Introduction

This study has three aims. First, it examines how religious moral sources—above all *agape*—can articulate motivation for altruism within current debates in practical philosophy, especially in dialogue with Charles Taylor. Second, it systematizes Taylor's use of *agape*. Third, it explores how a Christian perspective on moral motivation can enter the plural field of humanitarianism and global solidarity. The central claim is that *agape* provides a distinctive motivational depth that both complements and challenges secular accounts of moral life.

In the first claim, we allude to one of the great open questions in moral philosophy, namely, how to advocate and promote the genuine social impulse towards cooperation and benevolent actions for the common good, but also especially towards those distant who do not belong to one's own society, at a time when the focus is more and more on individual interests (Reder, 2018, pp. 85–91). An illuminating case in point is Jürgen Habermas, who in 2007, during a lecture at the *Hochschule für Philosophie* in Munich, reflected on the contribution religions might make to sustaining human coexistence. At one moment he acknowledged the limits of secular reason in motivating solidarity with the victims of injustice and appealed to religion as a source of support:

> "Likewise, practical reason fails to fulfil its own purpose if it no longer has the power to awaken and keep alive in profane minds an awareness of the solidarity that has been violated worldwide, an awareness of what is missing, of what cries out to heaven" (Habermas, 2008a, pp. 30–31).[1]

Even while insisting that modern societies have good reasons to "turn away from the transcendent," Habermas has repeatedly ac-

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1 ["Gleichwohl verfehlt die praktische Vernunft ihre eigene Bestimmung, wenn sie nicht mehr die Kraft hat, in profanen Gemütern ein Bewusstsein für die weltweit verletzte Solidarität, ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt, von dem, was zum Himmel schreit, zu wecken und wachzuhalten" (translated by S.G.)].

knowledged that Christian traditions remain crucial in counteracting "desolidarization tendencies" (Habermas, 2019a, II, p.807, 2008b, p. 96). His unease illustrates a widespread difficulty: when solidarity relies solely on procedural justice or pragmatic consensus, it risks becoming formal and fragile, unable to generate the affective and existential commitment required to stand with victims of injustice.

He also resonates with the cry that arises from the memory of Auschwitz and the demand for an immanent ethics of compassion grounded in anamnetic reason, as Johann B. Metz reminded him when warning that he had parted too soon from Theodor Adorno (cf. Metz, 2017a, p. 241). Ultimately, he shared Horkheimer's longing for full justice that religion can provide, especially the intuition that in a secularized world we are only left with compassion, indignation at evil, and a lifelong commitment to revolt against it (cf. Horkheimer, 2000; Gordon, 2020; Habermas, 1981a, pp. 411–426, 1991a, 1993). However, he cannot accompany him in his claim that God replaces reason in the unconditional foundation of morality. In this way, he continues the original impulse of critical theory, which aspires to designate or describe injustice even without being able to describe the good. But such a question leaves open how to formulate concepts such as justice, normative rightness or altruism without a vision of the good or the good life (cf. Habermas, 2007, p. 205). But somehow, faced with the question of something to sustain our reaction to pain, Habermas is forced to ask about the substantive and universalizable strength of moral sources that we had left behind:

> "Why should the citizens of a modern society, when they are outraged against injustice, unchecked subordinate or adapt those universalistic standards of morality, which have already arisen with the religious and metaphysical world views of the Axis period, to a particular good, which they supposedly find already realized in their form of life?" (Habermas, 2019b, p. 734).[2]

Thus, faced with the cry of sorrow of those who suffer throughout history, confronted with the injustices endured by our neighbor, the

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2 [Warum sollten die Bürger einer modernen Gesellschaft, wenn sie sich gegen Unrecht empören, jene universalistischen Maßstäbe der Moral, die schon mit den religiösen und metaphysischen Weltbildern der Achsenzeit entstandenen sind, *ungeprüft* einem partikularen Guten unterordnen oder anpassen, das sie in ihrer Lebensform angeblich schon realisiert *vorfinden?* (translated by S.G)].

question of what is the basis of our moral commitment becomes, if anything, more acute and penetrating. Now it is added the awareness of something missing when it comes to motivating altruism, an awareness that "there is a gaping hole here" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 87).[3]

At the heart of this inquiry lies a twofold yet inseparable question: how altruistic action can be both grounded and motivated. Philosophical accounts often distinguish between the ontological grounding of morality—what makes altruism rationally or metaphysically intelligible—and the motivational conditions that move agents to act for the good of others. This study contends that these two dimensions converge in the experience of *agape*. The grounding of moral life in *agape* is not merely explanatory but also transformative: the very structure that discloses the good simultaneously awakens the motivation to realize it. To grasp this unity is to understand why the question of moral motivation cannot be detached from the question of what ultimately grounds the moral horizon itself.

To grasp this unity is to understand why the question of moral motivation cannot be detached from the question of what ultimately grounds the moral horizon itself. Modern moral philosophy, however, has often treated these two dimensions as separate: reason has been charged with justification, while motivation has been left to sentiment, will, or faith. Hence, procedural reason seems compelled to acknowledge that altruism requires substantive foundations, not merely formal rules. From a Kantian standpoint, no further motivation would seem necessary: once the moral law is recognized through universal practical reason, duty itself should suffice to determine the will. Yet the contemporary situation reveals something different —the difficulty of sustaining such moral commitment when its sources of meaning have become opaque. This demand —to give a reasonable account of why we must care for others—runs through many strands of moral philosophy that seek practical, action-oriented responses to human suffering, one of the great philosophical questions of our time (cf. Ricoeur, 1985; Tracy, 2020, pp. 57–91).

In light of this divide between justification and motivation, religion—and Christianity in particular—has once again attracted the attention of social theorists as well as moral and political philoso-

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3 On Habermas' relationship with religion and theology, see (Habermas, 2021; T. Schmidt, 2020).

phers. It appears as a possible locus where the grounding of moral obligation and the sustaining of moral motivation might converge, offering resources that purely procedural or secular frameworks seem unable to provide. It appears relevant when confronting the individualizing tendencies of Western capitalist societies, the erosion of belonging and common good, and the enduring weight of realpolitik in discussions of global justice (cf. Rawls, 2003; Pogge, 2008; Taylor, 2010a; Žižek, 2001). Yet this renewed appeal to religion as a moral source arises in highly secularized societies, whether secularization is understood as the end of metaphysics, the decline of religious practice, the withdrawal of religion from public discourse, or the pluralization of ethical visions of the good life.

In any case, the development of the secularization process has resulted in moral pluralism —especially of ethical visions of the good life—as a consequence of the multiplication of visions on the foundations for morality and the epistemological problems added to it from modernity onwards. As Eva Illouz summarizes, the major difference in moral living in the pre-modern and modern ages is "the disentanglement of love from traditional moral virtues, from moral conceptions of the self and from a social cosmology" (Illouz, 2019, p. 179). However, the shadow of morality linked to religion in culture and the nostalgia for externally induced trust based on a convincing encounter with transcendence is still present in many areas of reflection. Indeed, some ask from agnostic positions how to replace the strength of the love of God as a moral motivator towards caring for others when religion seems to have disappeared, but its legacy remains in the importance given in our civilization to empathy and compassion and generous giving (cf. Drescher, 2019).

For instance, we can find radically different ways of understanding what motivates us to help others without attempting to be exhaustive due to the many authors who have approached this subject (see Kraut, 2020). On the one hand, "self-referential altruism" (Mackie, 1990, p. 184), a type of moral foundation based on the cultivation of self-interest through friendship and the aspiration of each individual for the good, has been in force since antiquity. We also find ancient conceptions of eudaimonia (happiness) or human flourishing, which finds in the Nicomachean Ethics its primary reference (Aristotle, 2009, VIII-IX; see also Price, 2010). Already in the modern era, we find the development of a type of moral philosophy based on

the use of impartial and impersonal reason that would provide us with a type of motivation towards the good of the other based on rational thinking, with a multitude of variants: from Kantian moral deontologist to utilitarianism or Nagel's impersonal point of view (Kant, 1999; see also Chalier, 2002; Esteban Duque, 2020, p. 95; Mill, 2017; Rawls, 2003; Nagel, 2016; Sepúlveda del Río, 2019, pp. 78–95).

Ever since the course of modernity, there have been reactions against this excessively rational and impersonal development of moral motivation by turning attention to some feeling or trust in a proper sense of sympathy, pity, or compassion born of altruistic human nature itself (Hume, 1992; A. Smith, 2002; Schopenhauer, 2007). Even today, there is an attempt to recover a lost metaphysical streak through the encounter with otherness, making ethics the first philosophy (Lévinas, 1989), or searching for the correspondence between divine love and human love, between metaphysics and human experience (Marion, 2002; Vetö, 2020). These efforts are joined by moral and political positions that seek to respond to barbarism and suffering through resistance or the desire for solidarity (Adorno, 1951, 1966; see also Bernstein, 2001; Honneth & Menke, 2006; Rorty, 1989, 2011).

In addition to the possibilities mentioned above, there is the Christian conception of love or the genuine moral motivation towards the love of neighbor hidden behind the *agape* conception. The radical nature of God's love, its gratuitousness, and the generous dynamism in which it introduces the subject remains attractive to many authors as compensation for the excesses of reason (cf. Kierkegaard, 1995; Rosenzweig, 1988). In any case, Christianity has been a fellow traveler and, in many cases, an inspiration or contrasting foundation for many of these approaches. Not least, the moral obligation to the needy beyond even our own circle of interest is part of the Christian heritage that has shaped Western culture. Even many of the authors mentioned have produced alternatives to *agape* in an attempt to precisely understand and adapt its content.[4]

Contemporary attention to *agape* speaks to us of a *return* (Mardones, 1999), of a reawakened "dormant trace" (Vattimo, 1998, p.

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4 As Robert Adams says, "*agape* is a blank canvas on which one can paint whatever ideal of Christian love one favors" (Adams, 1999, p. 136).

79), in a form of nostalgia of its force to be a foundation (if not the cornerstone in history) of moral universalism (cf. Joas, 2021), or of a demand for the spiritual, sacred or sacramental elements of *agape* that philosophy needs to adopt in order to approach the abject, the contingent, the accidental, the weak or the wounded and not fall into the insufficiencies of a human life lived from the schemes of exclusive secular humanism (cf. Kristeva & Vanier, 2011; Kearney, 2016, pp. 93–117). But it is not clear in any case whether *agape* in many of these cases is a gap-filler, whether it is confused with the feeling of sympathy for the needy or with the Kantian respect for dignity, whether it is just another possible explanation for the "selfish" gene of which we are made, or if it is really a spiritualized avatar that comes in support of collective interests, or if, understood in its purity as grace, it does not cease to be a heteronomous moral principle from which to protect oneself and only allow to be inspired by its history and that of the people who have been moved by it. However, the very definition of *agape* is controversial, as are the implications of its definition for moral philosophy, as we will see below.

Such a longing for some sort of substantivity in morals has been called the "post-modernism dilemma in ethics" (Wildes, 1999, p. 309): at a time when the possibility of metaphysics seems to be questioned by many and within a context where a multitude of views on the good life and the basis of right action appear, it seems complicated to construct an ethical framework that transcends particular interests and responds to the great demand for global solidarity and attention to suffering. Furthermore, it is not clear what role *agape* can play, nor even whether it can be experienced in its purity as a source of transcendent origin, in view not only of moral pluralism, but also of the conditions of possibility of belief given the anthropology and naturalistic epistemology that determines our way of being in the world as dwellers of modernity. In any case, the current interest in the Christian conception of neighborly love shows that *agape* can provide important elements in current debates on the relations between the individual and his or her membership in a society, authority, and freedom, and on the way religiosity can inform morality (cf. Söding, 2015, p. 342ff, 2017; see also Brandscheidt, 2018; Luomanen et al., 2017).

1.1. The meaning of agape

As we shall see in more detail, Charles Taylor's approach to the question of how the love of God might ground moral motivation introduces him to the long theological and philosophical tradition that deals with the concept of *agape*. *Agape* is a difficult concept to define because it attempts to capture much of the doctrinal and moral core message of Christianity.

To begin with, *agape* is a Greek term that opens onto the many-sided meanings of love. Ancient Greek, unlike modern Greek or English, distinguishes as many as four terms that today would be encompassed within the meanings given to the word love (cf. Lewis, 1982; Benedict XVI, 2006): *Stergein* (or *storge*), *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. *Stergein* defines the natural affection and appreciation that arises, for example, within family members or within a social unit. *Eros* is the passionate love that seeks union, a love towards an object of desire—in Plato, *eros* explains the desire to attain Beauty (Plato, 2008)—typically understood and encapsulated in sexual desire. However, it is also "the normal drive towards self-fulfillment" (Tillich, 1960, p. 25). On the other hand, *philia*, with a special connection to Aristotelian and Stoic philosophy, refers to the friendly and faithful affection between friends, business partners, or even members of the same society based on mutuality, reciprocity, and cooperation.[5] Finally, *agape* is an appreciative love that, however, does not respond to the value of its object but is a "spontaneous and unmotivated" (Nygren, 1953, p. 85), choosing disinterested action in favor of the well-being of others, often without regard to self-interest.

In contrast to the other uses of love in ancient Greek, there is an inflation in the use of *agape* in the New Testament, where it appears as many as 258 times. It is unclear to what extent the writers of the New Testament used it as a synonym of the other terms referring to love since, in many cases, they can overlap, even when we refer to altruism. But what is certain is that we can detect an interest in

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5 One aspect to note, however, is that contemporary theories of love sometimes need help to distinguish between the different Greek words for the concept of love and the specific modulations to which it refers. For example, in contemporary theories, the distinction between eros and philia tends to blur when referring to personal love (Helm, 2021).

highlighting a novelty in understanding the love of God and the love of men that is significantly different from the previously known Old Testament,[6] rabbinic[7] or Greek[8] conceptions of love and treatment of one's neighbor are well formulated in the Golden Rule and ethics informed by religion.

Agape aims to reflect the historical realization of God's love through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, opening a new dimension of depth in the relationship with humanity. The synoptic tradition has concentrated the message on the double commandment of love

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6 God's love in the Hebrew Bible (*ahab*) tends to excess and copiousness without asking for anything in return. One of the most outstanding characteristics of the Old Testament *ahab* is the emphasis on exclusivity: from among all the nations created and placed in the world by God, He chose Israel as His people (Deut 30:3; 32:36; 2Ch 36:15; Neh 9:27–31, Is 14:1; 30:18; 40:10). The love of neighbor is lived in Israel in a natural, concentric and expanding way—just as he perceives and feels the love he receives from God, who also chooses and makes distinctions—beginning with one's own family, continuing with the Israel people until reaching the closest strangers: "the Israelite begins his social activity at home, loves his people with the same preference with which God loves this people, extends his love to the stranger insofar as he is affiliated with his home and his people" (Stauffer, 1933, p. 38) ["Der Israelit beginnt seine soziale Betätigung im Hause, er liebt sein Volk mit derselben Vorliebe, mir der Gott diese Volk liebt, er dehnt seine Liebe auf dem Fremden aus, soweit er seinem Hause und Volke angegliedert ist (Ex 20,10; 22,20)" (translated by S.G.).](see also Ackerman, 2002).

7 Rabbinic Judaism speaks increasingly of charity towards the stranger and everyone not part of the Jewish people (including God's creatures, animals, and plants). The highest expression of this tendency is the Golden Rule formulated by Hillel: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is the explanation; go and learn." (cf. Allinson, 2003, p. 30).

8 Already the Stoics showed an idea of global solidarity, making no distinction of nation or origin, of those at home and those from abroad, parallel to the classical period of rabbinic Judaism and the first generations of Christians. However, despite giving a divine origin to solidarity with whole humanity, when it comes down to it, it depends on human nature and the rational use of the powers of the soul, but away from emotions and personal relationships: "The universal scope of the golden rule in Stoicism was based on the affirmation that human beings are the offspring of God (Zeus), the universal logos (principle, reason) governing the entire cosmos. Within each person is a spark of divinity, making it possible to realize cosmic truth; and the Stoics equated the divine spark with reason, an equation that has been the hallmark of philosophic rationalism. To do the will of God, therefore, is to be true to one's nature and to act in accord with right reason" (Wattles, 1996, p. 39).

of God and neighbor. The Pauline literature, for its part, emphasized love by integrating it into the eschatological salvific action of God and in the description of the loving relationships that should exist among the members of the community. Finally, the Johannine literature reflects the dynamism of love and grace that starts from God and the relationships within the Trinity, the relationship of the divinity with humanity and the whole created reality and between humanity among itself (cf. Brandscheidt, 2018).

In this regard, it is important to highlight three key points. Firstly, one must acknowledge the diversity of sources and the various approaches towards charity already existing at the time of the appearance of *agape*. At any rate, *agape* stands out as a distinctive concept regarding its scope, demand, and phenomenology of moral motivation. Secondly, from a Christian perspective, love of and for God and love of neighbor constitute the quintessence of love and serve as a foundation for all human relationships. As such, all other loves, like love of family or country or community, stem from it. This differs markedly from contemporary literature on global solidarity, which considers it "a subcategory of either social solidarity or civic solidarity" (Scholz, 2012, pp. 65, 231ff). From an ethical point of view emanating from the New Testament, therefore, it would be the other way around: social solidarity or civic solidarity would be a derivative of global solidarity understood as God's love of creatures and love of neighbor.

And thirdly, the conception of *agape* as a moral motivator is not confined to the sphere of religion and theology but also has connections with ethics, cultural philosophy, social theory, and political theory. Hence the diversity of meanings found in the literature: it can be viewed as self-sacrifice or supererogatory action made for someone else's benefit; a complement to justice or its alternative; equal respect between human beings; unlimited and unconditional love; or as a religious experience of divine love. Ultimately it serves as the basis of universal ethics or a motivator for altruism.

In this sense, it is important to scrutinize the New Testament's passages addressing *agape* to gain deeper comprehension. As previously noted, Jesus draws upon central motifs of the Jewish tradition and rearticulates them in a way that brings their ethical and spiritual depth to the fore. In particular, he highlights the inseparable link— already affirmed in the Torah and reflected in rabbinic formulations

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of the Golden Rule—between the love of God and the love of neighbor, presenting them as two dimensions of a single commandment:

> "Then one of the scribes who had listened to these discussions, and who had observed how well Jesus answered them, asked Jesus, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus answered, "The first is: 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (Mk 12:28–34, cf. Mt 22:34–40).

This passage offers a positive and encouraging formulation of the concept of love without shying away from its more rigorous demands: "ethically, love is for the good that draws one's actions and one's being, and-if Jesus is one's standard-there can be no exclusions in love's application" (Chilton, 2008, p. 77). What is distinctive here is not a rupture with Judaism but a radical insistence on the inner unity of the divine and the human dimensions of love. The appeal to heart, soul, and mind underscores its total character—cognitive, emotional, and moral—transcending any reduction of love to sentiment, mystical experience, or social benevolence alone. In this perspective, the unity of the two precepts also transcends the classical categories of eros and philia, orienting love toward an unconditioned openness to the other.

From the Christian point of view, *agape* is not only exemplified in connection with divinity and among humans, which originates from a theological understanding but is also exhibited through actions. Divine love displays primarily in Jesus' life: his healings and interactions with individuals regarded as sinners, gentiles, or enemies in the society highlight the gratuitous, kind-hearted nature of *agape*. Ultimately, the selfless nature of *agape* is conclusively demonstrated by the Cross at the end of Jesus' life—portraying its primary essence as generous, compassionate, and steadfast without any expectation of reward.

In addition, Jesus imparts the practice of *agape* love through narrating parables, including the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37), which elucidates the nature and extent of neighborly love. In response to an inquiry about who qualifies as a "neighbor," Jesus presents a story highlighting his novel approach. He shows how

agape transcends Torah's concentric hierarchical relationship, which places the law-abiding Jew as the first subject susceptible to receive supportive love and, at most, the stranger who sojourns with oneself (cf. Ernst, 1994, p. 347). By directing the Samaritan's focus toward a wounded man on the margins, Jesus shows that a neighbor is anyone in need near the moral actors. Additionally, Jesus underscores how love for the needy supersedes any consideration, even one's own personal interests. Also, he shows how compassion, understood as an inner affective movement in contact with reality (*splagnizomai*),[9] is above the Law and arises as a paradoxical outcome thereof at the same time.

Moreover, upon analyzing the scene through a first-century lens, it becomes clear that Jesus' novelty was met with confusion and conflict among his audience. The parable exposes the shortcomings of neighborly love at that time, which prevented the priest and the Levite from helping, even when they had sawn the wounded. Instead, Jesus places a Samaritan as an example of the power of *agape* as a moral source through his spontaneous reactions and his moral decisions: he endangered his own life by helping the wounded man in such a generous and untrammeled freeway (cf. Bailey, 2008, pp. 292–293).

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9 ἐσπλαγχνίσθη is third person singular of aorist passive deponent indicative of *splagchnizomai*. It means "the seat of the feelings, affections, especially anger" (Liddell, Scott, Jones, & McKenzie, 1996) or "to have the bowels yearn, i.e. (figuratively) feel sympathy, to pity -- have (be moved with) compassion" (Thayer, 1962, 7:548, 1067). This kind of compassion appears altogether 12 times in the New Testament, 5 in Mt, 4 in Mk, and 3 in Lk. In Mk and Mt, it refers to the compassion that Jesus felt when he saw the multitudes that wandered like sheep without a shepherd, or the compassion when he saw the multitude sick and suffering, or before concrete infirm people that awakened in him this type of compassion (Mt 9:36; 14:14; 15:32; 18:27; 20:34; Mk 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22). Lk also adds the compassion that Jesus felt before the widow whose son was dead (Lk 7:13). Also, Lk offers words of Jesus in which he teaches this compassion through exemplary stories or parables, like this one of the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son (or the merciful Father) (Lk 15:20).

1.2. The puzzle of agape

Beyond our approach to the New Testament, Christian moral theology has continued to discuss the nature of *agape* love over the centuries. Not least, as asserted by Pitrim Sorokin, "religious, ethical, ontological, physical, biological, psychological, and social" aspects are intertwined in this understanding of love (Sorokin, 2002, p.3).[10] Discussions have mainly focused, on the one hand, on whether a human being could love God more than himself and how the love of neighbor and love of self are compatible. On the other hand, there exist competing interpretations of the Good Samaritan's kind of neighborly love, depending on whether one perceives the *agape*-inspired motivation as focused only on a particular relationship or whether behind the Samaritan's behavior, there is a defense of a universalistic morality to love every human being. The multiplicity of ways of understanding love has engendered divergent explications regarding the moral motivation behind *agape* that are fundamentally opposed or alternative at least.

1.2.1. Incarnational love or dialectical love?

With regard to the first set of questions, we can see a contrast between two types of philosophy, depending on the conception of the source of the divine origin of love and its relationship with transcendence. On the one hand, currents closer to Aquinas emphasize a physical origin of divine love that would already be found in immanence itself, based on God's love as Creator of all existing reality and God's love for the human being as an image made in his likeness (cf. Aquinas, 2016; Rousselot, 2001, pp. 82–153). On the other hand, contrasting currents see *agape* as an ecstatic love external to reality itself, highlighting the divine initiative in the movement of love that is transcendent to reality itself and that calls to move away from any hint of self-centered and egocentric love, following the line of St.

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10 In contemporary philosophy *agape* appears in authors as diverse as Paul Ricoeur (1995, 2005), Gianni Vattimo (as 'charity' 1999, 2002; 2012), Alain Badiou (2003, 2012), Slavoj Žižek (2001, 2009; 2005), Julia Kristeva (1989) among others, as well as Taylor (cf. Guanzini, 2016; Depoortere, 2008; Núñez, 2013).

Bernard of Clairvaux (1995; see also Rousselot, 2001, pp. 155–211). For this reason, it is possible to speak of a "sacramental" or "incarnational" approach and a "dialectical" one (Pope, 2013, pp. 141–142), depending on whether or not human love can be transformed to be the bearer of divine love. Or, put another way, the debate revolves around the type and amount of self-love that fits into altruism.

The two accents can be traced throughout history and lead up to the revival of the disputes over *agape* around Anders Nygren's highly influential book, *Agape and Eros* (Nygren, 1953), considered "the beginning of modern treatment of the subject" (Outka, 1972, p. 1). Nygren distinctly sought to emphasize the ecstatic and dialectical nature of *agape* and attempted to carry forward the enterprise of demonstrating, following Luther (2016), that the presence of any self-centered love is a remnant of eros love within Christian theology. For him, early Christianity and the Reformation have been periods in history in which *agape* has shone in its splendor in theological reflection. However, Augustine's translation of *agape* by Caritas and the medieval scholastic disputes result from erroneous syntheses and confusion of motives around love (Nygren, 1953, Part Two). In its purest definition, *agape*, for Nygren the only Christian love, is understood as unconditional, spontaneous, unmotivated, directed towards sinners and enemies, which starts only and exclusively from God, in total opposition to self-love and which is genuinely expressed in the sacrifice of giving oneself to others (cf. Nygren, 1953, pp. 61–159).

In response to this view of *agape*, the literature on *agape* has practically attempted to balance Nygren's radical view (cf. Oord, 2008, 2010a, 2010b). A notable example is that of the Jesuit Martin D'Arcy (1947), who tried to return to the synthesis of the presence of God's love in nature, concerned about the excessive abstraction of the concept of *agape*. The abstraction mutilates every other form of human love that does not fit into pure *agape*. For him, it is important to emphasize that human nature is not impoverished at the expense of grace. On the contrary, it is enriched, enhanced, and transformed without renouncing its nature. In his understanding, *agape* must include both "God's special love and man's response to it as inspired and energized by it" (D'Arcy, 1947, p. 312). In a sense, the key lies in breaking down "the tranquil perfection of St. Thomas's synthesis," leaving more room for compassion and grace.

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In his words, there was a need for "an alien emotion and a more extravagant passion that Aquinas had domesticated" (D'Arcy, 1947, p. 101). D'Arcy's response can even be taken as a response from "commonsense ontology" (cf. Pasnau, 2011) to Nygren's restricted and abstract view.

But this tendency to emphasize *agape's* physical or incarnational aspect brings with it the difficulty of distinguishing *agape* from the other sources. Even more so when a history of the appearance of many of these alternative sources finds connections with the very development of Christian-inspired theology and moral philosophy. Even with the risk of generalizing, the underlining of the interconnection between the love of God and human nature and its ways of loving runs the risk that, in some cases, grace or openness to transcendence can be disregarded to explain the motivation for altruism; alternatively, *agape* can be understood as reduced to a single emotion or a rational maxim of attention to the dignity of any human being. In short, a balance between natural and supernatural is necessary, for, in the words of Karl Barth, "Christian love cannot in fact be equated with any other, or with any of the forms (even the highest and purest) of this other, just as this other love has obviously no desire to be confused with Christian. Nor can Christian love be fused with this other to form a higher synthesis" (Barth, 2007, p. 735).

1.2.2. Specific love or universal love?

On the other hand, when we examine the rich and unbounded inspiration that the parable of the Good Samaritan has had in philosophy, we also find a plurality of interpretations. Specifically, two sets of philosophical problems surround this parable concerning, again, who is a "neighbor" and the scope of the moral obligation to love one's neighbor. Hence, there seem to be two alternative ways of understanding the term "neighbor": either it refers to a special kind of relationship that arises between the Samaritan and the wounded man as individuals, or alternatively, the term neighbor alludes to anyone in need, near or far, with the relation itself between the Samaritan and the wounded man constituting an allegory of universalistic morality. The problem revolves, therefore, between proximity and distance.

The latter is the most common interpretation for those more familiar with the story of the Good Samaritan. For a modern reader, then, the story has a clear moral: do good and practice altruism with anyone who might need it, without excuses, hesitation, delay or prejudice: "Often this parable is simply taken in a general moral sense: if you see someone in the ditch, go and help them" (Wright, 2004, p. 163). Nevertheless, on the other hand, it is easy to hear this parable mentioned to justify any political agenda, from the most conservative and pragmatic to the most activist and progressive (cf. Spencer, 2017). In any case, "the more usual modern view is that the parable is an example story in which the Samaritan shows us a compassion unrestricted by national, racial, or religious barriers" (Nolland & Metzger, 2008, p. 597; see also Söding, Tilly, Bergmeier, Seebass, & Ziemer, 2010, p. 1324). The most paradigmatic case of inspiration from the parable at the social and political level can be found in Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK), who made a reflection on it through collective action, structural analysis, and institutional critique.[11] But there is a leap in the argumentation that goes from the individual example of the Samaritan to a concrete wounded person to the argument in favor of moral universalism that is applied as a basis for collective action and social transformation of injustices.

Without denying the importance of the connection between individual duty and motivation and collective action, some authors appeal to proximity as the central message of the parable, turning attention to the Samaritan's feeling of compassion, the inter-personal encounter, and the duty to help that arises from empathy for the suffering of the other. Ivan Illich, whom Charles Taylor quotes at key points in his work, says that *agape* inaugurates a new form of relationship between the wounded and the Samaritan: a tie that is

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11 In one of his best-known sermons, "A Time to Break the silence," he linked individual moral motivation with the need for organized action-oriented to transform reality: "On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. A true revolution of values will soon look uneasily on the glaring contrast of poverty and wealth" (King, 1991, p. 241).

"voluntary and bodily" (cf. Cayley, 2005, p. 31). For the Samaritan, *agape* appears as an invitation, an inclination, an opening towards a new horizon, distinct from cultural or rational ethical principles, from which to carry out practical action. The Samaritan remains free, continuing to be himself and maintaining his identity, from the moment he feels compassion in his guts until he is immersed in a personal relationship with the wounded person that goes beyond help: "My neighbor is who I choose, not who I have to choose" (Illich, 2005a, p. 51). His action is a response to a call and not to categories. Neither, then, is it easily reducible to rules applicable to any situation. But its freedom does not dent responsibility since that call can be disregarded. The call also remains in the subject's consciousness, "not by a sense of guilt but rather a deep sorrow about my capacity to betray the relationship" (Illich, 2005a, p. 53).[12] For Illich, the centrality of the message of Christianity is found in this parable and its call to proximity. Moreover, to want to see in it useful rational categories for social transformation or even to base the institutionalization of the call to love one's neighbor supposes the corruption of that message.

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12   From another way of understanding *agape* from the point of view of relation, Lévinas would speak of a heteronomy of the Good Samaritan before the face of the wounded. He suggests a type of morality that also starts from the encounter with the Other and not a morality that starts from principles à la Kant (a fabulous comparison of both moral proposals from the point of view of the moral obligation before the stranger in Chalier, 2002). However, in this encounter with the other, the latter reveals himself to be "higher" than the subject. The Other is "one for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all" (Lévinas & Nemo, 1985, p. 89). In that encounter, the face of the Other has an absolute meaning by itself; it is the good in itself and is prior to any principle. Levinas even finds there the transcendence or the trace of the divine, a reference to a supernatural Good. The Other is the gateway to the mystery of God: present and absent at the same time, personal in the face of the Other and inviting to personal responsibility. But that encounter does not give rise to a symmetrical relationship between the Self and the Other, but insists that there is a disproportion. The responsibility of the I for the Thou appeals to an interruption of the Being of the subject, in which Lévinas finds "egoism." It appeals, in short, to a total sacrifice of self. This extreme has been contested by some theorists of the philosophy of *agape*, such as Outka or Davenport, even in the light of this passage from the Good Samaritan: the reciprocity and symmetry between the Self and the Thou need not be narcissistic or contrary to *agape* (cf. Davenport, 1998; Outka, 1972).

In any case, the tension in understanding the *agape* at work in the behavior of the Good Samaritan as either an ethic of distance or an ethic of proximity comes from very far away. In this sense, St. Augustine, without denying the unconditional and universal quality of love of neighbor that is born of charity, establishes that there is an order in the attention to one's neighbor: "all men are to be loved equally. But since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special regard to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstance, are brought into closer connection with you" (Augustine, 2008, I, 28). The priority of some persons over others does not arise from a criterion of prudence, as Aquinas' vision will later complement (cf. 2016), but is rooted in the very order of creation (*ordo amoris*). The *Big Chain of Being* itself, with its hierarchy of goods and its quest for peace in the tranquility of order, also manifests itself in natural human relationships, which expand in a series of concentric circles (cf. Aquinas, 2016). Thus, Augustine suggests that "a Christian could not love every neighbor but should love nay neighbor who happens across her way" (Gregory, 2008, p. 35). In the relationship between the earthly and heavenly cities, the subject has to pursue peace with everyone but apply reason until "God is all in all" (Augustine, 1998, XIX, 14).

At present, debates about the proximity or universalism behind the parable of the Good Samaritan consider other factors while keeping the nature of the question about our responsibility to alleviate the suffering of those who are distant. On the one hand, economic and political globalization, and the development of the means of communication and information bring within our reach knowledge of human suffering in areas far from us. On the other hand, the emergence of institutions and organizations dedicated to charity and care for the worst off in society and the world allows for this new relationship of proximity to remote realities. However, the existence of these organizations raises questions about their use as conscience-cleansers or, in the case of faith-based organizations, about whether they really allow the proximity shown by the Samaritan in the parable (Illich, 2005b, 2018). Moreover, the development of a greater sensitivity to the suffering of those far away, also supported by the development and importance of the protection of Human Rights from the late 18th century onwards, is offset by the insistence of a call

to care for relationships of proximity in a way that counterbalances the dangers of a stark or overly condescending universalism.

In any case, the issue that persists nowadays is how to reconcile the rejection of exclusivism and the affirmation of universalism inherent in the usual reading of the parable while still prioritizing special relations and care for others.[13] As Roger Scruton succinctly summarizes the nature of this dilemma, the questions can be summarized as follows: "When we look to solidarity as a universal motive, and as the solution to the great conflicts that threaten us, are we looking in the wrong place? Ought we to be looking for the small, the local, the committed and the neighbourly, rather than the global, the inclusive and the 'non-discriminatory'?" (Scruton, 2015, p. xiv). Behind these questions is the growing discomfort with the answers given only from reason as applied to morality and the application of universal rules as the only way to respond to the current standards of solidarity instead of the relational and the particular.

The dilemmas of many charitable organizations between fidelity to the charism of closeness to those who suffer and the need to be efficient and relevant to fulfill the mission—sometimes even confusing their goals with the public sector in a welfare state—would be a new way in which this quandary between the particular and the universal occurs. Thus, the question of distance or proximity "is as urgent now as it was when Christ told the parable of the Good Samaritan. And the worst possible answer to it is that which seems to be currently most favoured, namely that the duty of care that we owe to others falls not on us but on the state" (Scruton, 2015, p. xiv).

1.2.3. What a theory of moral motivation grounded in agape must account for?

Having argued that *agape* can unite the grounding and the motivation of moral life, we must now ask what such a theory must actually explain and account for. Today the parable of the Good Samaritan is often read as an emblem of moral universalism, a call to

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13 A summary of the debates on the interpretations of the parable of the Good Samaritan in recent years within the Anglo-Saxon sphere, in (Gregory, 2008, pp. 28–42).

overcome exclusivism. Yet any attempt to ground moral motivation in *agape* must go beyond the phenomenology of this experience and confront the persistent dilemma between the proximity of special relations and the demand for universal love. This tension underlies the contemporary view of *agape* not as a heteronomous command but as a central virtue shaping Christian attitudes and motivating neighbor-love and community building (Outka, 1972; Silverman, 2021). In any case, given the renewed attention to Christianity in moral philosophy, any ethicist who wants to suggest *agape* as a moral source for motivation toward altruism must prove the uniqueness of *agape* without falling into the dangers of fusion with other kinds of love or into extrinsicism.

Whether understood as transcendent grace or as the perfection of human nature, any account of *agape* must clarify how this grounding translates into moral motivation. In this regard, a further requirement of any account of *agape* is that it must clarify its quality as a moral source. In other words, whether it is transcendent to the human being, and therefore unmotivated and only experienceable through an event of grace from which springs a supernatural and meritorious act that is completely distinctive, or whether *agape* is an experience of perfection of human nature itself, created in the image and likeness of God, capable of loving one's neighbor with the same love it has received from God, also through its reason, its feelings, and its will. Even trying to avoid issues specifically of theological anthropology or Christian ethics, an affirmation of *agape* would have to try to respond to the now classic objections to love of neighbor as an unattainable ideal and even harmful to the individual, in Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) or Sigmund Freud (2010), or the vision of a larval individualism in a supposedly disinterested love, in Hannah Arendt (2021) or Theodor Adorno (1979).

Moreover, *agape* has to do with compassion and with "good will" (Aquinas, 2016, q.27, a.2), as shown by the Good Samaritan, but this sentiment should not be confused with mere emotion or with a genetic disposition of the human being toward altruism (Breitsameter, 2010, p. 99). In addition, as we have seen in detail, an account of *agape* as generous and decentered love must clarify what kind of self-love is compatible with it, i.e., whether it is compatible with or contrary to any form of human flourishing. Related to this is

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the necessity or not of supererogatory actions or renunciations of human goods to favor others or achieve a greater good.

Furthermore, God's love influences the configuration of political and social reality (Augustine, 1998; TeSelle, 1998). Conversely, *agape* is related to justice and has had its relevance in the promotion of human rights, inclusion, and the transformation of socio-economic and political-legal institutions (Ricoeur, 1995; Boltanski, 2012; King, 1981, 1991; Cochran, Jr. & Calo, 2017; Iorio, 2014; Min, 2018). But it needs to be clarified to what extent *agape*, as a source of religious content, can participate in the public discourse where criteria of justice are discussed. Moreover, it needs to be clarified to what extent love has primacy over it, is a parallel principle to it, or simply inspires it, and under what circumstances. One of the situations in which *agape* has its place and is in a complex relationship with justice is its application in contexts of forgiveness, reconciliation, and recognition (Tutu, 2000). In any case, an account of *agape* must account for how to understand suffering, violence, and injustice in the world. This question also affects the kind of language that must be employed in the neutral public sphere and whether it admits *agape's* undeniable religious and metaphysical content. In short, a theory of moral motivation grounded in *agape* must show how a religiously rooted conception of love can illuminate, without dominating, the shared moral space of plural societies.

1.3. Taylor on altruism and the role of agape

Having laid the foundations of the debate—both concerning the need for a transcendent grounding of altruism and the challenge of sustaining moral motivation in a secular age—we may now ask how Charles Taylor's philosophy addresses these two dimensions together. Taylor has not been directly concerned with the subject of altruism in his writings; yet, several of his moral analyses touch upon what could be regarded as the anthropological foundations of altruistic behaviour, without ever formulating a normative theory of it.[14] If we were to find a place that summarizes his contribution to

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14 Moreover, there are only a few writings in which Charles Taylor addresses issues specifically and exclusively with solidarity (Taylor, 2007a, 2010a). An informa-

the debate on the grounding of altruism and the basis of motivation towards it, we could use the following quote taken from the context of his reflections on the presence of the sacred after the Disenchantment:

> "We require an ontology with the depth to allow there to be real differences in motivation between 'altruism' and strategy, even unconscious strategy. A mechanistic account can't make room for this. The whole difference must be one in how people feel" (Taylor, 2011a, p. 117).

What is decisive here—and what, in our view, expresses Taylor's most original contribution—is the conviction that the ontological grounding of moral life already carries within itself the power to motivate it. The same ontological depth that makes altruism intelligible also renders it existentially compelling. In our interpretation, Taylor's moral ontology shows that the sources which disclose the good are not merely explanatory frameworks but living wellsprings of moral motivation. Hence, the problem of grounding and the problem of motivation are not two separate questions but two dimensions of a single structure of moral experience. To recognize the good as real is already, in some sense, to feel its pull—to be moved by it.

In particular, the above quotation mentions the need for an ontology that enables us to see the differences between the various forces that move toward altruism. The reference to ontology is part of the characteristic moral realism he defends. For Taylor, human beings relate to each other, move in the world, and make moral decisions considering our position in relation to some notion of the good. However, as he explains in *Sources of the Self*, many moral theories have mutilated and severed the concrete way in which human beings live their moral lives and have failed to attend to the criteria,

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tive overview on Taylor's position on solidarity in (N. H. Smith & Laitinen, 2009). Both authors call Taylor's approach to altruism "moral solidarity" and are critical of Taylor's option for *agape*, which we will examine here. On the one hand, they are of the opinion that he prematurely excludes other sources of motivation. On the other hand, they are skeptical that *agape* is the right choice in a pluralistic society, since this source of motivation would fail in the absence of reciprocity (cf. N. H. Smith & Laitinen, 2009, 64–68). Although Taylor had previously discussed compassion as a primitive moral response (Taylor, 1999a), this analysis does not amount to a systematic treatment of altruism or solidarity, but rather explores the anthropological roots of moral responsiveness.

qualitative valuations, and normative assumptions that underlie our moral decisions, how we human beings understand ourselves, and our motivation toward altruism. Among them, Habermas's own proposal of a discourse ethics, the figure with which we have begun this introduction (cf Taylor, 1989a, pp. 85–88, 1991a; Habermas, 1991b, pp. 119–226).

In his own way, Taylor gives his own version of the postmodern dilemma: the value of human dignity, justice, and benevolence has reached unprecedented levels today, but nevertheless, there is a blindness in the form of an inarticulation of the moral sources, that is, there is little disposition to ask about the ontology and the relation to the good present in our moral predicament. This eclipse of the sources and their articulation results in the inability to be consistent with our moral commitments. In this sense, Taylor points out that we live in a tension, consisting of an increase in the demands for solidarity and attention to those who suffer both near and far from us, while there is a distrust toward reflection on the visions of the good on which our criteria and our moral decisions are based. Not attending to the notion of good, in short, puts us in a situation of not attending to this demand for solidarity or attending to it from moral sources that make us give an insufficient response to the pain of others.

Thus, for Taylor "the issue is what sources can support our far-reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 515). Or, put in other form, "what ontology do we need to make sense of our ethical or moral lives, properly understood" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 618). Taylor's contention, based on the search for the best account of moral behavior and considering the current pluralism of ethical views, is that a theistic view—the one which is based on *agape*[15]—has a potential "incomparably greater" (Taylor,

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15 Although here we will focus only on *agape* as a source of transcendence, it should be noted that Taylor also makes mention of the Buddhist *karuna* or the rabbinic *tikkun olam* as concepts in some sense synonym to *agape*. Regarding *karuna* ('great compassion', Taylor, 2007b, p. 818n23), to which the concept of *metta* is attached ('loving kindness', Taylor, 2011b, p. 18), he means thereby as a reflection of the same paradoxical relationship that *agape* has with flourishing and renunciation, as we shall see in chapter 8: "Buddhism also has this notion that the renouncer is a source of compassion for those who suffer. There is an analogy between *karuna* and *agape*. And over the centuries in Buddhist civi-

1989, p. 518) than humanistic responses to the motivation to love one's neighbor. The following quote, in which Taylor uses clearly confessional language, captures much of his approach to *agape* and, moreover, seems to be a direct response to Habermas "awareness of what is missing:"

> "What is missing, in other words, is a love for human beings as they are, with their faults and weaknesses, even if they are dumb and unattractive. But this would be exactly the love with which God loves people, and which Jesus Christ embodies—a love of which we are capable only by God's grace. A place where, beyond the eclipse of God, transcendence can shine through in this world is therefore the work of people close to God, who bring that love back among people" (Taylor, 2003a, p. 15).[16]

In sum, my interpretation of Taylor's account suggests that the experience of *agape* reveals the unity of moral grounding and motivation: the good discloses itself as lovable, and in doing so, empowers the agent to act in its light. Nevertheless, a number of scholars have contested his theistic argument, claiming that it undermines his moral philosophy as a whole by concealing an apologetic intent in favor of his own faith (Abbey, 2000, pp. 31–33; Allinson, 2003;

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lization there developed, parallel with Christendom, a distinction of vocation between radical renouncers, and those who go on living within the forms of life aiming at ordinary flourishing, while trying to accumulate 'merit' for a future life" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 18, cf. 1999b, pp. 22, 30; for more understanding of karuna as compassion, see Panikkar, 2000, pp. 255–293 specially 276; Peetush, 2018; Thammarongpreechachai, Teerapong, Wongpinpech, & Weinstein, 2021; Kittel, 2011). In addition, Taylor alludes to the Hebrew expression *tikkun olam*, "which we might render as 'healing the world'" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 681), as a positive response to suffering and evil in the world through work and personal commitment. This attitude is also related to transformation beyond human flourishing and as "a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 17, cf. 2016, p. 74; for more detailed guidance on the meaning and moral application of *tikkun olam*, see Dorff, 2007).

16 [Was und mit anderen Worten fehlt, ist eine Liebe zum Menschen, so wie er ist, mit all seinen Fehlern und Schwächen, und selbst wenn er dumm und hässlich ist. Die wäre nun aber genau ejne Liebe, mit der Gott die Menschen liebt, und die Jesus Christus verkörpert—eine Liebe, deren wir nur durch Gottes Gnade fähig sind. Ein Ort, an dem jenseits der Gottesfinsternis die Transzendenz in dieser Welt durchscheinen kann, ist daher das Wirken von Gott nahe stehenden Menschen, die jene Liebe wieder unter die Menschen bringen (translated by S.G.)].

Kerr, 2004; Klevesath & Reese-Schäfer, 2011; Laitinen, 2004, 2008; Lane, 1992; Mulhall, 1996; Rosa & Kern, 2012; Skinner, 1991, 1994). In this work, we take up that debate by focusing on the question of moral motivation toward *agape*-based neighbor-love, seeking to understand it on Taylor's own terms—that is, by both analyzing and assessing his reconstruction of moral realism and his intuition of the greater explanatory potential of *agape* as a moral source capable of meeting the demands of modern solidarity. Our view is that this intuition is indeed plausible when approached phenomenologically, as an account of what it means to experience the motivation to altruism through *agape*.

In any case, the moral argument developed here builds on a renewed form of moral realism: one that approaches the good from a non-anthropocentric perspective while remaining attentive to its expression in human meanings. In this view, the task is to show how subjects interpret themselves and the world when they recognize that the goods they most deeply value exist independently of them. Taylor's proposal, however, has given rise to considerable debate concerning the status of his moral realism, which focuses on human understandings of the good but pays less attention to its objectivity as something independent of the subject—an emphasis typical of traditional moral realism (cf. Sayre-McCord, 2021; Dancy & Hookway, 1986).

As we shall see, the literature is divided between those who understand it to be a *weak* realism, which would simply attempt to account for how individuals experience the goods in their lives, or those who argue that it is a strong realism, stressing the perception that the goods referred to are independent of human beings and the implication of their actual influence on their behavior (cf. Abbey, 2000, pp. 9–54; Gurciullo, 2001; Laitinen, 2004, 2008; Meijer, 2017a, 2018a; Meijer & Taylor, 2020; N. H. Smith, 2002; Thiebaut, 1991). This problem of interpretation becomes particularly acute when we focus on Taylor's phenomenology of moral motivation toward altruism and, above all, on his notion of *agape* as a theistic moral source, by definition open to transcendence (cf. van Buuren, 2014; Rosa, 2011). The fact that Taylor speaks of *agape* in terms of transcendence involves indeed a relationship with a good that exists outside of us, regardless of whether we perceive it or not. In our understanding, the confusion surrounding openness to a source of transcendent

goodness arises from Taylor's lack of clarity about the concept of *agape*, a difficulty compounded by the absence of a systematic treatment of the concept in the secondary literature.[17]

For this reason, our second task is to systematize and understand the concept of *agape* in Charles Taylor's work, both where it appears explicitly and in other parts of his thought where, in our view, it plays an implicit role, as we believe it does in his seminal contribution to the debates around recognition. In any case, the lack of systematization of the concept of *agape* leads us to ponder on his position in resolving the tensions inherent to the abovementioned Christian ethics. In fact, this lack of systematization in this area has caused some theologians to reject the orthodoxy and theological finesse of Taylor's proposal, thereby providing the paradox of being criticized by theistic and non-theistic scholars alike (cf. Hauerwas & Coles, 2010; Hauerwas & Matzko, 1992; Milbank, 2009; see also Kerr, 2010).

For example, in a first approach to the term in his major works, we find that in *Sources of the Self agape* is defined as "grace" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 410), emphasizing its status as a *strong* source transcendent to humans and in dialectical relation with the rest of the sources emerging throughout history. Thus, Taylor ponders his proposal of a moral source that, on the one hand, responds to the demands of his moral realism and, on the other hand, appeals to the religious dimension of the human being. *Agape*, in fact, refers to the love that God has for the human being and for creation: overflowing, gratuitous, and disinterested love. At the same time, it refers to the particularity of neighborly love and altruistic help proposed by Christian ethics (Pope, 2013, p. 138).

However, a first reading of *A Secular Age*, one of Taylor's major works, yields an incarnational and specific image of *agape*. Specifically, *agape*, as a moral source of love of neighbor, attracts Taylor's attention in some allusions to the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37, cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 158, 246, 277, 576, 737–742, 844n39), with which he shows how the motivation toward love of neighbor emulates the love of God, even from a feeling of compassion felt

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17 Although there are references to this concept in several commentators, an attempt to deal directly with it and its systematization can be found in (Heath, 1996, pp. 193–227; Hendrickson, 2022, pp. 45–51; Kühnlein, 2011).

corporeally. *A Secular Age* focuses on lived religion, conceived as a search for fullness, and associates *agape* with a transformation that transcends life and reaches "beyond merely human perfection" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 20).

At the same time, the book seeks to describe the meanings of world and life from a believing standpoint that remains open to transcendence while situated within an *immanent frame*—one *buffered* against the presence of transcendence beyond it. In this regard, we can discern traces of *agape* throughout Taylor's narrative: in his reflections on evil and violence, in his portraits of charismatic figures and leaders of justice, and in his attention to religiously inflected languages that still surface in the public sphere. For these reasons, we shall speak of a distinctively Taylorian approach to transcendence, which we will refer to as *agapeic transcendence.*

Besides, in both mentioned works, the genealogy of modern times plays a fundamental role in Taylor's way of arguing. Thus, in *Sources of the Self*, Taylor shows how modern subjectivity and the importance given to identity has its roots in the different ideas about the human good that have occurred throughout history. In that history, *agape* plays a prominent role, particularly if the point of interest is the reconstruction of the benevolence and tendency to avoid suffering that characterize the modern moral order. On the other hand, in *A Secular Age*, he tries to explain how society and culture shifted from a situation in which it was unthinkable not to believe in God to one in which being a believer is simply one possibility among others and not the most obvious one (Taylor, 2007b, p. 3). Accordingly, a history of neighborly love can be reconstructed, where we go from the spontaneity and relationality of *agape* through a whole series of changes until we reach the institutionalization of aid and the pluralism of current sources.

Here strongly resonates his thesis—borrowed from Ivan Illich (2000; 2005b)—that secularization is the result of the corruption of Christianity through the effort of some elites to reform the lives of Christians and the social order to conform them to the ideals of the evangelical *agape* through institutionalization, especially of the exercise of charity. However, despite some commentators taking this idea very seriously (cf. Lehmann, 2011; B. K. Ward, 2014), it can be shown that this idea is inconsistent with the general argument of his work and with the role that faith-based non-profit institutions

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dedicated to humanitarianism and charity can play in today's secular world.

Taylor's use of history is original, complex and richly nuanced, with repetitions, digressions and explorations outside the main argument—something that will undoubtedly be reflected in our own reconstruction, despite our desire for systematization. Indeed, on some occasions it seems to provide ammunition to those who complain about the length, complexity and density of his works as well as his lack of attention to other non-Western philosophical traditions or, more specifically when referring to *agape* and altruism, to other relevant authors who have reflected on these topics such as Max Scheller, Adorno or Hanna Arendt (cf. Kühnlein, 2011, 2008, pp. 117–126; Klevesath & Reese-Schäfer, 2011).

However, one of the main lines of debate in reading tries to make sense of the dynamics and patterns of development with which Taylor constructs his narrative. In particular, many have pointed to the trace of Hegelian historical dialectics discernible in the background of his reconstruction, noting in the background its tendency to justify the *status quo* of modernity and a certain historical determinism despite its distinction from showing linear and casual historical processes (Angus, 2014; Connolly, 2002; Gordon, 2008; Morgan, 2008; Sciglitano, 2019a; Somma, 2018; Thiebaut, 1991). As we shall see, Taylor has recently made a contribution to this debate with his *History of the Ethical Growth* (2021a, 2022a) where he calls the slow path to ethical universalism of the "space of *agape*," a place where people and higher modes of human fulfillment matter and where "the whole planet, the entire ecosystem is striving, is groaning and travailing to some end: to live up to the demands of the space of *agape*" (Taylor, 2021a, p. 2).

1.4. Taylor and the "catholic attitude"

This quotation, which echoes Rom 8:22, puts us on the track toward what we have called the *catholic attitude* in Taylor and which will put us on the way to the answer to the third of our questions, that is, about the possible role of Catholic thought in the plural realm of humanitarianism and the moral motivation toward altruism in plural society. To define the *catholic attitude*, we have to turn again

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to the debate on the qualification of *agape*. As we see, the number of aspects surrounding *agape* makes the task of clarifying its nature problematic. Any choice can be situated between excess and defect: between incarnate love and dialectical love, between particular love and universal love. But also between the natural and the supernatural, between heteronomy and autonomy, between the transcendent and the immanent, and between justice and the good. All these areas are relevant to Christian ethics. Indeed, history of theology and philosophy is full of attempts to respond to the dilemmas of *agape* that have fallen into the oversimplicity of explanations that fail to cover some of these dilemmas or fall into the most unintelligible abstraction far detached from real moral experience.

Thus, when we affirm that there is a *catholic attitude* in Taylor, we speak of a paradigm instance that allows us to affirm the extremes of the poles without denying the opposite, showing an openness to find truth, good or beauty in whatever form it may present itself. As Richard McBrien expresses, "As its very name suggests, Catholicism is characterized by a radical openness to all truth and to every authentic value" (McBrien, 1994, p. 1190). By attitude we mean a form of "Catholic distinctiveness" (McBrien, 1994, p. 9), of "Catholic conscience" (Adam, 1946, p. 13), of "intimate intelligence" (Lubac, 1988, p. 18) that forms a series of instincts and awareness with which the faithful subject engages in philosophy without undermining the plausibility or otherwise of his theses or the accent and influences contained in his work. By instincts and awareness we mean a predisposition or mentality of openness and humility that admits that there is some truth in the diversity of opinions and that they are all part of a unity or totality. As expressed by Yves Congar, a theologian well read by Taylor (cf. Taylor, 2013a, 2020a, pp. 79–94), the catholicity of the Church, as an attitude expressed in the Church, "is the dynamic universality of her unity, the capacity of her principles of unity to assimilate, fulfill and raise to God in oneness with Him all men and every man and every human value" (Congar, 1939, p. 117).

Such an ability to seek inclusivity and universality is embodied in simple ideas that are part of the fund of Catholicism: "the 'both/and' principle, and a deep concern for unity" „ (O'Collins, 2017, p. 106; cf. Francis, 2013, p. §217–237). As McBrien expresses, the *catholic attitude* we are trying to define

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"is a comprehensive, all-embracing, *catholic* tradition, characterized by a *both/and* rather than an *either/or* approach. It is not nature *or* grace, but graced nature; not reason *or* faith, but reason illumined by faith; not law *or* Gospel, but law inspired by the Gospel; not Scripture *or* tradition, but normative tradition within Scripture; not faith *or* works, but faith issuing in works and works as expressions of faith; not authority *or* freedom, but authority in the service of freedom" (McBrien, 1994, p. 1190).

Leading this approach to *agape*, a *catholic attitude* affirms both incarnate and dialectical love, particular and universal love, vertical and horizontal, mystical and diaconal. The attitude to which we refer denies the excesses of a univocal assertion but affirms all the visions to reach the unity that Jesus expressed in his twofold commandment to love God and the neighbor.

Therefore, when we refer to a *catholic attitude* we do not speak of prejudices or mental reservations; by catholic we do not mean here a set of norms and dogmas that form part of a creed, nor a program of human and social reforms inspired by a kind of *Christian spirit*, nor do we even want to mention a set of traditions or a particular conception of the Church in its relationship with History or the State. By *catholic attitude* we do not mean to confine ourselves to the set of characteristics that advocate a clear line of demarcation of the Catholic Church with respect to all other expressions of Christianity, nor do we enter into the debate whether Catholicism, as a historical form, needs to be offset by other forms of Christianity, such as Protestantism. Nor do we pretend to find some substrate or intrinsic quality expressed in beliefs invariably expressed throughout history by the Catholic Church as a kind of *catholic substance*.[18]

In any case, the *catholic attitude* can also be found in some of the characteristics that attempt to describe what are the proper accents of Catholic thought palpable both in theology and in philosophical thought as "positive determination" of the catholic "*forma mentis*"

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18 Paul Tillich referred to the dialectic between the "Catholic substance" (the sacerdotal) and the "Protestant principle" (the prophetic), so that Protestantism denies the Catholic tendency to consider certain figures, such as saints or sacred ministers, or institutions as little less than incarnations of the divine. On the other hand, "Catholicism, by its very existence, reminds Protestantism of the sacramental foundation without which the prophetic-eschatological attitude has no basis, substance and creative power" (Tillich, 2020a, p. 238).

(Cordovilla, 2019, p. 189).[19] Following McBrien largely (1994, pp. 1196–1199), catholic values can be summarized as sacramentality, mediation, communion, sense of history, and Christian realism. First, through sacramentality, the *catholic attitude* tries to express the conviction that the divine also manifests in material reality within the order of creation. Second, the principle of mediation maintains that the divine is present in persons, communities, events, and institutions with a transforming power of reality and injustices. Third, a sense of communion underlines the social character of the relationship with God and with one's fellow human beings. Fourth, respect for history and continuity, recognizing that we are products of the past and shapers of our future, collaborators with divinity in the transformation of creation. And finally, what McBrien with Bernard Lonergan calls "Christian realism," which sees the world as full of meaning and in dynamic relation to grace, thus rejecting both the naive empirical realism of a world apprehensible only by the senses and idealism, whether it rejects the possibility of knowing things in themselves, or admits that it is possible in the identity of thought and being, or sees reality as configured by ideas and structures that underlie it (cf. McBrien, 1994, pp. 1192–1196; Lonergan, 2016).

Ultimately, we find a similar *catholic attitude* and some of these values, characteristics, accents, or marks in Charles Taylor.[20] He himself is a self-confessed Catholic and describes the same simple principles as part of what it is to be Catholic, in his words: "comprising both universality and totality" and "unity through difference as opposed to unity through identity" (Taylor, 1999b, p. 13). He understands catholicity not as "innate virtue but a task" (Taylor, 2020a, p. 91). On numerous occasions, Taylor has committed himself to this task by trying to defend a truly Catholic Church, embracing

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19 A good synthesis of this search for the characteristics of catholicity can be found in (Dulles, 1984).

20 We make this assertion in the face of other interpretations that tend to understand some of his positions, even those that point to that dynamic between unity and diversity, as too much influenced by G.W.F Hegel (cf. Thiebaut, 1991; Somma, 2018) or drawing on a pragmatic attitude (cf. Joas, 1996; Nagl, 2011). The influence of both tendencies on Taylor is undeniable, just as we can find traces of phenomenology and hermeneutics in his interests in identity, subject, and language, of neo-Romanticism in his aesthetics, or of communitarianism in his political theory, to point out just a few.

everyone and all reality, rather than as affirming a system of truths or interested in the adoption of her message by all.[21]

Yet beyond his interest in the visible Church today, we find in Taylor's understanding of *agape* a *catholic attitude* prevails. As we have shown and will show in this study, Taylor's thinking on *agape* is fragmented and sometimes inconsistent. That is, although we will find many of the elements required of an account of *agape* throughout his writings, it is difficult to discern a description of the dynamics between incarnational and dialectical love, between specific love or universal love, and in short, theologically speaking, between nature and grace. Even the concept of *agapeic transcendence* that we will develop may not resolve the tension between transcendence/immanence, except descriptively. Part of this problem is explained by the fact that he does not work in the field of Christian Ethics, so that in his treatment of *agape* he is not closed to its epistemological and methodological assumptions and current debates.

However, we argue that the *catholic attitude* prevails regarding *agape* and its role as a moral motivator and social transformer. The "both/and" characteristic of the *catholic attitude* is evident in its desire not to mutilate anything of human experience, not even violence or heroism, or in the pursuit of a religious experience proper to the *via media*, such as that of St. Ignatius of Loyola or St. Francis de Sales. Even in his *Best Account* argument, which attempts to prove the bigger explanatory potential of moral realism, a certain connection could be found with the idea of a catholicity that embraces the universality of human expression, then "nothing authentically human, whatever its origin, can be alien to her" (Lubac, 1988, p. 297).

On the other hand, as we will show, *agape* as the moral source of neighborly love plays a fundamental role in Taylor's thought. This is so both in proposing his ethical realism as opposed to procedural ethics and utilitarianism, in his development of the history of the moral sources of altruism, and implicitly in his theory of recognition. Informed by the *catholic attitude*, the above will lead us to understand Taylor's proposal as a model of Catholic thought on

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21 Some examples of Taylor's insights on the Church nowadays can be found in (Taylor, 1999b, 2008, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2017a, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b, 2021b, 2023).

the foundation of altruism valid for the conditions of contemporary moral life and as a mode of dialog with secular culture. The chapters that follow pursue this intuition in a systematic way. They trace how the concept of *agape* shapes Taylor's moral realism, his genealogies of modernity, and his reflections on recognition and transcendence. Each chapter takes up a different facet of this dialogue between Christian and secular moral sources, showing how the grounding and motivation of altruism can converge in Taylor's thought.

1.5. Outline of the study

This book explores how the concept of *agape* operates in the philosophy of Charles Taylor and how it sheds light on the problem of moral motivation in a secular age. Building on the insight that the grounding of moral life and its motivation converge in the experience of *agape*, the chapters follow this tension through Taylor's moral realism, his genealogies of modernity, and his reflections on religion and transcendence.

The analysis unfolds in eight chapters. It follows the five types of arguments that Melissa Lane (1992, p. 46) identified in *Sources of the Self*—phenomenological, transcendental, best-account, historical, and normative—while also engaging Taylor's reflections on social and political life, where the traces of *agape* emerge most clearly. Chapters 2 to 5 and Chapter 8 correspond broadly to these five arguments. They explore, respectively, Taylor's moral realism, his phenomenology of moral experience, the genealogy of modernity, the best-account argument, and his treatment of religion and transcendence. Chapters 6 and 7 extend the inquiry to two fields where the dynamics of *agape* become socially visible: the relationship between charisma and institution in faith-based humanitarian organizations, and the politics of recognition. Together, these chapters map the presence and significance of *agape* throughout Taylor's work and within the major debates that surround it. Particular attention is given to Taylor's conception of moral realism and its ontological commitments, the nature and scope of the best-account argument, the influence of Hegelian dialectics on his genealogical method, the normative implications of identity and recognition politics, and his

approach to religion and transcendence as dimensions of the search for fullness.

Chapter 2 examines *agape* as both a constitutive good and a motivational source, tracing the reconstruction of Taylor's moral realism primarily through *Sources of the Self*. The discussion unfolds along the phenomenological line of argument, since Taylor's ethics is grounded in how human beings experience moral life. The moral experience illuminated by *agape* centers on benevolence, global solidarity, and the incommensurability of moral goods—issues that raise, from the outset, the question of whether genuine altruism entails sacrifice for the sake of others. The chapter also revisits debates over the ontological strength or weakness of Taylor's moral realism and concludes by engaging Enrique Dussel's critique from the perspective of the Philosophy of Liberation, which questions whether Taylor's account privileges the subject over the concrete call of the other.

Chapter 3 turns to a historical reconstruction of what might be called the secularization of *agape*—the transformation of its meaning through the multiplication of moral sources that sustain altruism in modernity. Drawing again on *Sources of the Self*, the chapter traces a series of "slippages" that mark shifts in the substantivity of moral sources across history. Because Taylor defines *agape* in terms of grace in that work, a central question is whether his secularization thesis entails a collapse of the supernatural into purely immanent accounts of morality. The chapter also examines Taylor's interpretation of major figures such as Augustine, Descartes, Shaftesbury, and Kant, and explores key moments in his narrative, from the Victorian era to Romanticism and the Expressionist movement.

Chapter 4 explores Taylor's Best Account argument as a way of defending moral realism and, *mutatis mutandis*, the theistic proposal of *agape* as the most plausible explanation for moral motivation toward neighbor-love. The chapter also brings Taylor's realism into dialogue with Hartmut Rosa's theory of resonance, using the Good Samaritan as a shared paradigm of responsive relationality. The discussion revolves around the importance—or not—of adopting ontological commitments when articulating moral motivation, and addresses whether Taylor's interpretation of *agape* can be understood merely as a romantic inspiration, given his sympathy with that tradition.

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Chapter 5 returns to the historical argument to reconstruct the story of the secularization of *agape*, this time through Taylor's genealogy in A Secular Age. Following Talal Asad's suggestion that secularization is best approached indirectly (cf. Asad, 2003, p. 67), the chapter traces Taylor's exploration of the changing social imaginaries of poverty, charity, and human solidarity, examining how alternative moral sources have emerged alongside *agape* throughout history. The discussion highlights both Hegelian and Foucauldian influences in Taylor's historical method, with particular attention to his later reflections on the "history of ethical growth"(cf. Taylor, 2021a, 2024, pp. 553–587) and the gradual universalization of moral concern.

Chapter 6 departs from Lane's schema to focus on Taylor's provocative claim, influenced by Ivan Illich, that the secularization of *agape* represents a "corruption of Christianity" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 158), influenced by his reading of Ivan Illich (2005b). Indeed, we find his statement striking in his narrative and conflicting with other expressions of his thought that do not reject the institutionalization of *agape* yet draw attention to the dangers of its codification. Building on Illich's distrust of charities, we will attempt to reconstruct Taylor's vision of civil society and the role of NGOs in the social and moral imaginary of our time. Exploring Taylor and his notion of *agape-network*, we will discuss the contribution of faith-based organizations in the humanitarian sector and secular society and the untranslatability of religiously inspired language in the political and social sphere, especially when it comes to motivation towards altruism.

Chapter 7 turns to the politics of recognition, another area where *agape* plays a formative role. Engaging authors such as Axel Honneth, Luc Boltanski, and Paul Ricoeur, this chapter rereads Taylor's Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition" (Taylor, 1992a) through the lens of *agape*, recovering the normative elements of moral realism and hermeneutical openness that stem from Christian neighbor-love. It highlights attitudes such as generosity, dialogue, and self-renunciation as potential correctives to the rigidity of contemporary identity politics and as resources for renewed solidarity.

Chapter 8 returns to the normative argument to explore *agape* as a concept explicitly linked to religion and transcendence. The notion of *agapeic transcendence* introduced here encapsulates Taylor's dis-

tinct way of approaching transcendence from within an immanent frame. The chapter revisits his dialogue with Martha Nussbaum and Friedrich Nietzsche in *A Secular Age* and outlines how Taylor's later writings interpret transcendence through moral exemplars, admiration, and the subtle languages of faith.

The concluding chapter offers an assessment of Taylor's recovery of *agape* as a motivational source for charity. It argues that Taylor's attention to the ontology behind solidarity and his account of *agape* as a moral source with higher motivational potential remain compelling, even within a secular age. Yet a gap persists between his theory of constitutive goods and a full-fledged theory of action—one that, if bridged, would strengthen his own Best Account argument. The conclusion also clarifies Taylor's position on the two tensions inherent in *agape*—its relation to human flourishing and the possible renunciation of worldly goods—and interprets these through what we have called the *catholic attitude*, a disposition that illuminates both the strength and the ambivalence of *agape*. Finally, the book points to several areas where neighbor-love inspired by *agape* can still make a positive contribution today: in the motivation of humanitarian workers and volunteers, in the identity and social mission of faith-based organizations, and in the work of reconciliation after political and social conflict. The result is an image of how the Christian motivation to love the neighbor continues to shape the plural moral landscape of modernity—and how, in a profound sense, *agape* fills the awareness that there is something missing.