3. The Secularization of Agape (I): Moral Slippages in Taylor's Sources of the Self

Having explored in the previous chapter how *agape* functions in Taylor's moral realism as a constitutive good—one capable of grounding moral motivation and opening human action to transcendence—we now turn to the question of what happens to agape in the history of modernity. If grace once named the divine power that makes love of neighbor possible, how has this moral source been reinterpreted in a world increasingly defined by human autonomy, reason, and sentiment? The task of this chapter is therefore to reconstruct, through *Sources of the Self*, what we may call the first history of the secularization of *agape*: the story of how Christian charity becomes translated into the moral vocabulary of benevolence, respect, and altruism that defines the modern self.

Reconstructing moral history, for instance, brings us face to face with a growing pluralism of visions of neighborly love, but also with a plurality of ways of understanding *agape*. Over the centuries there has been no univocal way of understanding it, nor even of securing its place in moral and political thought, which is increasingly reluctant to adopt ontological and normative commitments favoring a religious-based ethics with pretensions of universality, as Taylor has shown. In any event, one of the ways to understand both the multiplication of moral sources at our disposal and the impermeability of ethics to ontology is through the hypothesis of secularization (cf. Drescher, 2019).

The same Christian-based love of neighbor may have undergone its own process of secularization. There is no doubt that Western culture has been permeated with vaster force since Modernity by the feeling of benevolence, the idea of community behind the thought of the Nation, the concern for justice and human dignity and the imperative to reduce suffering. Under the influence of these features of the modern times, God is no longer inescapable to make sense of the duty to help the distant ones (cf. Taylor, 1989a, p. 314, 2002a).

There are multiple attempts to develop a causal explanation of such a process secularization. For example, in this work, we will visit Ivan Illich's thesis of the "corruption of Christianity" by institutionalization and power-relatedness in the exercise of charity (cf. Illich, 2005b, 2018). Nygren himself offered a history of the intellectual contamination of *agape* with *eros* by the Augustinian-Thomist synthesis in *caritas* (cf. Nygren, 1953; Watson, 1953). More recently, Gianni Vattimo hermeneutically interprets the secularization of Christianity, understanding the weakening of metaphysics as the fate of the Christian religion based on *kenosis*, leaving the affirmation of *caritas* over truth as the only way to resist violence and egoism through compassion and solidarity to others (cf. Vattimo, 1999, 2002, 2007; Reder, 2013, pp. 269–298).

By contrast, the distinctive feature of Taylor's account is his attempt to explain the secularization of morality not merely from the development of neutral epistemic or institutional grounds, focusing on power dynamics or from what in *A Secular Age* he will call "intellectual deviation", that is, "changes in the theoretical understanding" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 774). In Taylor's case, the interest lies in the persuasive force at the spiritual level of secularized alternatives to *agape*: at some point "[...] people no longer feel [...] that the spiritual dimension of their lives was incomprehensible if one supposed there was no God" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 310). the peculiarity of Taylor's story is that it does not abandon the moral and spiritual sphere. This focus on the moral and spiritual level not only allows him to explore history from the assumptions of the articulation of *constitutive goods*, which we saw in the previous chapter, but also allows him to explain the changes in the ethical predicament and the multiplication of sources as currents that affect entire masses of the population and not only intellectual elites.

Accordingly, our aim here is to reconstruct how *agape* is secularized within Sources of the Self, clarifying the parallel processes by which the moral predicament is reconfigured, new sources emerge to underwrite altruism, and contemporary standards of solidarity are established. We will follow Taylor's own admission that "the original root of the demand that we seek universal justice and well-being is of course our Judeo-Christian religious tradition… The orthodox Christian understanding of this universal concern is *agape*, or 'charity'; and the answer to the question of what makes it possible is

grace" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 410). The guiding question, then, is: what replaces grace as the empowering source of universal concern once the theistic definition is called into question, as in the Enlightenment?

Taylor's answer is nuanced. He tracks how the influence of the supernatural on the natural loses significance in favor of immanent explanations—plural and competing. The result is a broad modern consensus around respect (often juridified as rights) that can be read as a secularization of neighborly love. But this does not exhaust the phenomenon. Taylor offers a historical account of norms, ideals, and moral sources that also explains gradual changes in how agents experience those sources, in tandem with the formation of modern identity. Crucially, secularization is not a linear subtraction of grace nor a simple triumph of science and education; rather, the "issue shifts from the removal of blinkers to the question how these new sources became available" (Taylor, 1989, p. 313).

Within this frame, we encounter substitutes and rearticulations of grace and *agape* which, especially since modernity, often oppose their theological matrix and yet remain intertwined with it. The upshot is that "our ideas about our moral motivation show a confusing mixture of fusion, mutual influence, and rivalry among the different sources" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 412). It is not only that secular replacements stem from grace; they also reshape it:

> "It is not just that the secular replacements issue historically from the Christian notion of grace; they in turn have influenced it. Modern notions of *agape* have been affected by the ideal of austere and impartial beneficence which emerges from disengaged reason" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 412).

Taylor, in fact, speaks of the series of "transpositions" in morality, for example, between Plato, St. Augustine and Descartes—when one speaks of the good now residing in interiority (Taylor, 1989, p. 140–144); the transposition of the idea of generosity from an ethics of honor to an ethics of rational control with Descartes (Taylor, 1989, p. 154); the transposition from a first-person experience to an objective experience also from modernity onwards (Taylor, 1989a, p. 163) which is especially seen in Locke; the increasing centrality of the "human subject as an autonomous reasoner and the sidelining of grace" with deism (Taylor, 1989a, p. 251); the increasing importance of emotion and piety over reason with the pietistic movement (Taylor, 1989a, p. 302); and the accentuation of this last transposition

towards the expressivist articulation of our inner nature (Taylor, 1989a, p. 389).

To capture this cumulative dynamic, I describe these historical shifts as "moral slippages." As in the case of landslides, in which the movements of a mass of earth, previously considered stable, slides for different causal reasons and gives rise to a different terrain despite retaining the same materials, in each of these transpositions we find a completely different terrain. The ground that was previously trodden and seemed stable has now shifted, resulting at many times in greater instability. Even materials that were close to the surface may now have disappeared on first examination. And what was implied at a deeper level is now surfacing with greater ease.[64] Similarly, we can postulate slippages in the history in the motivation towards helping the other that go from the original position of *agape*, to the terrain we find today, with a plurality of sources and with difficulties in articulating goods. What follows, therefore, is a focused account of five major moral slippages in *Sources of the Self*—five reconfigurations of love, grace, and moral motivation that chart *agape's* path into modern ideals of altruism and rights.

3.1. First slippage: interiority

A first *slippage* takes place in the development of the dimension of self-control and self-knowledge of interiority as reflected in St. Augustine (2010, 2014) and drives through history to reach René Descartes (1984).[65] Taylor reflects the Augustinian distinction, originally Platonic, between interior things (*interiora*), external things

64 Taylor himself elsewhere uses the image of the "earthquake" to describe this state of affairs: "We have grown into a different civilization from our medieval and even early modern forebears. We moderns may differ among ourselves as to what has happened in this phenomenon we call Modernity, but it seems agreed by all that something important has changed. It is as though an earthquake has shifted the fields, and we can no longer enter the forest in the same way". (Taylor, 2011b, p. 15)

65 This movement towards interiority already began with Plato, although without recognizing Christian grace: "Plato's view, just because it privileges a condition of self-collected awareness and designates this as the state of maximum unity with oneself, requires some conception of the mind as a unitary space" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 118).

(*exteriora*) and finally superior things (*superiora*). The crucial shift is in the glide toward the inner subject: "from the lower to the higher, the crucial shift in direction, passes through our attending to ourselves as inner" (Taylor, 1989, p. 129). The interior would relate to spiritual life and moral perfection, since the path leading from the lowest to the highest passes through human interiority. He made

> "a turn to the self in the first-person dimension crucial to our access to a higher condition—because in fact it is a step on our road back to God—and hence to inaugurate a new line of development in our understanding of moral sources, one which has been formative for our entire Western culture" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 132).

The source of grace continues to be in God, but the individual this time finds it in the interiority. Even, the proof of God's existence is found in the individual, to which the individual arrives by memory:[66] "Augustine's proof of God is a proof from the first-person experience of knowing and reasoning (...). By going inward, I am drawn upward" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 134).

This emphasis on interiority continues to be present in Descartes, according to Taylor's account.[67] But as opposed to Plato or St. Augustine, there is no embeddedness in an order of Being to which the self must conform. By separating *res cogitans* from *res extensa*, all sense of teleology is removed from the material world. Thus, "where the Platonic soul realizes its eternal nature by becoming absorbed in

66 "At its root, constituting this implicit understanding, is the Master within, the source of the light which lights every man coming into the world, God. And so at the end of its search for itself, if it goes to the very end, the soul finds God" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 134).

67 The interpretation of this transition has been historically problematic. There is debate about the elements of continuity and novelty between Augustine and Descartes. At its core, there is a question about the moment of the birth of Modernity and with what characteristics it begins. Commenting on this transition in Taylor, Wayne J. Hankey points out that within the different interpretations on Descartes there are two distinct positions: those who, like Taylor, defend a great influence of Augustine on Descartes -who would be more postmodern, according to his vision- and those who from a more antimodern position preserve Augustine from his affiliation with Descartes, such as the radical theology of John Milbank (Hankey, 2001). However, others have reproached Taylor for forgetting the influence of authors such as Plotinus on Augustine, as well as the relationship between reason and will in Augustinian thought, which would also be an antecedent to Descartes (Peddle, 2001).

the supersensible, the Cartesian discovers and affirms his immaterial nature by objectifying the bodily" (Taylor, 1989, p. 146).

Although Augustine gives importance to the language of interiority, he maintains the order of things of the Platonic cosmos. Thereby, Augustine continues to believe in a transcendent-based order that must be satisfied to live the good life. For Descartes there is no order of Ideas and the reason is ontologically, therefore, "disengaged" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 143) when compared to the previous order. The reason will be the constructor of orders of reality that have to satisfy the parameters demanded by knowledge and certainty. As for the role of God in Descartes, Taylor tries not to judge his place anachronistically and does not say that Descartes has replaced Augustine's path of ascent from inwardness to the higher, with a new, more self-sufficient theory of knowledge.[68] Such judgments can only be made much later, in view of developments in later philosophy. In this sense, he changes the order of dependence: one does not acquire knowledge by entering into the mystery of God, but God and his existence is a necessary theorem for knowledge.

Regarding morality, Taylor recognizes the Stoic influence on Descartes in matters of mastery and self-control but with the novelty of the development of a model of rational mastery, of instrumental control of the passions. Such a definition of the mastery through reason produces a further internalization of moral sources since they can no longer come from an objective world. Descartes also uses a concept of generosity (*generosité*) as the principal of all the

68 However, Taylor has referred to Descartes elsewhere as the starter of the current that sees knowledge as "mediational", as opposed to the relational realism he proposes. Mediational knowledge understands that the reality we seek to know is outside our mind, while our knowledge is within us. Things are known through ideas. Thus, the difference between interiority and exteriority, between the physical and the mental, is emphasised. This kind of epistemology, however, implies more than the efficiency of elaborating valid and reliable beliefs. "But this is not only an epistemic stance; it is part of a broader ideal, that of freedom and personal responsibility, which determines a way of being in the world in general, and not just a way of practicing science. And indeed, we are aware that this ethic of personal responsibility has been a key component of Western modernity. It is central to the Reformed spiritualities, on both the Protestant and the Catholic side, and then it takes on secularized forms, and comes to expression in the ideals of reason and autonomy, and the political norms of self-government" (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015, p. 24).

virtues: "generosity is the emotion which accompanies my sense of my human dignity". Dignity and esteem thus appear at the center of the moral vision.[69] In any case, generosity at this time means something different from the current sense of readiness to give more of something liberally, but was understood as showing fair-mindedness and magnanimity in behavior: it "was that lively sense of one's own honour which kept one from doing the base things which might compromise it, and inspired one to the noble deeds which suited it" (Taylor, 1994b, p. 216).

In parallel to the changes in the moral instance, a major shift took place in the ontological order during the change from the Middle Ages to the Modern Era. The ontic and cosmic eschatological order, which dominated the framework of Antiquity and the High Middle Ages and which was at the basis of all orders of social and religious life, was losing relevance and plausibility in the face of the advance of mechanistic science. But, according to Taylor, this clash of worldviews did not occur primarily in the epistemological order, but in the field of morality. Alternative moral sources to moral goodness of divine origin began to appear. A new source was, of course, that which resides in the agent's own faculties, in self-control and self-exploration. The novelty of Modernity is that this interiorization is increasingly centered in the faculties of the subject, especially in those of expression and articulation.

In the same way, nature, that is, the autonomy of things, appears as a moral source. At first, they do so as a reflection of the interiority of the agent, of his own nature, of his desires and feelings. Both "frontiers" of morality, together with the process of disenchantment of the previous ontological order, arise in any case within Christian culture itself, but in a form of transmutation that displaces the ethics exclusively based on an experience of *agape* and grace:

> "Augustinian inwardness stands behind the Cartesian turn, and the mechanistic universe was originally a demand of theology. The disen-

69 Nevertheless, some of his critics, such as Susan James, accuse Taylor of overemphasizing the major changes that take place in Descartes' philosophy: neither the cut between the internal and the external of the human being is so pronounced, nor the theory of the passions is so simple, nor the vision of virtue so free of past influences (See S. James, 1994). Taylor's response is to recognize that he reconstructs the history of the modern self from "ideal types" in the Weberian sense (cf. Taylor, 1994b, p. 214).

> gaged subject stands in a place already hollowed out for God; he takes a stance to the world which befits an image of the Deity. The belief in interlocking nature follows the affirmation of ordinary life, a central Judaeo-Christian idea, and extends the centrally Christian notion that God's goodness consists in his stooping to seek the benefit of humans" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 315).

Taylor's arguments around his historical reconstruction are, of course, much more complex. Nevertheless he may appear to make causal connections that, at first glance, would suggest spurious relationships. This way of relating facts at first sight not obviously related is a "trademark" of Taylor's argumentation. But Taylor neither wants to offer a causal explanation nor does he "aspire to provide a complete answer to the question of what brought about these changes" (Abbey, 2004, p. 23). The point here is to understand the moral agency from within: through the examination of human motivations and behavior, through "the search for moral sources outside the subject through languages which resonate within him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 510). Therefore, it is not a matter of searching for causal effects, but of searching for shared meanings, often not verbalized: "It is not the exploration of an 'objective' order in the classical sense of a publicly accessible reality. The order is only accessible through personal, hence 'subjective', resonance." (Taylor, 1989a, p. 510).

3.2. Second slippage: ordinary life

The most relevant transformations leading to a disengaged identity occurred in the context of the Enlightenment when the very certainty of God's existence was called into question. It was not only that debates on theodicy and what is nowadays known as fundamental theology intensified, but also that in this time a virtual multiplication of possible moral sources occurred. The new focus on ordinary life, as an immanentization or disenchantment of an old idea of cosmic order, together with greater attention to interiority, transformed moral reflection. Still, the question of the subject, increasingly immersed in the immanent order, also raises the question of the political and, ultimately, of the connection with the rest of human beings,

with whom we share dignity. The centrality of ordinary life forced to explore aspects previously not taken into account:[70]

> "There were important respects in which the pagan authors failed to capture early modern moral experience: the dimension of *agape*, later sliding into benevolence or altruism, was wholly absent from the pre-Christian writers, as was the affirmation of ordinary life" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 314).

The life-affirming ethics of ordinary life, as outlined by Taylor in *Sources of the Self,* plays an important role. In addition, various doctrines about the Self, society, politics, and the various orders of human life develop in the same vein and become more and more attractive. At the same time, religion's criticism and the impulses towards reform within the Church itself also increased. The affirmation of ordinary life apparently goes hand in hand with a repudiation of the especially Catholic way of understanding the sacred. This rejection, in turn, lies behind the impulses toward reform of the Christian life: sacramental theology, the presence of God in certain places or at certain times, or the sacredness and hierarchy of certain vocations are questioned (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 211–218). Sacred ministers are no longer the only ones in charge of receiving and administering the *agape*. With the affirmation of the ordinary life,

> *"agape* is integrated in a new way into an ethic of everyday existence. My work in my calling ought to be for the general good. This insistence on practical help, on doing good for people, is carried on in the various semi-secularized successor ethics, e.g., with Bacon and Locke. The principal virtue in our dealing with others is now no longer just justice and temperance but beneficence" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 255).

In order to explain the prominence of the notion of beneficence, Taylor also pays attention to the emphasis on "natural affection" particularly in Locke's (1997) and Shaftesbury's (1999) Deism. By *natural affection* Taylor understands

> "the thesis that we by nature love the whole is expressed by saying that our natural affections would carry beyond our immediate family and entourage to a disinterested love of all mankind, if we rightly under-

70 "What this means for the explanation of secularization is that the issue shifts from the removal of blinkers to the question how these new sources became available." (Taylor, 1989a, p. 313)

> stood our situation. Natural affection is what holds societies together, and rightly understood it would bind the whole species. It is part of everyone's innate endowment, along with the sense of right and wrong" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 255),

Such reliance on the natural inclination towards goodness and love of neighbor is what came to be called as *ethics of benevolence*. Benevolence becomes the main virtue: "The fortunate thing is that our moral sense pushes us to benevolence and benevolence is what works most for our happiness" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 261).[71] Justice, benevolence and happiness are united. In this way, justice is redefined: "a constant study to promote the most universal happiness in our power, by doing all good offices as we have opportunity which interfere with no more extensive interest of the system" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 261). The most virtuous actions are those that tend most to universal justice and happiness.

Yet it is worth noting a fundamental development revealing a shift in the moral accent. Whereas before, understanding right and wrong behavior with respect to our neighbor could be the fruit of a calculation of the consequences in terms of reward or punishment in eternal life, now that understanding is entrusted to our feelings. At the level of moral articulation it is relevant. Earlier, "being in touch with some source—for example, God, or the Idea of the Good—was considered essential to full being. But now the source we have to connect with is deep within us" (Taylor, 1992a, pp. 28–29).

Sentiments, understood as contact with oneself and one's inner nature, are a powerful moral source that is still present in our time. They are, to a great extent, a continuation and an intensification of Augustine's path to God through self-consciousness. Yet this heightened emphasis on agent capacities marks the onset of a turning away from transcendence and, in the moral instance, an escape from the duty to shape one's own life and actions by conformity to an external source.

Taylor studies this moral attitude especially in Hutcheson (2002). For the experientialist philosopher, moral sources, understood as those goods that empower us to a more universal justice and happiness, are to be found in our own benevolent nature and, ultimately,

71 "With the internalization of ethical thought, where inclinations are crucial, the motive of benevolence becomes the key to goodness" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 255).

in the benevolence of God, the author of the cosmic order, created for our greater happiness. In this order of thing, God is not totally absent, although his place in it seems to be subordinate to happiness and, therefore, to the subject.[72] Yet there is no longer anything like an extrinsic moral law: "our bent towards the good is thoroughly internalized in sentiment and takes the form above all of universal *benevolence*" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 264).

The shift in the level of the articulation of moral sources towards universal benevolence continued with the Anglo-Saxon moralists of the 18th century: if the virtue originally sought by Christianity was a kind of love whose paradigm was the generous giving of oneself for others, even one's own life, benevolence now occupies the place previously reserved for charity, but with an emphasis on the happiness that must accompany altruistic behavior. The center is occupied by the human, not by grace; by human happiness, not by self-giving per se: "The notion that the godly person is one who gives of himself is continued in this new ethic, in which all the traditional virtues are redefined, as we saw above, and related to benevolence. But the content of this disposition is defined in terms of human happiness" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 268).

3.3. Third slippage: the utility of the good and the rationalization of agape

With Radical Enlightenment there is a definitive break with any remnant of the notion of providence or of a cosmic order that came from deism: "Enlightenment naturalism (...) is in part motivated by the sense that in rejecting religion it is for the first time doing justice to the innocence of natural desire, that it is countering the calumny implicit in ascetic codes." (Taylor, 1989a, p. 516).

72 Here Taylor points out that there is even a transformation of eschatology in terms of affection: "Happiness is the attaining of the things we by nature desire, or pleasure and the absence of pain. The rewards of the next life seem to be considered just as more intense and longer-lasting versions of the pleasures and pains of this. Moreover, God's having set up this system of recompense in the next world seems to be designed at least partly to underpin the interlocking system in this one" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 267).

Prioritizing moral action and utility is now crucial. The new approach differs from the seeking of constitutive good, while still acknowledging commitment to *life goods*. In any case, the focus on benevolence has shifted from social and political aspects presented in the *ethics of benevolence* to impartiality and individuality, while still valuing solidarity on a global scale. According to Taylor, the Marquis of Condorcet (1979) is an excellent example of this practical and selfless benevolence:

> "One thing to describe human motivation in a condition of realized harmony; quite another to attribute to people today a love of mankind which would lead them to work for the good of humanity regardless of the cost to themselves" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 331).

During the Enlightenment, there was a belief that increased rationality would lead to greater benevolence, ultimately freeing human good nature from their own negative tendencies. For Taylor, this is clearly exemplified in the case of Jacques Rousseau and his search for the sources of morality in the nature of humankind. For Rousseau (2008), *listening to the voice of conscience* is the source of the benevolence that will make us escape from self-interest: "To regain contact with this voice would be to transform our motivation, to have a wholly different quality of will" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 358). Scientific reason serves as the foundation of goodness, allowing us to observe and assess situations objectively without any bias. Moreover, human desire for pleasure motivates individuals to engage in selfless acts, resulting in behaviors that benefit others before oneself. The *Aufklärer*,

> "in their insistence on the physical nature of the moral life or on the reduction of all human motivation to pleasure, in their zeal to root out all religious and metaphysical doctrines about "higher" or "spiritual" aspirations, to leave them absolutely no ontological space, seemed also to abolish the space for what I have been calling 'strong evaluation', the recognition that certain goals or ends make a claim on us, are incommensurable with our other desires and purposes" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 332).

Kant exemplifies the idea of enlightened subjectivity and finding goodness through inner motivation. Similar to Augustine, Kant believes that morality involves transforming one's will and subjecting oneself to moral principles. According to Kant, moral laws are solely based on rational human will and impose obligations. Practically,

Kant believes in universalizing the maxims with which one acts, favoring the maxim that can be applied by anyone. However, Taylor criticizes this approach for abstracting morality, homogenizing norms, and avoiding the question of how to address human motivation. Ultimately, he deems this approach impractical, along with utilitarianism and its model of happiness calculation.

In this sense, Taylor points out that both utilitarianism and Kantianism work with a procedural conception of practical reason: "the rationality of an agent or his thought is judged by how he thinks, not in the first instance by whether the outcome is substantively correct. Good thinking is defined procedurally" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 86). By extension, being right about a decision comes from following the correct procedure. Substantive contents are of no importance—something that contrasts with Taylor's accent on ontology, as we saw in the previous chapter.

Conversely, God is still present but as a postulate of practical reason. Taylor stresses Kant's deep rootedness in Christian theology and finds several places where a strong influence of St. Augustine is evident. But we find in Kant a substitution of the role of grace by a new way of understanding benevolence as *respect*, as we saw already: "in Kant, what takes the place of universal benevolence is something closer to a principle of universal justice, the determination to act only by universal maxims and to treat all rational beings as ends" (Taylor, 1989, pp. 366).

It is, according to Taylor, a "secularized variant of *agape*" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 367) with enormous influence on subsequent centuries. A particularity of this secularization is independent of whether the subject is a believer or a non-believer. What is described is a change that has shaped the moral consciousness of modernity and has been definitive for the configuration of the sources of morality. It is, according to Taylor, the key to understanding the great reliance on ourselves to achieve the altruistic ends that lie behind all the humanitarian efforts of later centuries. The question of the place of universal benevolence, that *secularized agape*, attains great importance in Kantian practical philosophy:

> "Human beings are capable of a universal will to beneficence or justice, which is part of their make-up as rational beings, and which comes to be released in its full power by their acceding to self-responsible reason. There is a kind of secularized variant of *agape* implicit in reason

itself, which cannot but grow stronger with the development of enlightenment" (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 366–367).

These secularized variants of the *agape* are the ones that have "bulked large in the self-consciousness of moderns over the last two centuries, and (have) fed our faith in ourselves as a reforming civilization, capable of reaching higher moral goals than any previous age has" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 367).

Kant's particularity regarding the history of the secularization of *agape* lies in his internalization of grace in a quasi-secularized postulate of practical reason and in its use as a criterion.[73] However, Kant, unlike theories of Kantian heritage, such as Habermas', still grants a role to metaphysics. For Taylor, current moral theories based on a Kantian model, such a Habermas' or Rawls', reveal a growing inability to hold on to our humanitarian efforts, which 2creates something like a spiritual crisis in our civilization" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 367). Precisely, Taylor points out the weakness of neo-Kantian ethics that have become blind to their own sources by separating the domains of ethics and morality: they seek justice, but ignore reflecting on the good. This fact results in a difficulty to maintain the high expectations on the human being of those philosophies that start from rational discernment for a solidary action, as we saw in the introduction.

3.4. Fourth slippage: historical exceptionalism

Kant's relevance is still manifest in his influence on the expressivist turn of Romanticism, which brings with it another way of articulat-

73 Taylor also describes his moral theory as "criterial" besides recognizing in Kant a procedural model of practical reason. It would be criterial "in the sense that the requirements of reason are determined in advanced by some fixed criterion" (Smith, 2002, p. 106). In this sense, utilitarianism would also qualify as a criterial theory, where the criterion would be the maximization of happiness. Criterial theories are not by definition procedural, as Smith points out, since Taylor finds in Plato a substantive theory where the vision of the good would be the criterion: "Plato offers what we can call a substantive conception of reason. Rationality is tied to the perception of order; and so to realize our capacity for reason is to see the order as it is. The correct vision is criterial" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 121).

ing the good as the inner motivation. Romanticism "turned to nature and unadorned feeling (…) developed out of the notion that I have called nature as a source" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 461, cf.368). Romanticism represents a revolt against the consequences of rationalism and utilitarianism: "against the classical stress on rationalism, tradition and formal harmony, the Romantics affirmed the rights of the individual, of the imagination, and of feeling" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 368)

The notion that an individual possesses an innate voice or drive, which enables them to discover truth through their own emotions, played a significant role in bolstering the diverse manifestations of the romantic revolt: "The requirement in this new philosophy that I be in tune with the impulse of nature could be seen just as another demand of love: now the nature which speaks through me is the good which must be cherished" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 372).

Feelings are good in themselves; they are no longer good as a function of the action to which they move. And feelings no longer require the attraction of a transcendent pole to the subject: feelings are concerned with how we experience our lives and our desires.[74] They were not separated from the idea of the harmonious order of things, but the accent shifted through the way of accessing that order. It will no longer be rational coldness, but the warmth of feeling expressed in language and art. However, the displacement of this idea implies a radical turn that changes the understanding of the moral sources. Thus, benevolence is considered a natural sentiment, free of prior moral codes.

For Taylor, the French Revolution has more to do with this expressivist turn than with the dominance of reason and is, moreover, the first context where messianic expectations appear completely secularized: "The Revolution offers the hope of a new epoch, not because it proposes to engineer society at last in a rational form; rather the hope is that it can at last call forth the great benevolence

74 In an interview, Taylor referred to Romanticism's lack of a proper metaphysics: "It's even hard to speak of metaphysics with the Romantics, let alone of a common, consensual type of metaphysics (…). The share of indetermination inherent in the relationship between man and things certainly explains, at least in part, why there are no explicit metaphysics among the Romantics. The language of nature can indeed be translated, but the appropriate vector to do so is art, not some philosophical logic that strives toward an illusory clarity, in quest of so-called metaphysical light" (Taylor, 2020a, p. 30)

latent in virtuous men, once the corrupt servants of tyranny have been swept aside" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 387).

For Taylor, contemporary society stands on the great transformations of the Enlightenment and Romanticism: "our cultural life, our self-conceptions, our moral outlooks still operate in the wake of these great events" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 393). In a manner, he summarizes as follows:

> "Modern notions of *agape* have been affected by the ideal of austere and impartial beneficence which emerges from disengaged reason. (…) But they have also been transformed by Romantic conceptions of spontaneous feeling, of a goodness which flows from inner nature" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 412).

A legacy of modernity that has come down to us and is vividly present in our moral imaginary is the following the moral imperative to reduce suffering, which was formed in the Enlightenment and continues today, shows the combined strength of the two moral ideals on which modern identity is built: the importance of ordinary life and universal benevolence. Together with the latter, a new political ideal based on progress appears, also of unquestionable influence on morality: the ideal of universal justice, reflected from the 18th century onwards in numerous constitutional declarations of rights and international treaties, together with the ideas of liberty and dignity (cf. Taylor, 1989a, pp. 397–398).

Moreover, from the Victorian age onward, a sense of *moral exceptionalism* emerges: the imperative of beneficence and justice coupled with a sense of making history with an unprecedented milestone. Altruism at that time acquired undoubtedly moral primacy, especially subsequent to the anti-slavery crusades, in which the Christian influence was unquestionable (Taylor, 1989a, p. 396ff). Moral historical exceptionalism is a kind of recognition that a new moral conscience is emerging in connection with a collective sense of occupying a unique place in history. As historical bias, it might be sometimes even an illusion, in view of the injustices tolerated, the double standards and the lack of attention to some latent conflicts. This is a sense of historical exceptionalism which also applies to the present time.[75] But it sets very high standards of moral demands, encouraged by the value that

75 Many of the speeches of recent UN Secretaries General can be understood in this way. We can recall the sentence of Ban Ki-moon, receiving the honorary

equality, rights, freedom, benevolence, solidarity and the desire to alleviate the suffering of others have been gaining. Taylor recognizes in some recent movements in the USA, such as the anti-abolitionist movement or the great American movement for civil rights, this constant that began in Victorian times: "these movements reflect, and have helped to propagate and intensify, the imperatives of universal benevolence and justice and the sense that a recognition of these is integral to our civilization" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 396).

Taylor points out that the present time differs from earlier times, like Victorian era or the civil rights movements of the 1960s in that demands arising from the imperatives of benevolence and justice have increased, at least in Western civilization. Taylor even points out that part of this mechanism of minimizing the effect of the requirement of the moral ideal of solidarity and benevolence is manifested in modern bureaucracy: many of the historical concretizations of the demands of universal justice have become social rights to which resources, both public and private, are allocated; institutions of all kinds have been created and charged with alleviating suffering, defending the marginalized, caring for the worst off in society and on the planet, taking an interest in all kinds of causes: "much of the effort of what we often loosely call social democracy has gone into building universal concern, as it were, into the very fabric and procedures of our societies" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 398)

In any case, although the practice of solidarity today goes hand in hand with the construction of an institutional framework, it is also true that "bureaucracy creates its own injustices and exclusions and that a great deal of suffering is not so much relieved as rendered invisible by it" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 398). There is, therefore, a paradox: the same institutions and structures created and planned to alleviate

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degree at the Catholic University of Leuven in 2015: 'We are the first Generation that can end poverty, the last that can end climate change'. (Ki-moon, 2015). This sentiment, both optimistic and of historical exception, is perceived in many declarations and initiatives of international organizations, such as Agenda 2030 or Sustainable Development Goals. Certainly, we may find ourselves in a historical moment in which technical advances allow the accomplishment of those goals (Harari, 2015, 2016). But the moral framework that explains both such moral obligation to solidarity and the human capacity to achieve it, is rooted more deeply in history.

suffering from an imperative of benevolence also generate injustices and suffering.[76]

Moral historical exceptionalism, the increasing perceived inescapability of demands, and the bureaucratization of responses raise a central question in Taylor's view: "What can sustain this continuing drive? What can enable us to transcend in this way the limits we normally observe to human moral action?" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 398). Again, these questions refer to the capacity to articulate moral responses from the sources of motivation. But, as we already said earlier, the articulation of goods has become increasingly problematic in moral reflection:

> "The question of their (and our) place in history is very important to them (us). And not only because they/we may sense some higher moral standards in ours, but also because of the uneasy sense that something very valuable has been sacrificed in the process" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 576 n.6).

The late was not so much the case in the Victorian era, where the sense of exceptionalism was still rooted in the Christian faith and the idea of civilization. In fact, moral exceptionalism is an aspect of the idea of Western civilization and of the collective narrative of the North Atlantic culture of the last two centuries: "it is part of the newly developed story of the genesis of our culture against the background of the homogeneous time of nature, which relates this culture to institutional and social change over centuries" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 576 n.7).

The components that explain this narrative of Western civilization are rooted, on the one hand, in the Christian inspiration of *agape* but with an enormous influence of the Enlightenment notions of progress and rationally planned improvements. There was a complex interaction between religious and secular sources of morality, for example, when it came to undertaking major social reforms, as happened in the United States with the anti-slavery movements of the 19th century: "the demands of Christian faith were redefined to incorporate a heavy dose of social reform, often conceived in terms of utilitarian calculation" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 399). Thus, although the initial impulse was Christian, the sources to which one turns to

76 Later, in *A Secular Age* he will describe this fact, in dialogue with Ivan Illich, as corruption of *agape*.

satisfy the demands are not based on grace, but rather on reason. And this possibility of turning to non-believing sources of morality, without affecting the goals of benevolence and solidarity and the image of civilization, is the great novelty of the nineteenth century: "for the first time an alternative moral horizon was available to belief in God" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 408).

Taylor understands the crisis of deism and the appearance of the possibility of the option of atheism or agnosticism from a novel position. Taylor resorts to the causal explanations of secularization (which in *A Secular Age* he will call "subtraction stories"), that is, the passage to a rational mentality due to the development of science and the development of the economy and the urbanization of society, which distances individuals from apparently less evolved beliefs. Taylor's emphasis is that prior to an epistemological change there is a displacement of the moral accent: "Scientism itself requires a leap of faith. What powers this faith is its own moral vision." (Taylor, 1989a, p. 404). It is a change or a decision, conscious or not, by which subjects resolve to turn to some moral sources and abandon others.[77] The context is already clearly that of a moral pluralism.

A new unbelieving "ethic of benevolence" emerges, with two operative images that perform as ideals: the ideal of the rationally free individual who is self-responsible for his/her moral decisions, and the heroic ideal of unbelief, that is, of the individual who confronts the truth of reality, no matter how discouraging it may be (like Dr. Rieux from Camus' *La Peste*). Moving from religion to science, moreover, "not only betokened a greater purity of spirit and greater manliness but also aligned them with the demands of human progress and welfare" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 405).

The history of the secularization of *agape* could already end at this point with an explanation of the pluralistic panorama of the different sources of solidarity today: from the purely Christian understanding of *agape* as grace, its intimate version, internalized grace operating as disengaged reason, the spontaneous voice of nature within us,

77 The convincing force of scientistic arguments, such as Darwin's, is not found primarily in their capacity to better explain the facts of nature, but in the convincing power of a new moral outlook: "not the simple replacement of non-science by science, but a new militant moral outlook growing out of the old and taking its place beside it as a fighting alternative" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 404).

no notion of good will, the procedural way of discerning the right decision or action, and so on.

Taylor's point is that pluralism generates a new reality. There is not just a pluralism of different moral sources and ways of motivating that are available to the subject, but "our ideas about our moral motivation show a confusing mixture of fusion, mutual influence, and rivalry among the different sources. Belief and unbelief have been complexly related to each other" (Taylor, 1989, p. 412). Modern ways of referring to *agape*, even the most explicitly believing ones, have been influenced by moral exceptionalism, using a detached reason and by the intimate conception of grace. All moral models, in which the *agape* is different from its original form—or, at least, in ways that call for new ways of understanding grace—hide not only changes in morality, but also in anthropology, in politics and even in metaphysics and theology. However, all these models are vulnerable in two ways: on the one hand, all the sources are interconnected, not only in their historical genesis, but also in real moral life, in the way how the agent finds a variety of sources in him and in relation to others in the community (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 594–617); on the other hand, blindness with respect *constitutive goods* also affects those who try to respond to the demands of *agape*, so to speak, as children of the same modern identity.

3.5. Fifth slippage: expressivism

There is however a final twist in the history of the secularization of *agape* that has come about with Romanticism and the beginning of Expressivism that will increase the drama of the gap between the high demands of solidarity and the lack of articulation of goods. Romanticism brought with it three crucial reorderings in the moral vision and which resulted in the crisis that could lead to blindness towards the sources of morality. First, Expressivism inherits from Romanticism the vision of reality from the nature of the subject and the uniqueness of the artist's feeling, which puts him in contact with the most authentic spiritual and moral forces. This realignment is revived and intensified in contemporary times. Another way of looking at things is the belief that humans are inherently flawed, as exemplified by Baudelaire's perspective. He sees humans as pos-

sessing a fallen spiritual nature and emphasizes the importance of honor in the hero's journey, detached from the mundane aspects of life. (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 434–441). Finally, Schopenhauer expressed the idea that moral free will, which was once considered a spiritual source of good, is now objectified in nature (Taylor, 1989a, pp. 441–447).

As it can be noticed, the rejection of Enlightenment's view of nature by post-Romanticism is a clear indication of the negative judgement on it, out of the suffering and catastrophic consequences it brought. Nonetheless, Taylor highlights the long-lasting impact of the Enlightenment era, which includes the emphasis placed on human creativity, imagination, and inner emotions. Taylor pays attention to *subtler languages* and nuanced forms of communication, which effectively convey these values and continue to influence us today.[78] Hence, the possibility opens for the denial of all goodness of the human being and of all goodness of life in common, as it is clear in Nietzsche's understanding of the moral predicament. With him, it is also possible to postulate the non-existence of any understanding of the good, even the most immanent, and thus of access to a moral source.

Thus, the contemporary moral landscape offers a range of choices when it comes to grappling with the concept of goodness in humanity and the significance of reducing harm, as advocated by the modern era. One of these choices involves refuting the idea that humanity is inherently good and that minimizing suffering is a crucial goal. This option contrasts with the new expressionist developments, which reaffirms the virtuousness of our own vision of the good, without recourse to any objective order of goodness or any *constitutive good*. Indeed, no longer can the world be seen simply as *good*, for this assessment is reserved for the self-affirmation of the human being. Therefore, the challenge lies in how to find a balance between acknowledging and affirming humanity while also resisting the increasingly tendency of abhorrence of the world and instead seek true reality. This is exemplified in the philosophy of Nietzsche, which calls into question the ethics of benevolence and solidarity:

> "One of the things that makes a doctrine of our affirming power so necessary is just our commitment to an ethic of benevolence, which

78 We will discuss the subtler languages in more depth later.

> is why an inability to affirm the goodness of human beings can be threatening" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 455).

Yet the power of human self-affirmation and expressivism can give rise to a new way of understanding *agape*. So the power of self-affirmation manifests itself in Dostoyevsky's thesis as summarized by Taylor:[79] openness to grace manifests itself in our openness to the world. "What will transform us is an ability to love the world and ourselves, to see it as good in spite of the wrong" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 452). The noble act, the act of compassion and selfless altruism, manifests in the moral order of things that "people are transformed through being loved by God, a love that they mediate to each other, on one hand, with the modern notion of a subject who can help to bring on transfiguration through the stance he takes to himself and the world, on the other" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 452).[80] Whoever acts inspired by God's grace can be saved from the excesses to which deviant human freedom may lead, but also from the fatalistic distrust in the world. Key is to see the free initiative of Christ operating in the world and especially incarnated in exemplary characters: "God's grace and his primordial initiative lie at the base of the distinction between the *sequela christi*, meaning the fact of following Christ, and the imitation of an inspiring persona. Dostoyevsky was quite sensitive to the 'miracle' of charity. He claimed that love, as

79 "From Taylor's perspective, Dostoevsky is among the most insightful thinkers who have explored the problem of self-affirmation in a Christian perspective" (Kühnlein, 2008, p. 165). ["Aus Taylors Sicht gehört damit Dosojewski zu den aufschlussreichsten Denkern, die die Problematk der Selbstbejahung in christlicher Perspektive erkundet haben" (translated by S.G.)]. (cf. Taylor, 1999b, 2011f, p. 366, 2011g, p. 63; see also B. K. Ward, 2014).

80 The noble and generous act as a sign of *agape* from the subject's self-affirmation, without reference to transcendence, allows us to understand Dostoyevsky's famous maxim: "If God doesn't exist, everything is allowed" (see also Taylor, 2011b, p. 13). Taylor understands Dostoyevsky, in many ways, as a romantic, albeit a very peculiar one. With Romanticism he shares its vision of truth, where truth cannot be formulated directly, nor is it a matter of reason alone. Without an objective order of truth, anything can replace it. And so, as shown in The Demons, there are individuals who will no longer find any restraint to achieve their new absolute, even to the point of amputating other human beings of their dignity. It is not, therefore, a relativistic maxim, as if all moral references had vanished. Christ, in this sense, functions as a moral reference.

Christ experienced it, couldn't be understood from within mundane boundaries" (Taylor, 2020a, p. 73).

With Dostoyevsky, Taylor clearly enters the perspective of the *subtler languages*: a new possibility for understanding *agape* and the role of grace opens up through the expression, from within the subject, of the transcendent basis of compassion without necessarily having to invoke God in the transcendent order.[81] The way of experiencing the world as open to the possibility of transcendence by seeing the grace of God operating in the world—like Dostoevsky—, the existence of exemplary charismatic exemplars and the use of *subtler languages* will be to a large extent the way in which Taylor will see the operability of *agape* as a source of human fulfillment, motivation towards the good of the neighbor and social transformation, as we will see in the last chapter.

3.6. The fate of agape in the age of pluralism

The reconstruction undertaken so far has shown that the secularization of *agape* in *Sources of the Self* is not a story of mere loss but of continuous rearticulation. Across the five moral slippages–from interiority to expressivism–Taylor's moral genealogy reveals how the Christian experience of grace is progressively immanentized, producing a moral landscape defined by pluralism, benevolence, and the affirmation of ordinary life. The outcome is a complex field where *agape* persists under multiple guises: as respect, altruism, justice, and solidarity.

At this stage, several questions arise. Can these rearticulated forms of *agape* still claim moral objectivity, or do they dissolve into the

81 René Girard, considers this type of transcendence a secularized a deviated variant of true transcendence: "Deviated transcendency is a caricature of vertical transcendency. There is not one element of this distorted mysticism which does not have its luminous counterpart in Christian truth" (Girard, 1965, p. 61). Dostoyevsky, according to Girard, constantly emphasizes the analogy between the two transcendences, the deviated and the vertical, only this time "in Dostoyevsky's universe deviated transcendency is no longer hidden behind religion" (Girard, 1965, p. 158). For Taylor, however, there is a type of vertical transcendence that manifests itself in the communion that arises in the act of helping the needy mediated by the experience of *agape*. In this way Taylor would read the noble acts that Dostoyevsky speaks of.

relativism of cultural pluralism? Does Taylor's moral realism provide sufficient criteria to discern among competing articulations of the good, once the transcendent source has been displaced? And how can one justify, within modern immanence, that certain moral frameworks are "better accounts" of human moral experience than others?

These questions prepare the transition to the next chapter. In chapter 4, we will turn to Taylor's epistemological strategy as the key to evaluating moral articulations. There we will see how Taylor attempts to reconcile moral pluralism with realism, and how the continuity of *agape* as a constitutive good can still be defended within a framework that acknowledges the diversity and historicity of moral sources.

In any case, the outcome of this first reconstruction of the secularization of *agape* leaves us with a pluralism of moral sources, as well as of views on the goodness of the world and of the individual, resulting in the plurality of ethical approaches today. In chapter 5 we will follow his description of our age as affected by a "supernova effect" (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 300). Added to this is the consensus on the respect and dignity of human beings and historical exceptionalism. We will also see in our reconstruction that this view on the fate of the moral articulation on *agape* will be complemented by a closer attention to the social imaginaries and practices around charity and love of neighbor in each period of history