understood" (Bellah & Joas, 2012b, p. 4).

119 "Damit war das irdische Königtum seiner traditionellen gesetzgeberischen Funktion beraubt—und die Verpflichtung zur gelebten Mitmenschlichkeit fortan göttlichen Rechts (ius divinum) sowie vor einem von den Menschen als "liebend" identifizierten Gott einklagbar" (translated by S.G.)

structural evil remain absent at this stage (cf. Hudson, 1993, pp. 11–12), the Axial configuration introduces a moral horizon in which the poor are no longer merely integrated through social order but recognized as subjects of divine justice.

5.2. The novelty of Christian agape

Christianity introduces three innovations central to Taylor's account. First, it reconfigures human flourishing in relation to transcendence in a distinctive way *vis-à-vis* other axial religions. Second, it introduces a new conception of time, cosmos, and social life as a *Great Chain of Being*. Third, it generates a dialectic between the dynamics of the Incarnation and the drive to articulate it in ordinary life, with particular relevance for the practical shape of *agape*.

The tension between transformation beyond life and immanent human flourishing forms the central locus of Taylor's understanding of Christianity in his narrative:

> "The paradox of Christianity, in relation to early religion, is that on one hand, it seems to assert the unconditional benevolence of God towards humans; there is none of the ambivalence of early Divinity in this respect; and yet it redefines our ends so as to take us beyond flourishing" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 151).

From a divine and transcendent affirmation of human flourishing in the axial religions—which contrasts with the arbitrary moral universe of many Neolithic cults—Christianity introduces the certainty that God unequivocally seeks the good of the faithful. Evil no longer appears as a necessary part of the cosmic order. At the same time, the good is not simply available within immanence: its ideal is transcendent, still to be attained, and yet to come. Underneath this paradox lies *agape* and its tension between God's unconditional love for each person and the promise that love of neighbor, taken even to the limit of ultimate self-giving, beyond ordinary flourishing, has the status of a higher good.

In Taylor's account, the way this tension is handled eventually shapes the story of the secularization of *agape*. To attain goodness, Christianity introduces a new distinction between the immanent and the transcendent that invites the faithful to break with mere

human flourishing and to go beyond it. But this possibility is not open to all in the same way; it appears in intensified form in those who receive an especially grace-filled experience. These experiences crystallize in specific social forms, generating modes of life that hierarchize Christian society according to the degree and intensity of religious commitment. The monastic phenomenon (also present in other post-axial religions) emerges in precisely this context and opens up the possibility of "different speeds" of living the faith.

Protest against this stratified regime will be one of the forces that eventually lead to *Reform*, in the sense Taylor gives to the term. Here he explicitly connects the secularization of *agape* with a tension between different social ways of addressing the Gospel ideal. This tension runs between "higher," spiritual vocations and "worldly," temporal forms of life, and between those who orient themselves primarily beyond flourishing and those whose pursuit of the good is concentrated in ordinary life,

> "between dedicated minorities of religious 'virtuosi' (to use Max Weber's term), and the mass religion of the social sacred, still largely oriented to flourishing, survived or reconstituted itself, with the same combination of strain on one hand, and hierarchical complementarity on the other" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 154).

At the heart of the above-described "perennial tension" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 81) would be somehow an implicit reflection of the relationship between Nature and Grace typical of the Christian—especially Catholic—understanding of reality and life (J. K. A. Smith, 2014, p. 32 note 3).[120] Duality of vital orientations within Christianity lies in the doctrine of the creation of the human being in the image

120 The relationship between Nature and Grace has as its background the doctrine of the creation of the human being in the image and likeness of the Creator and the doctrinal considerations of the dual nature of Christ, God, and human. Both reflect the tension between the freedom of the human being and his ontological relation to the Creator, but also the relationship between an autonomous world and its dependence on God. The human being, "made of body and soul, is one." As a corporeal being, he presumes an intimate relationship with the rest of the creatures but with a privileged place in the world because of his openness to grace (Gaudium et Spes, n.14). This worldview begins to break down with modernity. Many, like Heidegger, saw in the Cartesian distinction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* the beginning of the rupture of this unity between soul and body in the human being (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 89–92). Of course, Christian theology has understood this tension between

and likeness of the Creator and the doctrinal considerations of the dual nature of Christ, God, and human. Both reflect the tension between the freedom of the human being and his ontological relation to the Creator, but also the relationship between an autonomous world and its dependence on God, in a way that cannot be explained in terms of functional differentiation or moral correctness alone. In lived experience, this tension takes the form of a duality of ends: on the one hand, a Christian faith directing life toward a transcendence beyond ordinary flourishing; on the other, a complex of institutions and practices oriented to human flourishing in the world (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 44).

In Early Christianity, this regime of hierarchical complementarity corresponds to an underlying metaphysical picture of the cosmos: "created things receive their form through God (...) everything has being only insofar as it participates in God" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 127). This is what Taylor calls the *Great Chain of Being* (Taylor, 2007b, p. 129).[121] In this conception, the hierarchies between ideal forms and material affect how reality is perceived. In this order, all instances complement "and help each other" (ibid Within this order, higher and lower forms stand in relations of mutual implication; each level "helps" the others. Love proceeds from the Trinity, and everything

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nature and grace according to the emphases of the mental frameworks of each time and how the concept of personhood is understood (Greshake, 1997, pp. 172–175). From the "paradigm of substance" of the Middle Ages, we move in modernity to the "paradigm of the subject" to arrive at the new approaches that arise in theology after the reception of the existentialist philosophy of authors such as Karl Jaspers, Emmanuel Mounier, or Gabriel Marcel, who try to integrate subject, world, and God from the paradigm of subjectivity and from a dynamic communicative model between divinity and subject from which Taylor recognizes himself to have been influenced (Taylor, 2020a, p. 25).

121 In *Disenchantment-Reenchantment*, Taylor defines the *Great Chain of Being* as follows: "Being itself existed on several levels, and the cosmos manifested this hierarchy, both in its overall structure and again in its different partial domains. The same superiority of dignity and rule that the soul manifests over the body reappears in the state in the preeminence of the king, in the animal realm in that of the lion, among birds and fishes in the supreme status of eagle and dolphin. These features "correspond" to each other in the different domains. The whole is bound together by relations of hierarchical complementarity, which should be reproduced in a well-ordered state" (Taylor, 2011c, p. 291).

finds its place in that order through the love that descends from above (Augustine, 1998, XI, 27, 1998, XV, 22).

Augustine's distinction between *amor concupiscentiae* and *caritas*, especially in The City of God, becomes decisive for later understandings of *agape*. He differentiates a love of concupiscence, which binds the person to the world and transforms the desire to give into a fear of losing, from a love of charity, which comes from God and is returned through piety and love of neighbor. These two loves generate two social orders: "Two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; and the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self" (Augustine, 1998, XIV, 28). God is loved for himself and through the love of neighbor. But this *agapeic love*, in any case, is a reflection of its origin, which is in the Trinity and not in human beings.[122]

Finally, Christianity introduces the tension between the Incarnation and what Charles Taylor calls "excarnation," the process by which Christianity gradually becomes a more disembodied, de-ritualized, head-centered religion. On one side lies Taylor's concept of the Incarnation—which concentrates much of the dogmatic content of Christianity—a key background for Taylor's approach to

122 The Augustinian vision of the world and love perhaps has had the most significant influence on Christianity, perhaps only surpassed by the contents of the Gospels. It continues to arouse theological commentaries and philosophical criticisms in the contemporary age. Of significant influence has been the doctoral thesis of Hannah Arendt and her accusation of the excessive individualism and sentimentalism of the Augustinian concept of neighborly love to the detriment of its social and emancipatory potential (cf. Arendt, 2021, pp. 84–88; Klevesath & Reese-Schäfer, 2011). For Arendt, historical Christianity and Christian-based neighbor-love have an excessive otherworldliness that stems from their hatred of the body and belief in the end of the world. In terms of Patrick Boyle, "an all-embracing love for God does not reveal the neighbor's relevance" (Boyle, 1987, p. 92). In *Vita Activa*, she will argue that both New Testament *agape* and Augustine's caritas are otherworldly and excessively dependent on the working of divine grace- especially groups of people who are carried away by Christian neighbor-love—and therefore cannot provide a basis for the political (cf. Arendt, 2020, pp. 52–54; Chiba, 1995, p. 525n55). The influence of this critique of the lack of political content of the Christian religion had a strong influence on 20th-century theologians in Germany and Latin America, who, in many ways, have tried to recover the authentic political dimension of the Gospels, often focusing on the eschatological hope and the proximity of Jesus to the marginalized.

agape. On the other stands excarnation, "the exaltation of disengaged reason as the royal road to knowledge, even in human affairs" (Taylor, 2007, p. 746), in early modern Deism (Taylor, 2007b, p. 288). While Taylor locates the origins of excarnation already in the Axial period (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 613–614), he sees the Reformation as a decisive intensification: religious life moves away from the body—ritual, festival, carnival, "gut" compassion, and even the sacralization of sexuality—toward increasingly rationalized and disciplined forms (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 770–772, see also 2008).

Taylor's contrast between excarnation and Incarnation underscores the importance of an incarnational theology in his thought, already explicit in *A Catholic Modernity?*:

> "Redemption happens through Incarnation, the weaving of God's life into human lives, but these human lives are different, plural, irreducible to each other. Redemption-Incarnation brings reconciliation, a kind of oneness […]the oneness of diverse beings who come to see that they cannot attain wholeness alone" (Taylor, 1999b, p. 14; see also Cloots, Latré, & Vanheeswijck, 2015, pp. 963–967).

Faith in the Word made flesh, crucified, and risen opens a way of inhabiting openness to transcendence in and through embodied life. God's love for creatures is thus linked to the love human beings can feel and enact: "the Incarnation, the Crucifixion happened in time, and so what occurs here can no longer be seen as less than fully real" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 56). Nothing is more real than God's love for the world and individuals. Hence "in the Christian case, we could think of this as *agape*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 20). And it is the will of God that we "participate in his love" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 764).

The Incarnation transforms not only theology and spirituality but also the human relation to self and community. The body is deified; the person is endowed with inalienable dignity; and new forms of fraternity, hospitality, and altruism become imaginable. Christ's "gut feelings" (2007b, p. 640), break with the Stoic ideal of *apatheia* and invite believers to share his compassion. If the Gospels portray him as being moved "in the bowels" (*splangnizesthai*) (2007b, p. 115), then partaking of his love compels us to do likewise even with the same compassion, to share in the same personal love for even the most distant stranger This is what the Good Samaritan exemplifies when he is moved to compassion for an unknown man lying on the

road, inaugurating "another kind of solidarity altogether" (2007b, p. 158), one that "can take us beyond the bounds of any already existing solidarity" (2007b, p. 246, see also 576, 737–742).

The embodiment of *agape* thus reshapes Western understandings of universal solidarity, communal bonds, and the articulation of moral good, significantly raising the bar for any alternative motivation toward neighbor-love. At the same time, this incarnational force is continually countered by processes of excarnation. Under its sway, a personal relation to transcendence rooted in unconditional love is gradually rendered more impersonal and rational—"a transfer out of embodied, 'enfleshed' forms of religious life, to those which are more 'in the head'„ (Taylor, 2007b, p. 554, see also 613–615). The God-who-becomes-flesh gives way, in ordinary life, to "de-Communioned, de-ritualized, disembodied" patterns of existence (J. K. A. Smith, 2014, p. 67). This process, beginning with Taylor's understanding of Reform, is what Ivan Illich defines as the "corruption of Christianity" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 737, see also 158) that would ultimately give rise to modernity and to ways of understanding solidarity without recourse to moral sources open to transcendence.

The Incarnation-Excarnation dialectic at work between *agape* and other ways of articulating loving one's neighbor will be a constant tension from this point onwards in our narrative, as we will see from the Reform onwards. Moreover, this dynamic will be a hermeneutical key to understanding the place of *agape* in today's society, compensating in large part for the over-coding of justice, as we will see in the following chapters when we discuss the place of *agape* in the field of non-profit organizations engaged in altruism or the politics of recognition and identity.

5.3. Reform and the eclipse of agape

One of the central paradoxes in Taylor's account is that the very tensions internal to Christianity—between transformation beyond life and immanent flourishing, and between Incarnation and excarnation—generate the revolutionary dynamic that eventually destabilizes the old equilibrium between transcendence and immanence and, through many unintended turns, leads toward the secular age. In other words, the force that fuels exclusive humanism is not exter-

nal but emerges from Christianity's own inner logic. Taylor captures this under the heading of Reform:

> "[the] drive to Reform was the matrix out of which the modern European idea of revolution emerges. […] What I'm calling "Reform" here expressed a profound dissatisfaction with the hierarchical equilibrium between lay life and the renunciative vocations. In one way, this was quite understandable. This equilibrium involved accepting that masses of people were not going to live up to the demands of perfection. In a sense, they were being "carried" by the perfect. And there is something in this which runs against the very spirit of Christian faith" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 61–62).

The differences in spiritual *speed* among religious elites and lay people in their aspirations for perfection and the dissatisfaction of the latter led to the multiplication of reform movements at the end of the Middle Ages (Taylor, 2007b, p. 67). Taylor understands the Reform as a "long-term vector in Latin Christendom towards Reform" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 786 n. 92; see also O'Malley, 2000, pp. 17–18; MacCulloch, 2004, pp. 27–28), which crystallizes in the tensions over discipline and morals that would begin in the eleventh century with the Gregorian Reformations.

For Taylor, the key to the beginning of those movements was the changes in the practices of piety, which tended to look to Christ as a figure of redemptive suffering and to Mary as a compassionate mother. It was a real "revolution in devotion, in the focus of prayer and love" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 94) that would have two consequences, according to Taylor: a deepening of the mystery of the Incarnation and a new focus on the poor and disadvantaged of the world: "The stress on the human suffering Christ obviously fits with the aspiration to bring Christ to the suffering humans of our time. They are two facets of the same leading idea, that Christ is our brother, our neighbour, is among us" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 93).

Accompanying this turn towards a more incarnational spirituality, open to the pain of others, there was a push by the elites towards moral and social reform. The underlying tension can be described as one between the demand to love God even to the point of renouncing everything, and the demand to affirm ordinary human flourishing:

> "We could describe [this tension] as lying between the demand to love God, which means to follow him even to the cross, to be ready to renounce everything, on one hand; and the demand to affirm ordinary human life and flourishing, on the other. The two come together in that the path of giving to God often takes the form of feeding, healing, clothing; fending off suffering and death, and thus making human flourishing possible. This is clear in the life of Christ" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 80).[123]

The problem appears when we ask what the Christian life looks like for those immersed in "full human flourishing"—work, family, civic life, building for society and the future. As Taylor notes, the renunciative vocation can directly serve works of mercy, but the ordinary believer "living from the land or from a trade" cannot simply imitate this pattern (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 80–81). A possible way through the tension would be to affirm *agape* and openness to transcendence within ordinary life itself, recognizing a God "which loves all mankind, [and] is ready to give without stint" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 81). As we will see in the last chapter, that is Taylor's personal approach to *agape*. In any case, such a shift in the understanding of the transformation of *agape* implies a novelty, so to speak, a new synthesis. But, then, the transformation of *agape*, which, as we shall

123 The closer union with the crucified through suffering also manifests in the development of piety around death. Close phenomena are the "dramatization of the last moment" around the celebration of burials and the theology of purgatory, so popularly successful in the centuries preceding the coming of the Reformation. Taylor makes little mention of it. The development of piety around death entailed a unique solidarity between the living and the dead, extending beyond life and even beyond the closeness of one's own family. As is well known, this led to sometimes abusive trading of masses by certain clergy. Together with the enthusiasm with which popular piety embraced this theology, this explains much of the fierce struggle of the reformers against these practices. Particularly in the context of death, confraternities and societies of mutual assistance also arose. For example, solidarity is shown in practice in favor of a confrere who is temporarily in difficulty, significantly if he is affected by a life-threatening illness. Or, again, in the practice of brotherhood banquets, where the poor received the same amount of food as the rich. These confraternities, based on evangelical values and read from the social conditions of the time, represented a social compensation for inequalities and, depending on the perspective, a demonstration of the differences between popular religion and the religion of the clerics, between the elite—also the secular—and the people (Chaunu, 1975).

see, by definition, leads *beyond life*, is now within reach of everyday life. So, this possible synthesis is highly paradoxical to the common people, who would be somewhat "living in all the practices and institutions of flourishing, but at the same time not fully in them" (ibid.).[124]

However, theological disputes and subsequent political changes provide the foreground, but Taylor uses "Reform" as a broader category for those movements "which aimed to remake European society to meet the demands of the Gospel, and later of 'civilization' (Taylor, 2007b, p. 61), or as he also says, "to make over all Christians, so that they meet higher standards of dedication and commitment" (Taylor, 2007b). As Weber (2021) showed, the process at the social and moral level is a long one, and Taylor substantially follows him (cf. Joas, 2009a).

In this context, we can focus on the changes concerning the care of the poor and disadvantaged in societies, shifts in the social imaginaries of solidarity and neighbor-love, and the emerging *ethos* of Renaissance humanism. As a result of the anthropocentric turn, human agency in its relation to the world manifests itself, on the one hand, in a new understanding of ethical improvement and the good life and, on the other hand, in a new way of achieving a just and benevolent society It is striking that only at this moment, as Mollat notes, "contemporaries began to feel ashamed at the sight of people living in a state considered unworthy of human beings, did anyone dream of eradicating it" (Mollat, 1986, p. 1).

The main change concerns a new understanding of the inherited morality from scholasticism, especially around the concept of Will. In Antiquity, however, virtue was pursued through harmony and balance, with a clear distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*. Taylor's thesis is that the introduction of *poiesis* into the domain of *praxis* eased changes in the conception of the self and in the way of intervening in society.[125] Previously, *praxis* and *poiesis* have formed two

124 This quotation alludes to the tension between "living in the world but not of the world" (Jn 17:11.16), a tension that recurs in the New Testament, especially in Johannine and Pauline literature (see Eßer, 2010, pp. 1890–1891; Fitzmeyr, 1990, pp. 1413–1416).

125 Undoubtedly, Taylor's thesis has resonances from his dialogue with Martin Heidegger. These connections are also to be found in Hannah Arendt, who argued that the modern way of conceiving the political has tried to corset

distinct domains, but they began to merge at this point. Significant for that was the development of science and the scientific method, leading to an increasingly instrumental and less contemplative approach to nature. In parallel, good and evil, as traditional Christian categories attached to the will, gradually began to lose interest favoring the distinction between strong and weak will (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 113).

A telling example of the shift away from traditional Christianity and towards instrumental ethics and anthropocentrism comes from the work of Justus Lipsius, probably the most influential neo-Stoic of the 16th century. His concept of *constantia* in *De Constantia* (2010) epitomizes the new Renaissance subject, who seeks harmony through reason and self-control yet moves beyond classical imperturbability toward an active but unemotional engagement in politics and in charitable action. Taylor depicts Lipsius' popular thinking in his time as "a (sort of) Christianized Stoicism," a "(semi)-Christianized Stoicism" or "modernized Stoicism" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 115–117, see also 2008, p. 226, 2011d, pp. 378–379). In any case, Taylor's attention to Lipsius means paying attention to the most popular literature that marked the cultivated elite in a time of particular weakness of the Christian faith, enfeebled in the struggle of confessions after the Reformation. Lipsius would be, in a way, an example of the "third force" ("dritten Kraft," Heer, 1959) of Renaissance humanism seeking to return to the essentials of Christianity and, in a more conscious way, the more jaded they were by corrosive ecclesiastical quarrels.

Particularly important for our interest is Taylor's thesis that Lipsius' neo-Stoicism presupposes the phenomenon of the "eclipse of *agape*" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 117) and the rejection of Christian com-

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action in the form of production, with *poiesis* being introduced into the realm of *praxis*. She, however, traces this movement as far back as Plato. Such an understanding of politics as if it were the work of a craftsman has reached the present day, manifesting itself in problems such as the loss of plurality in the public space, the professionalization of political activity, or the justification of violence if it is the best means to achieve the proposed end (See Arendt, 2020; Di Pego, 2019). The originality of Taylor's thesis, however, is to be read in the union of the two phenomena, i.e., the introduction of the poietic attitude into the realm of practice and the change in the vision of the will (See Wils, 2011, pp. 320–321).

passion.[126] Although Taylor believes that there is a possibility that *agape* could be conceived as a "kind of passionless condition of strenuous benevolence," the fact is that Justus Lipsius "rejects *miseratio*, or misericordia, the compassion of feeling, in favor of the compassion of active intervention, but on the basis of a full inner detachment" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 115). For Lipsius, compassion is "a vice of a pusillanimous and petty soul, which breaks down at the sight of another's evil"[127] must be distinguished from true Christian mercy, "the inclination of the soul to mitigate the poverty or grief of others" (Lipsius, 2010, I, 12).[128] He continues:

> "Our truly merciful person will certainly not pity, but he will do the same things, or even greater things, than the one who pities. He will look on the evils of others with human, but reasonable eyes; he will speak with a serious, but not a gloomy or dejected face; he will console firmly, help generously, be kind, more in deed than in speech, and will reach out his hand to the poor and ruined rather than give him a word" (ibid.).[129]

At all events, this mercy is devoid of sympathy for the other person's situation. According to this new understanding of mercy emanated as a virtue from constancy, no kind of sentiment or moral source would suggest that the agent is driven by something alien to him. On

126 We have already seen with Taylor that in *Sources of the Self* he distinguished Stoicism from Christianity on the basis of the valuation of goods, whereby a good is renounced in pursuit of a constitutive good through a strong evaluation (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 137–138).

127 "Un vicio de un alma pusilánime y mezquina, que se derrumba al ver el mal ajeno" (translated by S.G.).

128 "La inclinación del alma para mitigar la pobreza o la pena ajenas" (translated by S.G.). It is important to note that the chapter from which these quotations are taken was expunged by the Inquisition in the first translation from Latin into Spanish, no doubt because of Lipsius' strong contrast with the Christian faith (see Lipsius, 1616).

129 "Nuestro verdadero hombre misericordioso, ciertamente, no se compadecerá, pero hará las mismas cosas o incluso mayores, que el que se compadece. Mirará los males ajenos con ojos humanos, pero razonables; hablará con rostro serio, pero no lúgubre ni abatido; consolará firmemente, ayudará generosamente, será bondadoso, más con hechos que con palabras, y tenderá la mano al pobre y al arruinarlo antes que darle unas palabras" (translated by S.G.).

the contrary, prudence through reason is the accurate inner attitude that moves towards charity.

Taylor, however, does not yet qualify Lipsius' neo-Stoicism as exclusive humanism, for Lipsius still comes from a theistic world. But his morality already reflects an autonomous use of practical reason that results in some elements of *agape*, such as grace or commotion, becoming superfluous. It is, therefore, an excarnation of the incarnational elements of the mercy found in *agape*. Moreover, it was a clear step towards modernity, in which theology and philosophy based on cosmology were replaced by a hybrid that placed the human being, with reason and will, at the center: "The transition can be conceived as one which takes us from an ethic grounded on an order which is at work in reality, to an ethic which sees order as imposed by will" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 130–131).

The influence on practicing neighborly love and charity is reflected in the new approach to articulating moral sources previously unknown in Christianity, despite the Stoic influence of its beginnings. The active intervention disengaged in favor of beneficence does not necessarily reject grace. However, it does eclipse it in favor of the will and the search for harmony as the greatest human good. For Lipsius, *constantia* is to embrace the permanent out of duty, as a Stoic would, but to add activism for the good, as a Christian who believes in free will would (Lipsius, 2010 I,4). Thus, charity "is not a matter just of doing one's duty in the world, but of waging active struggle for the good" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 116).

This disincarnated attitude of the elites toward the good and toward charity coexists with a strong institutionalization of poor relief and, at the same time, with new practices of repression and control of the marginalized—often justified in the name of their own good or of a more evangelical society. There are, of course, many counterexamples of saints and lay reformers whose charitable practice is animated by an incarnated compassion and personal relationship with the poor (cf. Mollat, 1986, p. 265ff). Yet the neo-Stoic imaginary illustrates how, already in the Reform era, *agape* could be partially "flattened" into a rational, disciplined beneficence—one of the first major *zags* in the long history of its secularization.

5.4. The Renaissance civility

Along with *De Constantia*, Lipsius' book on politics *Politicorum sive civilis doctrinae, libri sex* (2004) had a key impact on creating a morality for the new modern bourgeois elites and on the emergence of the post-Reformation disciplined stance. The discipline of society to which Taylor refers stems from the public morality of the elites based on asceticism and self-control, which manifested itself in raising the moral standards for the whole population. Hence, coinciding with the overshadow of the human potential for moral ascent and the "eclipse of *agape*" as a moral motivator towards altruism, political programs emerge in which the theological and pious fatalism and social immobilism of medieval Christianity are abandoned in favor of an optimistic and activist stance towards the order of things. It begins to be believed that endemic violence and disruption can be lessened through the inculcation of "at least some of the norms of civility and a properly ordered life in everyone" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 120).

Now the novelty to note here is that such elite reformist activism coincides with a period of the state's expanding size, competences, and bureaucracies. Taylor speaks dramatically of how the population is being urged towards the Reform of mores and habits:

> "They are precisely not left as they are, but badgered, bullied, pushed, preached at, drilled and organized to abandon their lax and disordered folkways and conform to one or another feature of civil behaviour. At the beginning, of course, there is no thought of making them over utterly to meet the full ideal; but nor did it seem acceptable just to leave them as they were" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 102).

From these attempts to conform the population to civil standards of behavior begins a genuine disciplinary reform program that also includes an interest in regulating and controlling poverty. Profound societal reform programs are exemplarily undertaken in Calvin's Geneva and in St. Charles Borromeo's Milan.[130] In these places,

130 Taylor summarizes disciplinary Reform in five points: a new regulation of poverty, the suppression of superstitious and anti-Christian elements of popular customs such as carnival, the increasing efforts to raise the productive and educational level of the population, the development of government structures organized into ever more effective bureaucracies and, finally, the proliferation

society becomes responsible for ensuring that everyone attains an entirely Godly life by promoting piety and decency. Moreover, this religious impulse "influences the agenda of social reform, and gives it a universalist-philanthropic thrust" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 105). Consequently, from the 16th century onwards,

> "there was a drive here to make certain norms universal, conceived in part as a demand of charity towards fellow human beings, but given an edge or urgency by the thought that God will punish our community for the blasphemy of its wayward members" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 104).

The contrast between the joint effect of these demands of charity and the drive towards making some norms universal compared to the medieval world is patent concerning helping one's neighbor. And it will also be a contrast with *agape*. In the Middle Ages, the poor were an occasion for personal sanctification, as manifested, for example, in devotions to St. Martin of Tours (see Fürst, 2011; Mertens, 2017). However, helping the poor was no longer seen as an occasion for personal sanctification, but the destitute, the homeless, the sick, the needy, etc., began to be valued from an instrumental-rational point of view regarding their usefulness in the common enterprise.[131]

In this period of the development of civility, the mechanisms of excarnation that began with the eclipse of *agape* are accentuated. The drive to Reform has made neighborly love a systematic and rationalized instrument of social normativization by institutionalizing it through legal figures and, above all, through institutions paid for by the powers that be or by elites dedicated to beneficence and life reform. Thus, while Western Christianity's growing awareness of social problems is evident, the separation between *agape* and the actual practice of beneficence is also worsening. It cannot be denied that *agape* is not articulated as a moral source at this historical moment.

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of "methods" aimed at transforming the individual—from manuals for the physical training of soldiers to spiritual methods to the increasing use of "methods" in philosophy and other sciences (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 108–112). To delve deeper into social attitudes towards poverty in the transition from medieval to modern times, see (Mollat, 1986)

131 For example, legislation began to be passed systematically on the subject of poverty. Through this regulation, the poor who were unable to work were distinguished and separated from those who were able. The latter were forced to work for meager wages, while the former were confined to specialized institutions with rigorous regimes of permanency (cf. Geremek, 1987, 1994).

Hundreds of saints dedicated to charity testify to this. What is in question is that direct access to the unconditional and gratuitous relationship born of a feeling of compassion that expresses the very love of God is less and less likely.

5.5. Providential Deism

As shown earlier, pursuing a path of transformation or renunciation for the greater good, as exemplified by *agape*, became viable for certain elites at the onset of modernity. However, in the 18th century, a more accessible alternative arose in the form of exclusive humanism, which appealed to a broader population (Taylor, 2007b, p. 221). Prior to the widespread adoption of exclusive humanism, an intermediate phase emerged within the framework of Natural Theology, which Taylor refers to as *providential Deism* (cf. Byrne, 2013; W. Hudson, 2009). Notably, the human being is unequivocally and ultimately positioned at the center of this stance. Consequently, the traditional notion of divine providence underwent significant changes, with God's plan reduced to human beings accepting what has been foreseen for their happiness and well-being. In this context, "The help of grace seems less necessary" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 242–243; cf. Byrne, 2013; Hudson, 2009). Since moral fulfillment can be attained without invoking God, "moral/spiritual resources can be experienced as purely immanent" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 244).

Within the framework of Providential Deism, the expectation of a human transformation toward God has been replaced by the idea that humans will utilize reason to develop what God has embedded within their nature and mind. This notion suggests a shift towards a purely immanent perspective, where human beings are viewed as inherently good and capable of seeking universal justice and benevolence from sources other than Christian *agape* or neo-Stoic disinterested benevolence. This perspective reflects the concept of "new humanism," which asserts that human beings are driven to act for the betterment of others (Taylor, 2007b, p. 246).

Taylor dedicates some pages to noticing the differences between Christian *agape* and the moral predicament of providential deism. Taylor makes use of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), which we have already referred to in the previous chapter. For

the present, it suffices to note that, within the Christian *agape*, the act of transcending the boundaries that separate the Samaritan from the wounded—whether these boundaries are national, social, economic, racial, gender-based, or otherwise—is viewed as an eschatological concept. That is to say, it represents a goal that has yet to be fully realized but one which extends beyond this life and immanent human flourishing. Moreover, as Taylor points out, "the paradigmatic stepping beyond of *agape*, the incarnation and submission to death of Christ, is not motivated by a pre-existing community or solidarity. It is a free gift of God" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 246).

The idea of the humanist moralists is radically contrary to this *agapeic* perspective, and they currently acknowledge this fact: "their aim was also to reject the Christian aspiration to transcend flourishing" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 247). This motivation is also reflected in the desire to love one's neighbor. According to humanist moralists, the origins of this motivation toward neighborly love and benevolence are inherent in human nature. Embracing this principle requires, on a personal level, integrating charity into one's behavior and developing the appropriate internal attitudes. On a societal level, it involves caring for all community members.

Taylor notes that enlightened humanism shares a perspective with Christian *agape* regarding the motivation towards solidarity. For both, it is not dependent on any pre-existing ties, whether they are familial, tribal, or national. Additionally, they both aspire towards the universality of the commandment to love one's neighbor. According to Taylor, these shared characteristics are still "the historical trace, as it were, of *agape*" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 247). The ideal of the charitable person prior to the immanentization of *agape* is also part of this trace: "Charity was part of the ideal of personal conduct; good social order must involve taking care of all members of society; and the proper inward dispositions of a decent man included charitable ones" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 247–248). What happens is that, with deism, Incarnation loses its meaning for spiritual and moral life. *Agape* loses its potential. Thus, Jesus is not a transformer of the world or a conductor of the human soul towards the *theioisis*, but a great teacher expounding the demands of God, consisting of a moral to achieve peace and harmony in the inner order of the world (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 736).

5.6. The expansion of exclusive humanism

Taylor argues that the displacement caused by Deism in the anthropological and moral spheres ultimately gave rise to exclusive humanism. It was, in a way, a positive movement towards modernity that brought about levels of moral universalism never seen before. In his own words: "the discovery/definition of these intra-human sources of benevolence is one of the great achievements of our civilization, and the charter of modern unbelief" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 257). Taylor maintains that the positive aspect of this displacement can be attributed to the impetus it provided to Christianity itself. In *A Catholic Modernity*, he asserts that it is undeniable that the modern, secularized concept of altruistic motivation has its roots in Christianity. However, paradoxically, the immanentization of moral motivation was able to advance the Christian ideal of *agape* beyond what was achievable in the past culture of Christendom:

> "The notion is that modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could have been taken within Christendom. In relation to the earlier forms of Christian culture, we have to face the humbling realization that the breakout was a necessary condition of the development. For instance, 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 were living within the terms of Christendom (…) we could never have attained this radical unconditionality" (Taylor, 1999b, pp. 16–17).

From this perspective, the development of concern for the welfare of others and justice that emerged during the Enlightenment aided Christianity in breaking free from the confines of Christendom, which kept Christianity bound by codes of conduct not compatible with the freedom of *agape* and too closely tied to power. Consequently, this release from the traditional Christendom model ultimately allowed *agape's* motivating force to emerge as a moral source in its full potentiality. Although Taylor acknowledges the positive impact of the rise of exclusive humanism on the proliferation of calls for solidarity, he also identifies it as the true beginning of the

multiplication of sources and the fragilization of moral articulation, a topic he thoroughly discusses in *Sources of the Self*.

Afterward, in *A Secular Age*, Taylor provides a catalog of purely intra-human immanent moral sources of motivation towards benevolence that arose during this period. The first type of new moral sources followed Lipsius' disengaged instrumental reason. The use of reason in morals allows us to break free from our own personal perspectives, as well as from negative emotions such as envy and egoism, in order to embrace universality, akin to Russell's humanism (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 250–254; Russell, 2002). The second approach is through Kant's concept of the pure and universal will, which commands our awe and respect (cf. Kant, 1999). A third way to immanentize moral sources is through Rousseau's (2008) and later Schopenhauer's (2007) notion of *pitié* and intuitive universal sympathy. Lastly, Feuerbach (1973) proposed the idea of projection, which suggests that the motivation for neighborly love, attributed initially to God's grace, is nothing more than a jut of inner human potentialities.

According to Taylor, the four new modes of purely immanent moral motivation are not simply alternative explanations for the same phenomenon of compassion and the desire to help others selflessly. Instead, they represent new modalities of moral experience that affirm distinctive constitutive goods and a distinct way of conceiving human ideals, society, even the cosmos, nature, or religion (Taylor, 2007b, p. 252). In other words, the modern anthropological turn hides a new imaginary that eventually shapes the conditions of the experience and the meanings constitutive of it.[132] Therefore, we are not simply dealing with different opinions on the same reality or alternative philosophical approaches to morals—human motivation towards doing good for others—, but instead, we are speaking of different perspectives on the constitution of reality and relating to the good.

It is challenging for *agape* to fit into the new models of moral motivation based on immanence and to provide a structure of reality that supports openness to transcendence within this framework.

132 For Taylor, lived experience goes hand in hand with an account of reality, of how we situate ourselves in it (Taylor, 1985d, p. see, 2004, 2016, pp. 255–257; Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015, pp. 167–168).

Exclusive humanism is closed to grace, at least as it was previously understood in gnoseology and medieval theories of knowledge. So then, the four models of exclusive humanism are based, in that sense, on an epistemology that Taylor calls "closed world structure" (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 551–592), which is consequent with the new worldview closed to transcendence and underlying anthropology that Taylor calls "buffered" (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 262, see also 37–42, 134–42,262–264,300–307, 488–490, 539–542). Both elements—the new anthropology and epistemology—make up the immanent framework.

From the immanent framework, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept the image of a merciful God who intervenes in history through the love inspired by Him towards one's neighbor, as seen in the Good Samaritan. It will now be hard to believe that there is, for instance, a plan defined by God beforehand or that coincidences or accidents do not exist, but only God's providence—like it was not an unforeseen event that the Samaritan passed by there, but that in some way, God corrected the thieves' bad action in this way (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 277). Now, God's intervention in history, not only through miracles but even through the moral inspiration of individuals, is called into question as a superfluous explanation, even sometimes incomprehensible.[133]

Taylor also examines another aspect of the Enlightenment: the creation of a disciplined and united society through legal codes that uphold the principles of equality, human dignity, and freedom without constraint. According to his vision, this process peaked during the American and French Revolutions. Furthermore, Taylor argues that this social and political dynamic also influenced morality, leading to moral perspectives based on obligations and norms, searching mainly for the right action. He even goes so far as to speak of a "code fetishism" or "nomolatry" (Taylor, 2011f, pp. 353–354, 2007b, p.

133 Peter Berger describes the modern change in the imaginary about God and his intervention in reality when he explains how believers have gone from asking God for a miracle, for example, to cure a very sick loved one, to ask Him for inspiration to take the right action or make the right decision—such as to move the surgeon's hand. Such changes in the imaginary entail a change in the theological predicament and a complex shift of images of the world and the human being (cf. Berger, 2014, p. 57).

707), which refers to the idea "that the entire spiritual dimension of human life is captured in a moral code" (Taylor, 2011f, p. 353).

The new model of society and its moral predicament have consequences for altruism. The new moral order of modernity is described by the self-sufficient paradigm of a properly ordered society that "brings together individuals in such a way that their reciprocal action redounds to their mutual benefit" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 690). Thus, altruism is paradoxically conceived in a maximalist and minimalist way simultaneously. Although the demand for solidarity with others is raised, it is minimized by the conviction that mutual benefit will flow naturally given the proper structure and conformity to certain rules of reciprocal respect of rights.

In any case, *agape*, continues to serve as a viable source of motivation.[134] Its potential appeal lies in offering an alternative to the impositions of the enlightened system by instilling a sense of freedom. Then, as we will see more profoundly in the next chapter, *agape* can never be captured in a code or a set of rules (Taylor, 2007b, p. 282). Hence, *agape's* fate appears paradoxical: serving as both the inspiration behind the trend which ultimately eclipsed it and also becoming an alternative in response. Additionally, we see how *agape* has multiplied its universal reach through the impulse of exclusive humanism, even though transmuted in new immanent forms of moral motivation toward benevolence.

Nevertheless, in the course of the history being recounted, *agape* has lost two essential components: the incarnational factor, which connects metaphysics and emotions, as well as the openness to transcendence. Nonetheless, Taylor believes that such aspects of *agape* can be revived in contemporary times, akin to past witnesses who demonstrated the prevalence of Christian love across different ages. However, Taylor acknowledges the irreversible influence of Enlightenment ideals which follows a unidirectional "ratchet effect" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 273) in the stadial consciousness after the anthropological shift following the changes accumulated in the past centuries. By means of the *ratchet effect*, which does not allow us to go back to the imaginary prior to disenchantment, all of us, believers and non-believers, share the same immanent framework.

134 It would certainly be pertinent to introduce here the work of Soren Kierkegaard (1995), who tried the challenge that Christian love imposes on thought, even though Taylor does not mention him.

5.7. The Nova Effect

So far, Taylor presents a historical narrative that depicts the *zig-zag* of Christian *agape*, which has experienced consistent fluctuations since the drive to Reform. These shifts have been marked by neo-Stoicism and providential deism, leading to exclusive humanism and unforeseen outcomes such as increased demands for universal solidarity and multiple moral sources towards altruism. However, with the onset of romanticism in the 19th century, there was an unexpected resurgence of *agape*'s *zig* through attacks on modern moral order made paradoxically by certain opponents of Christianity. In some way, *agape* becomes an alternative, even revolutionary option for personal and social transformation. Furthermore, its reappearance amplifies access to new diverse moral sources—a movement referred to as the "nova effect" by Taylor:

> "Here is not only the traditional faith, and the modern anthropocentric shift to an immanent order; the felt dissatisfaction at this immanent order motivates not only new forms of religion, but also different readings of immanence. This expanding gamut is what I am trying to gesture at with the term 'nova'. So the need for meaning can be met by a recovery of transcendence, but we can also try to define the 'one thing needful' in purely immanent terms, say, in the project of creating a new world of justice and prosperity" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 310, see also 299).[135]

The confluence of moral and spiritual choices exerts a cross-pressure on the "buffered self," which is still called upon to achieve fullness and human flourishing but increasingly experiences unease due to immanence, the disenchanted of the world, and the fading sense of transcendence (Taylor, 2007b, p. 307). Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to assume that a turn toward orthodoxy or transcendent spirituality is the only antidote to this discomfort produced by ennui and the flatness of everyday immanence. Nor should these sentiments be misinterpreted as a latent longing for *agape*—as if the absence of divine love created a void that human existence must fill through a return to grace. Likewise, this sense of absence should not be read as the kind of deficiency that, in Thomistic terms, prevents human nature from attaining the perfection of grace. It would also

135 On the meaning of the "nova" metaphor, see (Seibert, 2018, pp. 91–92)

be misleading to describe this sensibility as a "mystical residuum" *(mystisches Residuum),* as Seibert (2018, p. 96) calls it.

What emerges is a third way between transformation by grace and immanent human flourishing, which involves rebelling against absence but seeking meaning and fullness within immanence. For this reason, Taylor introduces "resonance" as a new concept in his phenomenological description, which we have already encountered in the chapter devoted to the *Best Account* and Hartmut Rosa.[136] Taylor's point is that the dissatisfaction felt at the loss of resonance is experienced by those who want to return to the transcendent and those who cannot tolerate such a return but seek meaning within immanence (cf. Taylor, 2019c, 2019b; Taylor & Costa, 2021). Furthermore, it gives rise to an even greater multiplication of possibilities in the ways of living and interpreting immanence specific to the *nova effect*.

In this sense, this new third way affects the articulation of constitutive goods and the motivation toward solidarity. Thus, Taylor presents three possible answers to these questions in his development of what happened between the end of the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, retracing some of the milestones already visited in *Sources of the Self*: the axis of resonance with the pain of the world, the romantic axis and the axis of counter-enlightenment.

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136 This is a potentially ambiguous phenomenological depiction, as noted by Christoph Seibert (cf. Seibert, 2018, p. 96). Nonetheless, in order to illustrate his concept of resonance between the innermost self and the surrounding world, Taylor offers several examples, one of which involves a doctor who grows weary of the purely materialistic trajectory of his professional life and chooses instead to leave his well-paying job to join *Médicins sans Frontières* in Africa, in pursuit of a more fulfilling existence (cf. 2007a, p. 308). This phenomenological portrayal of the discontentment inherent in immanence due to a lack of resonance is recurrent throughout *A Secular Age*, particularly in relation to science, philosophy (2007a, Ch. 9), and art (2007b, pp. 352–361). Additionally, Taylor's brief anecdote about the doctor bears similarities to the life experiences of Anna and Hanna, as described by Rosa in the opening pages of *Resonanz* (cf. 2016, pp. 13–36), and aligns with Luc Ferry's examination of the question around the meaning of life (1996, p. 19ff). It also corresponds with Taylor's depiction of the ethical dilemma facing individuals in modern society, as presented in *Ethics of Authenticity* (1992b). Despite its imprecision, the metaphor evokes a dimension of lived experience that many contemporaries find unmistakably familiar.

The first response, identified by Taylor as "axes of resonance" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 311), involves seeking a connection with emotions that demand a higher level of justice or benevolence than what is provided by the moral or legal codes of the time. These axes of resonance strive for moral knowledge that is intimately linked to internal moral sources, often with moral feelings that are discovered to be deeper than instrumental reason or the utilitarian notion of self-interest.[137] An example of this response is the evangelical Christians who devoted themselves to campaigns against slavery, a cause their institutionalized church initially hesitated to lead.

Taylor argues that this resonance axis represents a moral ascent or growth identified with *agape* (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 312). However, benevolence originates not from grace but from human nature in the form of compassionate feelings. The nostalgia resulting from the loss of true religious sentiment and the rebellion against moral codes find their true expression in the duty to others, which is considered the true love of God. This movement, which significantly impacted certain elites and groups, contributed to the modern imperative demand for a response to the suffering of others (cf. Taylor, 2021a, p. 3).

Secondly, Taylor (2007b, pp. 313–317) discusses the romantic axis, which represents a rebellion against the moral divide between duty and desire, nature and spirit, subject and object, and the individual and the community. The Romantics sought unity through higher goals, as exemplified by Schiller's theory of moral elevation through beauty, which defines the true end of human life and life in the state (see Schiller, 1785; also Bach, 2019). Taylor also notes Wesley's Methodist movement as a religious pursuit of unity through the heart, in contrast to Pietism's fixation on doctrine. Although some Romantics, such as Novalis, did not return to Christian or theistic moral sources, they sought to return to Greece "because, at least in the eyes of the Romantics, the Greeks enjoyed forms of unity that have been lost ever since" (Taylor, 2020a, p. 28). In any case, the sense of recovering a lost unity leads the Romantics to have "a

137 In any case, the origins of this first possible response can be traced back to philosophers like again Rousseau (2008), who proposed radical humanism through the sentiment of *pitié*, and Kant, who considered compassion a natural feeling that should be balanced by reason or justice (cf. Kant, 1913, p. 213; see also Marks, 2007; Rudolph, 2011; Villar Ezcurra, 2005).

strong sense of solidarity: the unity they were searching for implied unity among all human beings" (Taylor, 2020a, p. 39, see also 2020c; Taylor & Costa, 2021). Notably, Taylor does not mention at this point the Romantics' response to the codification of neighborly love that arose from closed systems in modernity.[138]

Thirdly, Taylor discusses the anti-romantic or counter-enlightenment axes, which embrace intellectual groups expressing discomfort with both immanence and the answers derived from the romantic search for harmony. These positions reject any form of reconciliation of tensions and realistically accept that there are unalterable forms of separation that must be recognized in order to appreciate their "depth and grandeur" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 318). At this time, the question of theodicy and the lack of explanation for suffering and tragedy is prevalent, as exemplified by François Voltaire's *Candide* (1759), which criticizes the inadequacy of Christianity in dealing with these issues. Friedrich Nietzsche's (1887) anti-humanism also falls under this category, as he emphasizes the unbearability of pointless suffering and the undeniable human need to give it meaning. Nietzsche sees Christianity as the root of all Western notions of altruism, self-sacrifice, and pity, which will describe slave morality. In chapter 8, we will look in depth at Taylor's response to Nietzsche's attack on Christian neighbor love.

Summing up, these three axes of the "nova effect" constitute a protest, primarily against the outcome of the process of excarnation, of rejecting the transformation beyond life. They are also a reproach against the consequences of the culture of the codification of equality and benevolence, which flattens moral and political life. The complaint manifests itself in a persistent spiritual concern for the transcendent or, at least, for that which is lost by the advance of

138 Ayn Rand, whose defense of egoism and rejection of altruism introduces a bias in her analysis of romanticism, makes an extreme statement: "The archenemy and destroyer of romanticism was the altruist morality. Since romanticism's essential characteristic is projecting values, particularly moral values, altruism introduced an insolvable conflict into Romantic literature from the start. The altruist morality cannot be practiced (except in the form of self-destruction) and, therefore, cannot be projected or dramatized convincingly in terms of man's life on earth (particularly in the realm of psychological motivation). With altruism as the criterion of value and virtue, it is impossible to create an image of man at his best—"as he might be and ought to be" (Rand, 1988, p. 107).

the Enlightenment and the project of modernity. In many ways, we can speak of nostalgia for *agape*. Moreover, although we may sometimes talk of sympathy for religiously based altruistic sentiment, it is no longer so easy to speak of the effect of grace. The immanent framework of modernity and exclusive humanism, how subjects experience and give meaning to the world and their lives, which at this time is already widespread in broad layers of Western society, may not allow us to open the door to transcendence, at least not in the same way as it is shown in the original experience of *agape*. As we have said, the ontological background has changed radically, so that the spontaneous connection between bodily feelings and metaphysics has been lost, as well as the openness to the transcendence of the whole being, not only from the instance of rationality or sentimentality. In any case, the lines or axes that begin with the *nova effect* and the moral stance of each of them are already very familiar to us. They are still moral sources for the good of the other, which, with various transformations, are still available to us in our contemporary time.

5.8. Altruism in the 19th Century 'Open Space'

Taylor's account continues with the mid-19th century, which "saw a great rise of unbelief" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 322), with an even greater multiplication of varieties of incredulity, for which Taylor uses the metaphor of William James' "open space" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 549–551; see also W. James, 2002, p. 59). These forms of unbelief, Taylor asserts, "are basically the same as those which are held today" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 369). He situates at this moment the "modern schism," borrowing Martin Marty's book title (1969). Taylor focuses mainly on the search for wholeness within the context of changes in the conception of nature and science—in which the latter reaches an unprecedented prestige that shapes the ethical commitment of the elites of the time—and in the development of expressive forms and languages of art. Again, the new conceptions do not necessarily exclude the religious option, but their ethical undertones modify the nature of experience, disrupting the foundation of neighborly love. In Taylor's words,

> "it could easily appear that the values of the modern moral order could only be carried out fully and radically by the step into unbelief. In the nineteenth century, one of the key values was understood to be altruism. And in this regard exclusive humanism could claim to be superior to Christianity" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 361).

Within this attitude of claimed superiority were the non-believing thinkers Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, who resonated strongly in the much-expanded Victorian culture in the second half of the 19th century. According to Taylor, both authors gained a wider acceptance for being qualitatively different from what had been seen before. The broader reception of their theories is related to a general perception that they provided more depth than the mainstream deistic humanism in the Anglo-Saxon world (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 323). Their cultural impact was such that we owe them the term altruism, coined in French by Comte in the first volume of *Système de politique positive* (1851) and the first uses in English of the same term by Mill (1865; see also Dixon, 2005a). Moreover, his vision of neighbor-love widens the boundary between acts due for the good of the other and concern for one's transformation, between altruism and self-love. Selfishness will remain an enemy to be fought in clear contrast to altruism, but there is a growing tendency to distinguish the ethics of obligations from the ethics of the good life. However, without going into the details of Comte's positivism or Mill's utilitarianism, both visions had an impact on many people who, without renouncing Christian commitment, saw an independence of altruism from the struggle for the most appropriate self-love and from the need for God's love (cf. Dixon, 2005b, p. 51).

Notwithstanding the perceived innovation, their approach to neighborly love is the natural continuation of the Enlightenment mutual benefit society. Taylor presents the concept of "practical *agape*" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 370), which can be understood as the sequel of the "minimalist" sense of altruism and solidarity born of the trust that respect for the norms of equal rights and the harmony of individual interests will redound to the benefit of all, founded in authors like Locke (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 690). Then, as now in the nineteenth century, practical *agape* becomes an open criticism of Christianity and religion in general, but with a fierce force never seen before. This time relies on the eloquent moral force of science

and the new modes of expression of art, on technical advances and improvements in life.

In any case, in the line that links the Enlightenment with the movements we are now seeing, whether they are friendly or contrary to the results of modernity, the demand for solidarity reaches unprecedented heights, as we saw at the end of *Sources of the Self*. The inheritance of all this path is, in short,

> "a powerful humanism, affirming the importance of preserving and enhancing life, of avoiding death and suffering, an eclipse/denial of transcendence which tends to make this humanism an exclusive one, and a dim historical sense that the first of these came about through and depends on the second" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 371).

Although the drift towards exclusive humanism began centuries ago, it is only now that this powerful humanism vigorously shows the tendencies that were pointed out earlier, as this quote manifests. A marked lurch of the secular *zag* that continues with these dynamics occurs in post-revolutionary France, which is openly anticlerical and atheistic. Eventually, within this *zag*, one will arrive at the foundations of French secularism and, ultimately, socialism. From Rousseau's foundations, it is thought that "Democracy and human rights are conceived as inseparable from a view of humans as innocent or fundamentally good by nature" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 412). Therefore, the foundations of solidarity and altruism would be found within human nature itself, which must be identified with the general will. On the other hand, the influence of Rousseau is evident in Marx, where the demand for a higher level of altruism, "which is very often conceived as universal, transcending all boundaries" (Taylor, 2007a, p. 690), goes hand in hand with an unambiguous rejection of religion (cf. Taylor, 2011h).[139]

However, movements on the believing side can also be described as a combination of *zig* and *zag*. Thus, openness to transcendence is sought, but the influence of the historical outcome of its eclipse is powerful. Taylor focuses especially both on Victorian England, where secularization is mixed with a return of faith, as well as on the emerging American democracy, where God's providential order goes hand in hand with the development of democracy, denominational-

139 Ian Fraser offers in his work an analysis of Taylor's philosophy from a Marxist perspective (cf. I. Fraser, 2007).

ism, and civil religion. In both Anglo-Saxon societies, the modern idea of an order of right-bearing, mutually beneficial individuals has gradually entered the social imaginary with evident success. Even by appealing to the transcendent instance, the imaginary is entirely horizontal, egalitarian, and directly accessible (Taylor, 2007b, p. 392). The following text reflects the mixture in the British Victorian era, as Taylor would like to point out, in which altruism is also alluded to:

> "We can see how the Victorian Christianity of self-discipline created a space for the move to a humanism of duty, will and altruism. They had a lot in common, particularly the opposition between egoism and benevolence, but the ontic basis for the move from the first to the second was quite different. For Christian faith, benevolence was possible first, because of the pristine human nature which God created before the Fall. But then since this had been perverted by that Fall, it also required grace to restore it. For humanism, altruism was possible, because once humans rise to it, they see it to be a higher, more evolved way of being (…). A higher self, which can think in terms of universal good, arises out of the process of Enlightenment and character formation. (…) But there also was an important borrowing from Romantic sources. (…) [We] have the power within us to sustain an all-encompassing love. At a certain stage of development, we can bring this power to fruition, and thus come to recognize that what we have previously attributed to the divine is really a human capacity" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 396–397).

As we can see, the Victorian imaginary of altruism would be a decantation of the Christian faith, humanism, and romanticism. But it still retains belief, in the form of "transposition into an immanent key" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 396). Faith is lived intermingled with the new moral perspectives opened up by the Reformation and developed throughout modernity. It is an identity dominated by a model of self-discipline and self-control, where the idea of decency, pride in belonging to the British people —with a mission of civilization over the whole world —and being Protestant reigns. Altruism is lived at this time, with tension and polarization with selfish desire, between the ethics of duty and benevolence, in a way not seen in the Enlightenment. The new ideal of altruism developed by authors such as Comte, Mill, Kant, or Leslie Stephen requires the forging of an iron will, discipline, and constant exercise to keep selfishness at bay (see also Collini, 1994, pp. 91–94).

Nevertheless, the struggle at the moral core of the human being against egoism and for altruism is perceived as worthwhile (see

Maurer, 2020). Altruism was seen as a form of evolution so that once the "disciplined self" ascends to it and manages to think in terms of the universal good, there is no turning back. Victorian humanist altruism is thus indebted to the advances of the Enlightenment's detached reason but also to that romantic conviction that within us lie the emotional bases of motivation towards that greater good than ourselves. In any case, the difference between this Victorian Protestant Christian humanism and the non-believing variants is minimal from the mindset of the social imaginary. When it comes down to it, God and grace hardly play a role in the motivation towards the good of the other.

5.9. The Age of Mobilization

Taylor refers to the period after the French Revolution up to 1960 as the "age of mobilization." Taylor understands this time as one in which there is an antithetical relationship between the ideal forms or types of the "ancien régime" and of "mobilization" (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 446).[140] By mobilization, Taylor means an intensification of the dynamics initiated at the Reform in such a way that he points to a controlled and intended change of social imaginaries carried out by certain elites. Unlike other times, such as the Reformation, where changes in the social imaginary occurred as an unintended consequence of new social practices and habits, mobilization does entail a massive willingness to change cognitive evaluations of the good life and social practices. In his own terms:

> "process whereby people are persuaded, pushed, dragooned, or bullied into new forms of society, church, association. This generally means that they are induced through the actions of governments, church hierarchies, and/or other elites, not only to adopt new structures, but also to some extent to alter their social imaginaries, and sense of legitimacy, as well as their sense of what is crucially important in their lives or society" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 424).

140 Forms or types refer to Weber's terminology (cf. 1988, pp. 190–209). The purpose of these types is to represent a heuristic means to present the particular characteristic of a historical course. (see Küenzlen, 2018, pp. 136–137).

It is also a period of enormous religious mobilization and an unquestionable public presence of institutional religion. Yet the significant difference with the *ancien régime* lies in the place occupied by religious belief and morality within the social imaginary. Now individuals are effectively disembedded from the great embracing cosmos. There is no longer a hierarchical social order mirroring the celestial one; modern moral order is indeed fully operative. Instead of a spontaneous belief in future rewards for acting altruistically, mobilization "calls for society structured for mutual benefit, in which each respects the rights of others, and offers them mutual help of certain kinds" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 447).

Taylor focuses specifically on American patriotism and the French Catholic reaction of the 19th century, both distinct forms of leaving behind the old regime and the revolutionary phase and giving a new form to this movement of religious mobilization (cf. Taylor, 2007a, p. 462). In the first case, God is present in the social imaginary as the author of the Civilizational Design governed by Natural Law. The Christian faith would be essential for maintaining civilization and giving meaning to the nation.[141] On the other hand, Taylor's so-called "Catholic reaction" defines what happened throughout Catholic Europe. Much of it seemed to be a return to forms of the *ancien régime*, namely, a return to the parish and a robust public

141 The fruit of the age of mobilization is the denominationalism of the churches in the United States. All churches—or denominations—see themselves as divinely established to fulfill God's plan. In that sense, they all participate in nation-building and help the nation (and the productive system) and the individual to fulfill God's plan. In general, the general belief is that if one complies with moral demands, he or she will do well, and God will bless him or her. This spiritual understanding stands for a new version of retribution theology. Coupled with capitalism and Protestantism, it will eventually influence how poverty is viewed and perceived and how to help alleviate it. This type of American religious patriotism has been described by Robert Bellah as "Civil Religion" (1975, 2005b), borrowing the term from Rousseau (see Casanova, 1994, pp. 58–63). This concept is still the fruit of much debate because many of the conditions of that religion are undoubtedly being questioned today (see, for example, Bungert & Weiss, 2017; Williams, Haberski, & Goff, 2021). Taylor examines this phenomenon based on the work of David Martin (1978, 1990) and Gordon Wood (1993). In any case, American civil religion is part of the cause of what explains what is known as American exceptionalism and why America is still considered an exception in the general theory of secularization (See Berger, 1999, 2014; Jon Butler, 1990; Casanova, 1994, 2010).

presence of religion. However, religion also became the new moral order's mainstay, acting as a social cement.[142]

In Europe, perhaps more than in North America, there was an intense social competition between the different movements that formed part of the social structure following the appearance of labor movements. Religious organizations were also part of this contest, either to maintain the cohesion of their members or to defend themselves against an increasingly pluralistic environment that opposed every position. In this context, the philanthropic work of the Protestant and Catholic churches multiplied, but undoubtedly also because the churches were also fully involved in the age of mobilization (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 471).

The time frame to which Taylor refers as the age of mobilization is undoubtedly very complex in many areas, and certainly in the history of humanitarianism and philanthropy, which experienced a veritable explosion in these years (see, for example, Barnett, 2013; Dromi, 2020; Magill, 1927; Zunz, 2014). Thus, Taylor barely refers to the missionary efforts and the currents of defense of the rights of the inhabitants of the colonies that took place in Protestant and Catholic churches at this time, in the shadow of the colonialism of

142 The reference to religion as a social cement leads us to think of the figure of Émile Durkheim. Taylor, in fact, uses the word *paleo-Durkheimian* to give a form to this Catholic reaction. In general, with the epithet *Durkheimian*, Taylor refers to the ideal types that determine a particular location of the sacred in the structure of a society, as a principle of order that guarantees social cohesion, always in relation to power and its justification (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 487; Durkheim, 2008). The *paleo-Durkheimian* conception and design of the relationship between Church and State, between religion and politics, finds its most unambiguous expression in the time of the *ancien régime*, in which the God-ordained and God-guaranteed legitimacy of the king and the church ensured the sacredness of society and, therefore, its cohesion. By *neo-Durkheimian*, he refers to the centrality of God's plan in the political community, as in the United States. There is no longer a "sacral" presence of God in the state, but it is now a matter of recognizing God's plan for a state or a political community and enabling its social-political space. It remains the term "*post-Durkheimian* dispensation" that Taylor uses for the religious forms of the Age of Authenticity, and that would coincide with our time, in which "the 'sacred,' either religious or 'laïque,' has become uncoupled from our political allegiance" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 487). This stage theory of Taylor's is challenged by sociologists like Casanova, referring to the North American case (Casanova, 2010, p. 271ff) and by Hans Joas in the case of the *paleo-Durkheimian* association with the Middle Ages (Joas, 2020, p. 262).

the nineteenth century. Nor does his account mention the remarkable phenomena of mobilization of people to act on behalf of some specific oppressed groups, such as the British movement between 1904 and 1913 against the cruelties inflicted by Europeans in Congo and which were created, among others, by Quakers and evangelical Christians (see Stamatov, 2013, pp. 5–8, 177–189; Vargas Llosa, 2015) or the anti-slavery movement across the Atlantic already in the 19th century, as well as many others. Nor to how the enterprise of colonization as well as the struggle against the excesses of the dominant over the dominated, was part of the very construction of Western identity and modernity (See Dussel, 1992, 2007). Indeed, little reference is also made to this contradictory dynamic of the *Age of Mobilization* in shaping the high demand for solidarity with the stranger in our time.

5.10. The super-nova effect and the Age of Authenticity

Taylor calls the period beginning around the 1960s and continuing to the present day the *Age of Authenticity*, borrowing this word from Heidegger (1927, div. II, chaps. 1–2). We are dealing with a cultural revolution which he already characterized in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Taylor, 1992) and which has its roots in the Romantic movement (cf. Taylor, 1989a, pp. 502–513, 1992b, pp. 25–29; see also Abbey, 2000, pp. 86–89). Authenticity is, for Taylor, out of any description of relativistic morality, a powerful moral ideal that seeks the good understood as self-fulfillment.[143] In Somorgy Varga's words, authenticity is "a way of conceptualizing the practice of the self that aims to achieve a good life" (2012, p. 158). According to Taylor, such a search for good life and human flourishment comes with high

143 The interest aroused by this concept of authenticity as self-fulfillment in the academy is great, especially as an alternative to the liberal concept of autonomy and self-determination (cf. Rosa, 2010b; Rössner & Uhl, 2012). However, the concept of authenticity has been questioned for the lack of epistemic basis in this moral ideal and for not sufficiently reflecting the personal existential condition (Cf. Oshana, 2007). On the other hand, Taylor's reliance on authenticity as a moral ideal is also criticized as an adequate means to alleviate the consequences of alienation (cf. Rosa, 2016, p. 301ff; Han, 2019, p. 25ff; see also Reder, 2020).

doses of expressivism and subjectivism, which put in tension the demands of our ties with others (cf. Taylor, 1992b, pp. 1–12).[144]

Of course, privatization and individuality dominate the moral and spiritual predicaments in our time (cf. Taylor, 2007a, p. 514). Nevertheless, it is not as easy as saying that this is a time of selfishness, relativism, or indifference towards the collective or even the sacred. What is happening is a "large-scale shift in general understandings of the good [which] requires some new understanding of the good" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 474). In that sense, the demands of solidarity continue, perhaps more strongly than ever, as we have seen. However, the demands of the articulation of the good—in a context of fading of moral horizons and the eclipse of ends by the rampant development of instrumental reason—now have to be satisfied more than ever through the self-expression of the subject itself:

> "Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demands of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands" (Taylor, 1992b, pp. 40–41).

This new way of understanding good gives rise to a new moral ideal based on the pursuit of fulfillment and free choice, market economy and questioning past values, which gives rise to a new social imaginary based on new notions of what constitutes society and human dignity. This is now also based on human rights, which stands itself a sign of the *Modern Moral Order*. Moreover, personal involvement

144 Taylor's use of the notion of "expressivism" has a particularly extensive background. For example, his way of interpreting Hegel has at its center this expressivism of the *Geist*. The *Geist* is unfolding a dynamic of self-realization through its externalization and its interaction with its environment through actions and articulations to achieve its identity (cf. Taylor, 1977a, see also 1979; Honneth, 2018). Regarding subjectivity, for Taylor, in a nutshell, the subject is always embodied in a particular culture or society or historical circumstance. This model of subjectivity, heavily influenced by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, appears not only in his view of Hegel but very early in his work (see Taylor, 1964) and continues throughout his work in many places, especially in his attention to the phenomenology of socially situated subjectivity and in his remarks on Romanticism (Taylor, 2020c) and, of course, in describing the age of authenticity. A critical response to this category of expressivism can be found in (Norton, 2007).

in humanitarian causes will always have a component of personal choice, self-expression, and moral commitment (cf. Taylor, 2007a, p. 515).

Furthermore, Taylor speaks of the fact that nowadays, great emphasis is given to intimate relationships and feeling, not only in the sphere of personal relationships but also in the political inclination, commitment to solidarity, and relationship with God:

> "One can only connect with God through passion. For those who feel this, the intensity of the passion becomes a major virtue, well worth some lack of accuracy in theological formulation. In an age dominated by disengaged reason, this virtue comes to seem more and more crucial" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 488–489).

Precisely, this search for virtue to which Taylor refers, in its relation to the pursuit of fulfillment, supposes a real possibility of a revival of *agape* in this time, even with a renewed authenticity that may have been missing along the way. Thus, in a time that reacts against disengaged reason and its expression in moral autonomy, it will be passion and the importance of the sentimental that also best describe the motivating impulse towards solidarity. In some ways, it resembles the original version of *agape*, which moves "in the bowels" by compassion. Today, the spontaneous outburst toward solidarity is mediated by the shift in the expressive perspective that emphasizes the valuable as the very feeling of compassion, fixing the attention more on the subject than on the Other or the constitutive good behind the motivation. However, Taylor distances himself from feelings of sympathy as the sole moral motivator, as we have seen discussing Rousseau and Hume, despite his sympathy with romanticism (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 694). His position, following his moral realism, focuses on recovering the importance of human meanings and the constitutive power of language beyond its mere expressive faculty (cf. Taylor, 2016, pp. 200–213). In essence, he argues for the rehabilitation of the articulation of the ontological backgrounds behind compassion, as we have seen at length.

In that sense, Taylor understands that the current force of feeling for solidarity is not lived within an imaginary in which the impulse to altruistic action is driven by a force that comes beyond the self, and that is understood to bring the agent (in many senses patient) into another "higher" order of time on the eschatological level (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 54–61,195–196,207–209,712–720), as would be the

case of *agape*, nor does it make him see in the Other the divinity itself (Mt 25).

Agape, in any case, demands to be understood today from the social imaginary of the *age of authenticity* itself, one in which humanitarianism and institutionalized solidarity through charitable agencies and NGOs play a prominent role. Moreover, given the preponderance of the sentimental, the power of the media in the collective imaginary of pain and the need for solidarity towards those affected by natural disasters or armed conflicts plays an important role (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 691–696, also 371, 1999b). And that may make empathy with the stranger weaker, as we moderns are less capable of narrowing our focus: It makes our philanthropy vulnerable to the shifting fashion of media attention, and the various modes of feel-good hype (…) and then forget all about it next month, when it drops off the CNN screen" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 696). We will dwell on the social imaginary of humanitarianism and solidarity in the next chapter.

In any case, at the end of this story of the secularization of *agape*, with this new *zig* in the form of the search for fullness and authenticity, Taylor shows us the space where *agape* has a place as an impulse of grace towards a gratuitous and disinterested action for the good of the stranger other. It is closely related to openness to transcendence as an experience that brings us closer to the self-perception of the basis of self-motivation towards the good. Furthermore, it also has to do with transformation beyond our ordinary possibilities. As a fruit of all the changes we have gone through, the possibility of *agape* has to do with a more profound reality to which the subject opens himself, and at the same time it is a new life-transforming reality.

Agape, therefore, is to be understood according to the schemes of what it means to live in modernity, that is, taking into account the changes in the conception of the subject and its embedment in reality, and as such, "as distinct both from the object and the continuing nature of the subject (experiencer)" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 730). For Taylor, however, such an experience of *agape* has to do with a paradigm shift, in the sense of openness to the new, perhaps previously undiscovered dimension of transcendence, but always with a surprise at the encounter with God's love. Moreover, as we will see in the following chapters, the experience of *agape*, even within the current parameters of an immanent framework, allows

Taylor to face dilemmas that have to do with deep motivations and their relationship with good and evil, such as violence, misanthropy, recognition, the relationship of good with justice, the institutionalization of the charism or the very openness to transcendence. Nevertheless, Taylor still thinks it is a possible experience, trusting that the implied openness to transcendence will alleviate the problems of modern morality.[145] As he states towards the end of *A Secular Age:*

> "Christians today (…) live in a world where objectification and excarnation reign, where death undermines meaning, and so on. We have to struggle to recover a sense of what the Incarnation can mean (…) Our faith is not the acme of Christianity, but nor is it a degenerate version; it should rather be open to a conversation that ranges over the whole of the last 20 centuries (and even in some ways before)" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 753–754).

For Taylor, *agape* would remain a possible source of motivation that is still operative in the same circumstances in which the Christian faith can be lived in the immanent framework resulting from the historical narrative above. As we shall see in the following chapters, Taylor's way of arguing will present new formulations of concepts pertaining to the Christian faith's content and praxis. We will see, for example, how the community of saints becomes "*agape-network*s" or how the unitive mystical experience is configured through "subtler languages." Likewise, how some characteristics of the veneration of the saints can be found through moral exemplars. Furthermore, the call to conversion or *theiosis* lies behind the transformation that distinguishes *agape* from human flourishing. Another is how the univocal understanding of dogmatic principles is transformed into indirect hermeneutics aimed at giving human meanings. All these

145 For Holmer Steinfath (2011), however, such an openness to transcendence, particularly faith in a personal God, is not possible because of the same course of history that Taylor has described. For Steinfath, only secularized sources would enable us to fulfill the claims of moral universalism and achieve greater solidarity with the exploited of this world. He even proposes "liberal naturalism" to understand the social and natural world in which we live meaningfully without resorting to transcendence. Taylor's response is to recall that the nature of the question is not to judge which option is better, theistic or secular, but to ask about the nature of the moral conception itself. For Taylor, morality goes hand in hand with the question of the good life and one's own transformation, which is a question that goes beyond the right action or the best source for it (Taylor, 2011i, p. 827).

elements will show us how Taylor understands the possibility of *agape* in today's world.

5.11. Evaluating Taylor's historical account

In this chapter we have provided an overview of Taylor's genealogy of secularization. In doing so, we have attempted to construct a narrative of the secularization of *agape*, following the breadcrumb trail scattered through the multi-layered argument of *A Secular Age*. Our aim has been twofold: on the one hand, to consider the fate of the experience of transformation associated with Taylor's understanding of *agape*; on the other, to reconstruct the history of altruism through the shifting social imaginaries and moral predicaments characteristic of each historical epoch. As we have seen, despite the *zigs* and *zags* of this history—with its reversals, discontinuities, innovations, and losses—Taylor maintains that the possibility of experiencing *agape* remains open today, albeit transformed by the mentalities and imaginaries of our secular age.[146]

Before assessing Taylor's historical reconstruction,[147] however, we must first identify the kind of history he is actually telling. Our claim is that his genealogy of secularization cannot be adequately framed

146 As Taylor emphasizes, any attempt to articulate the moral sources that shape modern identity requires a historical-genealogical inquiry attentive not only to explicit doctrines but also to the tacit background of cultural imaginaries: "In any case, what this shows is that the path to articulacy has to be a historical one. We have to try to trace the development of our modern outlooks. And since we are dealing not just with philosophers' doctrines but also with the great unsaid that underlies widespread attitudes in our civilization, the history can't just be one of express belief, of philosophical theories, but must also include what has been called 'mentalités'. We have to try to open out by this study a new understanding of ourselves and of our deepest moral allegiances" (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 104–105).

147 There is a vast amount of literature on Taylor's historical understanding, concentrating either on the comparison of his narrative with that of other authors who have taken a similar path, or examining the success or otherwise of the use of historical reconstruction in his argumentation of a modern immanent framework open to transcendence. Some examples are (Brunkhorst, 2011; Jon Butler, 2010; Cloots, Latré, & Vanheeswijck, 2015; Costa, 2016, 2022, pp. 31–52; De Vries, 2009; Gagnon, 2002, pp. 56–87; J. Goldstein, 2011; Gordon, 2008; Jay, 2009; Joas, 2020, pp. 250–271; Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 155–170; Rosa, 1998, p. 487ff;

either within a Hegelian dialectic or a Nietzschean–Foucauldian genealogy, despite drawing selectively on both. Its structural coherence becomes intelligible only when read through what I call a *catholic attitude* toward history—a hermeneutic grounded in ontological fecundity, moral growth, and the enduring gravitational pull of *agape*.

A Hegelian reading of Taylor is initially plausible. The *zig-zag* pattern structuring his narrative resembles "a particular version of Hegelianism" (Sciglitano, 2019a; see also Hegel, 2021; Berlin, 2014), as already noted in *Sources of the Self*. It begins with an original unity—Axial transcendence and the novelty of *agape*—followed by negation and eclipse in the emergence of exclusive humanism, and culminates in something like a new synthesis, namely the transformation of transcendence from within the immanent frame. The story also bears a teleological trace that seems to aim toward the balancing or reconciliation of opposing forces.

This resemblance has led several commentators to align Taylor with Hegel. Given Taylor's longstanding engagement with Hegel (Gordon, 2008, p. 659), such interpretations are unsurprising: already before *A Secular Age*, William E. Connolly detected a Hegelian teleological impulse, especially in Taylor's work on recognition and multiculturalism (Connolly, 2002).[148] Others have also seen Hegel's influence in Taylor's construction of epochal conflicts age (cf. Calhoun, 2008; Morgan, 2008; see also Thiebaut, 1991).

Yet this proximity to Hegel has been judged problematic by some critics. Ian Angus (2014), for example, argues that Taylor's account of modernity—and especially the unresolved ending of *A Secular Age*—amounts to a form of contemporary Hegelianism in which Hegel's ontology survives as a diagnosis of the problem but not as a solution. For Angus, Taylor offers no *Aufhebung*, only a persistent tension between sharply opposed positions. Emilio Di Somma similarly contends that Taylor's Hegelian inheritance exacerbates the divide between belief and secularity without providing the conceptual resources to resolve the problem of our moral sources (Somma, 2018).

Sheehan, 2010; Vanheeswijck, 2015, 2021; Warner, VanAntwerpen, & Calhoun, 2010; Woodford, 2012).

148 In his own words, "Taylor procedes from rethoric of self-realization within community, though a rethoric of communal realization through harmonization of the diverse parts of an ongoing cultural, to a rethoric of progressive attunement to a harmonious direction in being" (Connolly, 2002, p. 89).

Conversely, Ludwig Siep acknowledges genuine Hegelian influences but highlights important divergences in starting points, historical emphases, and method (Siep, 2011a).

From our perspective, Taylor's argumentative architecture undoubtedly bears Hegelian traces—something that will become clearer in the following chapters when discussing *Sittlichkeit*, civil society, and the institutionalization of *agape*. But Taylor also distances himself explicitly from Hegelian dialectics. He rejects any "inescapable design at work inexorably in history" (Taylor, 1985g, p. 385), as well as the notion of "a single line of unfolding potentiality" progressing through fixed and necessary stages (Taylor, 1978, p. 135). And although one might be tempted to interpret Taylor's understanding of religion (via the category of fullness) as a reworking of the young Hegel's elevation from finite to infinite life, Taylor does not read *agape* through a Hegelian scheme (cf. Hegel, 2015, pp. 343–351).[149] As he notes, Hegel's mature system ultimately leaves no true place for divine love in the Christian sense, since God's love becomes inseparable from its conceptual expression (Taylor, 1977a, p. 494).

What truly separates Taylor from Hegelian dialectics is his focus on anthropology and moral interpretation rather than on the fate of ideas. Taylor is not tracing antinomies and counter-antinomies unfolding across epochs (contra Nitschke, 2018, p. 117). His concern lies with shifts in human self-understanding: with how people redefine themselves (as explored in *Sources of the Self*), how new moral predicaments arise, and how individuals orient themselves toward strong goods and forms of fulfillment.

For this reason, Taylor's use of history also exhibits affinities with Nietzschean or Foucauldian genealogy (cf. Gorski, 2014).[150] Like these authors, Taylor seeks a self-understanding that is simultaneously destructive and constructive. His genealogy dismantles the subtraction stories—the linear, progressivist accounts that portray secularization as the shedding of illusions—and also challenges the moral and epistemic frameworks of modernity that produced excarnation, code-fetishism, and forgetfulness of moral sources. At the same time, Taylor constructs a narrative that rehabilitates constitu-

149 We address Taylor's concept of religion later in chapter 8.

150 On the historical-genealogical program of Nietzsche's and Foucault's critique of morality, see (Saar, 2007).

tive goods and their ontological grounding, drawing on the transformative potential of *agape* to recover meaning, incarnation, and openness to transcendence (cf. Sciglitano, 2019b).

That Taylor names his project an *Entstehungsgeschichte* of exclusive humanism is significant (Taylor, 2007a, p. 26). As in Nietzsche and Foucault, he attends to the "sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (Foucault, 1984, p. 76) that progressive histories typically ignore. And like a genealogy, Taylor shows that exclusive humanism was not inevitable: the path to secular modernity resulted from a web of contingent choices, excesses, reactions, and opportunities. Yet unlike Foucault, Taylor's genealogy does not aim to reveal hidden power beneath dominant truths, nor does it seek a history disengaged from metaphysics or purpose. Rather, it has a double aim: to expose the blindness of modernity's self-affirmation (Taylor, 1994b, see also 1985h, 1989b, 1985g) and to reopen the space for the transformative power of *agape*, in continuity with Taylor's moral realism. In this sense, genealogy is part of his broader argumentative strategy (cf. Lane, 1992) and has an affirmative, constructive character (Joas, 2011, pp. 147–203, 2020, pp. 250–271, see also 2009b, 2017b).

Siep objects that Taylor's use of history cannot justify his theistic proposal in favour of *agape*, since it emphasizes anthropological self-interpretation rather than conceptual argument (Siep, 2011a, p. 292). Yet the purpose of Taylor's genealogy is not to demonstrate the truth of the Christian option but to unsettle false beliefs about modernity and to place believers and unbelievers on equal footing when confronting today's moral sources and their dilemmas. The historical narrative cannot prove that *agape* is the necessary outcome of secularization; rather, it shows that *agape* remains a viable and compelling option amid contemporary cross-pressures—which, as Taylor insists, is already significant.

This originality distinguishes Taylor's approach from other influential genealogies of secularization. He departs from "subtraction stories," which imagine modern subjects waking from a dogmatic slumber into greater freedom or solidarity. But he also resists accounts that portray secularization as the direct result of theological developments alone, such as those proposed by John Milbank (2006, 2009), Catherine Pickstrock (1998), Rémi Brague (2006) or Nygren (1953), or as the destiny of Christianity itself culminating in self-negation, as pointed out, from different perspectives, by Marcel

Gauchet (1997) or Gianni Vattimo (1998, 1999, 2002). Likewise, Taylor distances himself from narratives in which philosophy progressively appropriates and transforms Christian dogmatics into rational, post-metaphysical discourse (cf. Habermas, 2019a, p. 14).[151] Though a religious thinker, Taylor does not adopt the catastrophic tone found in Berdiaev (1936) or, in a different register, Maritain (1959).[152]

The point, therefore, is not to claim that everything changes only to remain the same, as in a circular or self-neutralizing genealogy. Rather, the *zig-zag* history of *agape* results in a genuine plurality of moral sources—each generating distinct moral predicaments, visions of life, and evaluations of goods. While these alternatives are historically related to *agape* through reinterpretation, displacement, or negation, their outcomes are genuinely diverse and cannot be reduced to a dialectical unfolding. Still, Taylor's narrative makes clear that something has been lost this history of the secularization of *agape* —perhaps irretrievably for many.[153]

However, it is worth asking, in the light of the teleology of this history towards a growing moral universalism and taking into account

151 Habermas writes in the Introduction to his *opera magna* on the history of philosophy: "Therefore, this discourse serves me as a guideline for the genealogy of a post-metaphysical thought, which should show how philosophy—complementary to the formation of a Christian dogmatics in terms of philosophy—for its part has appropriated essential contents from religious traditions and transformed them into knowledge capable of justification" (Habermas, 2019, p. 14). ["Daher dient mir dieser Diskurs als Leitfaden für die Genealogie eines nachmetaphysischen Denkens, die zeigen soll, wie sich die Philosophie—komplementär zur Ausbildung einer christlichen Dogmatik in Begriffen der Philosophie—ihrerseits wesentliche Gehalte aus religiösen Überlieferungen angeeignet und in begründungsfähiges Wissen transformiert hat" (translated by S.G.)].

152 We have simply referred here to some of the genealogical theories of secularization in theology or philosophy. The debate on the causes of secularization is broad in the social sciences. For a good analysis of the state of arts in social sciences, see (C. Turner, 2019). For a multidisciplinary overview, see (T. M. Schmidt & Pitschmann, 2014). See (Lübbe, 2003; Marramao, 1999; Monod, 2002) on the importance of secularization in political philosophy and history. On the variety of uses of dialectical patterns on the history of secularization in social science, see (W. S. Goldstein, 2016).

153 We find a similar idea in William Greenway: "Modern Westerners are largely aware of the reality and reach of *agape*, but this truth, a truth at the heart of the meaningfulness of existing, has been wrenched out of focus by powerful conceptual trajectories in modern Western thought" (Greenway, 2016, p. 2).

the high moral demand towards altruism of our time that we have already visited, if we are really witnessing a history that explains a sort of ethical growth toward moral universalism despite increasing pluralism. And further, how this is reconciled with the growing inability to articulate goods. In one of his last reflections, Taylor wonders whether this history we reconstructed can be understood as a "history of ethical growth" (Taylor, 2024, pp. 553–587).[154] Taylor recognizes a *telos* in this history of articulation that goes hand in hand with a greater universalization, a greater openness to the good, which begins, as we have seen, with the Axial Age and reaches into our time with "ecumenism," citing Pope Francis as an example, in which a need to broaden relationships from the discovery of one's deep identity is manifest (Francis, 2020, §89; see also Taylor, 2020b). Nevertheless, as a non-Hegelian *zig-zagging* history, a step forward sometimes entails a step backward.

Taylor interprets these advances and regressions not as cancelling one another out but as generating something greater: an expanded repertoire of collective action that brings us closer to the moral ideal implicit in *agape*. For him, the universalism that began with *agape* ultimately culminates in it. Echoing Teilhard de Chardin, Taylor can thus write that "the whole planet, the entire ecosystem is striving, groaning and travailing to some end: to live up to the demands of the space of *agape* (or of *karuna*, or *salaam*, or…)" (Taylor, 2024, p. 554). This trajectory is visible both in the widening demands for universality and equality first prefigured in the Axial breakthroughs and later formalized in the French Revolution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and also in the gradual enactment of these ideals in movements such as the abolition of slavery or the civil rights struggle.

In any case, regardless of the philosophical character of this evaluation, it is noteworthy to keep in mind Charles Taylor's own

154 Hans Joas has also been working on how increasing pluralism of values occurs at the same time as increasing universalism, albeit from a sociological perspective, in *Die Entstehung der Werte* (2017a). In this book we find a thesis similar to the one Taylor uses here. Specifically, Joas argues that values are born through experiences of self-affirmation and self-transcendence that then end up being accepted in the contexts of experience where they originate through new types of actions (cf. Joas, 2017a, see also 2001, 2021; Kühnlein & Wils, 2019).

Catholic faith. Alongside the traces of Hegelian dialectic and Nietzschean–Foucauldian genealogy, a distinctively *catholic attitude* is more decisive for grasping the architecture of his historical argument, especially given the centrality of *agape*. In the Catholic imagination, history has a meaning and a direction, one ultimately disclosed eschatologically. Reality possesses an intrinsic movement toward redemption—a growth and maturation of creation itself—whose unfolding is not exhausted by empirical events but rooted in a deeper ontological fecundity. As Henri de Lubac noted, "for Christianity […] the course of history is indeed a reality. It is not mere barren dispersal but possesses a certain ontological density and fecundity" (Lubac, 1988, p. 141).

In Taylor, this Catholic accent takes two principal forms. First, it appears in his conviction that history exhibits ethical growth and is oriented toward an ecumenical encounter among diverse articulations of the good and of fullness. Second, it shapes his interest in identifying the place and destiny of constitutive goods in every epoch. Within such a framework, the contradictions, negations, or reinterpretations of the original *agape* are not merely oppositions; they touch, as Lubac puts it, "the very foundation of religion" „ (1988, p. 153). They reproduce, in fractured form, the history of redemption itself in its relation to human beings, their social worlds, and their quest for fullness.

At the same time, a *catholic attitude* recognizes that no historical period can claim to incarnate the Gospel ideal in definitive form. The Incarnation introduces a standard that no social or cultural formation can fully realize. Hence Taylor's critical stance toward the reforming elites of various periods who elevated the demands of the Gospel without foreseeing the unintended consequences of their initiatives, and toward the Victorian conviction that theirs was the first generation capable of eradicating poverty—a confidence grounded in insufficient moral and ontological foundations. Such judgments become clearer retrospectively but receive their fullest illumination from the eschatological horizon to which Taylor appeals through *agape*. His historical perspective therefore confirms that one cannot "marry the faith with a form of culture or mode of society" (Taylor, 1999b, p. 17).

From this perspective, each historical period constitutes an advance in humanity's self-interpretative capacities, accompanied by a

multiplication of goods capable of shaping the moral predicament. Taylor's narrative can thus be read as an appeal to tradition in the Catholic sense—not as a restoration of past doctrines or practices, but as a recovery of the original sources of meaning and of the transformative power of *agape*. Tradition becomes the medium through which forgotten or transmuted goods re-emerge and through which *agape* is continually reinvigorated.

A further characteristic implicit in Taylor's account is the continual presence of a "third way of love" ("dritten Weg der Liebe", Balthasar, 2019, p. 33ff), mediating between the extrinsicism of early Christian practice and the immanentism of modern anthropocentrism. This path also avoids the recurrent temptation of Gnosticism—whether in the form of spiritual elites imposing higher moral standards through rationalized codes, or in the opposite temptation of surrendering to the enchanted forces of cosmos, nature, or sin. *Agape*, resisting reduction to codified justice, inhabits this third way: in tension with the world (Jn 18:33–37), yet also requiring the contrast with its negations and mutations. Only in such contrast does the human being appear as the image of God, and only there does the incarnational potential become visible. As explored earlier, moral plurality is indispensable for discerning and articulating strong goods, especially in times of crisis.

Taylor's narrative thereby reveals the discreet persistence of *agape* as a summons to transformation—conversion—and as a higher way of approaching contemporary conflicts. The path of love becomes visible in the emergence of *agape-networks* formed through spontaneous responses of compassion to suffering, and in charismatic figures who, open to transcendence, expand the effective repertoire of ethical action.

It is clear that Taylor approaches *agape* as a Catholic philosopher who deeply understands the modern Zeitgeist. Yet his stance is not a reaction against modernity nor an apologetic for ecclesial authority. Rather, his attitude reflects the integrative, capacious vision of history characteristic of Catholic thought and a desire to bear witness to the love revealed in the Incarnation—poured into human hearts across the centuries and eliciting a grateful response toward God and neighbor, especially the most vulnerable. Still, the primacy of *agape* exceeds what philosophy, even one attentive to human meanings, can fully demonstrate. Ultimately, faith may be the only

standpoint from which the ethical claim of the stranger can be unconditionally recognized.

For this reason, despite the *Catholic* label, Taylor's attitude does not amount to Catholic philosophy in the confessional sense. He does not explicitly ground his reflection on *agape* in the person of Christ, nor does he develop a theological apologetic. Where he defends anything, it is the integrity of moral sources and the contemporary conditions of belief. His focus on *agape* underscores his fundamental interest in practical philosophy and ethics. Even in his historical reconstruction of the Reformation, he attends primarily to changes in the moral predicament rather than to Luther's theological impetus—faithfulness to Christ. Taylor himself acknowledges this difference in *A Secular Age*: the "Intellectual Deviation Story," centered on doctrinal shifts, and the "Reform Master Narrative," centered on moral experience, are complementary (Taylor, 2007b, p. 775).