

8. Agapeic Transcendence

Throughout our study, we have referred to transcendence as a key to understanding *agape* in Taylor's usage. A dedicated examination is therefore needed to clarify *agape's* distinct nature as a moral source, its ontological specificity, and its transformative power within Taylor's framework. This problem was clearly seen in both the examination of moral realism and in the history of the secularization of *agape*, for *agape* differs from other immanent sources by the transformation brought about by its openness to transcendence. Moreover, delving into transcendence should help us to better understand how *agape* functions as a moral motivator.

In this chapter, we will approach how Taylor explicitly comes closer to the definition of transcendence, especially in *A Secular Age*, where we will see its linkage with concepts such as transformation or the afterlife. Regardless of the endless debate surrounding the relationship of transcendence and imminence in Taylor, we will examine it from the category of *catholic attitude*. Moreover, we will examine Taylor's central dialogue debate with Martha Nussbaum and Friedrich Nietzsche on transcendence and fullness by refocusing it on our main question: the love of the neighbor from *agape*. As we will see, we will not get much clarity in Taylor's explanation of what we will call *agapeic transcendence*, agreeing with many of his criticisms. In any case, we will examine Taylor's dialogue debate with Martha Nussbaum and Friedrich Nietzsche on transcendence and fullness, however, by refocusing it on our main question, that is, on the love of the neighbor from *agape*. Finally, we will mention several important points of Taylor's later works better to understand *agape* and its relationship with openness to transcendence: the invitation to use indirect hermeneutics as a way of using reason in the domain of faith and human meanings, the importance of morally exemplary charismatic characters and the use of what he calls *subtler languages*.

8.1. The concept of transcendence according to Taylor

Defining transcendence is always a dicey ground in both philosophy and theology. The search for *transcendence* in the history of philosophy is associated with the search of human beings for the substratum of reality. *Transcendence* and *immanence* are correlative terms, and their definitions, therefore, must also be associated with each other: if tangible reality is characterized as *immanence*, the term *transcendence* would be its correlative as that which is beyond that reality. Throughout the history of ideas, there have been different ways of understanding transcendence: “Transcendence can be described as God, the absolute, Mystery, the Other, the other as other or as alterity, depending on one’s worldview” (Kolmer, Wildfeuer, Krings, Baumgartner, & Wild, 2011, p. 1540; see also Dalferth, 2012, pp. 147–153; Stoker, 2012; Poláková, 1995, pp. 16–24).

Rather than rehearsing these typologies in detail, what matters for our purposes is how Taylor seeks a notion of transcendence grounded in lived self-interpretation. By using *transcendence*, Taylor tries to find a generic term to give an account of religion as it is lived by individuals, that is, from the perspective of the self-interpretations with which individuals try to understand themselves and “give meaning” (cf. Abbey, 2010, p. 10; see also Taylor, 1977b, 1985p, 1985d, 1985q, 2003b, 2012b). By “give meaning,” Taylor does not refer to the linguistic meanings contained in a religious creed or morality but rather refers to the hermeneutics of the “life meaning,” the “meaning for us,” the “landscapes of meanings” that are part of human understanding (cf. Taylor, 2016, pp. 216–219). In that way, he tries to avoid engaging in debates concerning philosophical theology or onto-theology.²¹⁵ This is why the whole question around belief and unbelief is approached from the articulation of the conditions

215 However, in *A Secular Age*, we find a reference to postmodernism and its moral motivation towards the good with the stranger based on universal human dignity: “the farther one moves to a ‘post-modern,’ ‘anti-humanist’ position, the more a passionate commitment to universal rights is without grounding in the nature of things, and without hope of reward or fulfillment, the more unmotivated in traditional terms this commitment is, as with Derrida for instance, then the more it is plainly powered by a sense of dignity, the sense of a demand laid on us by our very lucidity” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 695, see also 586).

of moral and spiritual experience, not from the specific normative content of these experiences, whether believing or not:

“In order to get a little bit clearer on this level, I want to talk about belief and unbelief, not as rival *theories*, that is, ways that people account for existence, or morality, whether by God or by something in nature, or whatever. Rather what I want to do is focus attention on the different kinds of lived experience involved in understanding your life in one way or the other, on what it’s like to live as a believer or an unbeliever as a first rough indication of the direction I’m groping in, we could say that these are alternative ways of living our moral/spiritual life, in the broadest sense.” (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 4–5).

Notwithstanding, he regards this as only a provisional, even “prudent (or perhaps cowardly)” understanding of religion (Taylor, 2007b, p. 15), acknowledging the need to find, perhaps, a better one in the future (cf. Taylor, 1999e). Despite that, he fits the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence, typical of the “particular Civilizational site of the former Latin Christendom” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 21), into his definition of religion. Thus, he speaks in a traditional way about the idea of

“an immanent order in Nature, whose working could be systematically understood and explained on its own terms, leaving open the question whether this whole order had a deeper significance, or whether, if it did, we should infer a transcendent Creator beyond it” was “the great invention of the West” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 15).

In any case, transcendence and immanence are examined from the perspective of moral articulations. What interests him, therefore, is how the world is lived in our social imaginary, especially in the contemporary world, where a closure to transcendence coexists with a discomfort within the immanent, due to the fragility of sense, the monotony of life, and the emptiness of everyday life (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 299–321). Against this modern malaise, it makes sense that Taylor speaks of religion from how believers and unbelievers give meaning to their lives, that is, from what frameworks or imaginaries they understand themselves. Taylor finds the universal presence in the moral and spiritual experience of every human being that is the search for fullness:

“We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity,

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or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 5).

Fullness, then, brings together a moral and spiritual aspect that unfolds in the meaning we give to our life or certain aspects of it and, at the same time, to some kind of activity, place, or condition that leads us to use terms such as deeper, richer, more admirable. To speak of fullness in these terms, in any case, opens the door to transcendence (cf. Halsema, 2012; Schweiker, 2014; Liebsch, 2018). Thus, it links the discussion of the goods and ways of living with the sources of fullness in a way that these do not become alternatives to modern values but as a possibility in the face of the lack of articulation of modern goods and their relevance in making ethical claims (cf. Sciglitano, 2019b). Taylor accepts and reconstructs in his historical narrative why we have arrived at a plural and secular age in which both moral sources and sources of meaning have multiplied. In that sense, he concedes the plausibility of experiencing fullness from a non-transcendent source. By all accounts, it is within the parameters of fullness that Taylor understands transcendence: “instead of asking whether the source of fullness is seen/lived as within or without, [...] we could ask whether people recognize something beyond or transcendent to their lives” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 16).

If the answer is positive, and if *agape* is what we are referring to, then Taylor introduces a way of understanding fullness that is distinctive with respect to other ways. Taylor speaks of “transformation.” The uniqueness of this kind of experience of fullness links with his twofold conception of religion. On the one hand, religion as openness to transcendence refers to the belief in a force that is beyond life. On the other hand, such a force is accompanied by “the connected aspiration to a transformation which goes beyond ordinary human flourishing” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 510).

The second criterion distinguishes between transformation and human flourishing. While the latter refers, simplistically, to human development “with no relation to anything higher” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 151), transformation, as Taylor understands it, is what we can call *agapeic transcendence*.²¹⁶ We are dealing with a form of transforma-

216 The term “agapeic transcendence” is taken from (Vanheeswijck, 2012). Many references to this way of understanding transcendence from *agape* are found

tion that may be understood in terms of the dynamics of renouncing *life-goods* for the sake of a greater good, a *hypergood*, motivated by the articulation of a *constitutive good*. However, in the context of openness to transcendence within moral and spiritual life, it can be understood that by Transformation he refers to the moral predicament of the spiritual experience of *agapeic transcendence*: “the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 20).

Indeed, we already referred to transformation as a distinctive feature of *agape* earlier when we spoke of the secularization of *agape*, more specifically, to the difference between Christianity and the neo-stoicism of Justus Lipsius. He also alluded to this transformation in *Sources of the Self* when referring to Dostoyevsky, who brings together the central idea of transformation through the love of God of the Christian tradition. (Taylor, 1989a, p. 452).²¹⁷

The transformation is coupled with the aforementioned openness to *beyond life*.²¹⁸ In this way, the transformation that *agape* suggests

in the thought of William Desmond, for whom God is the “agapeic transcendence” (Desmond, 1995, p. 195; see also 2008; Duns, 2020). On the relation of transcendence, *agape*, and the sacred in Taylor, it is worth reading his dialogue with Richard Kearney (2016, pp. 76–92).

- 217 Dostoevsky is perhaps one of the authors who has most influenced Taylor throughout his career and in shaping his Christian faith (Taylor, 2020a, pp. 59–78). Taylor himself affirms this when he acknowledges that his theistic perspective or openness to transcendence owes much to the dramas and characters presented by the Russian author in some of his novels, especially *The Brothers Karamazov* (Dostoyevsky, 2002). As he said in *Sources of the Self*, Dostoevsky “has framed this perspective better than I ever could here” (Taylor, 1989a, p. 518). For parallels between Taylor and Dostoevsky, see (B. K. Ward, 2014).
- 218 Roberto Esteban Duque distinguishes five distinct aspects in Taylor’s concept of transcendence: “first, going beyond; second, positioning oneself from a new point of view from which the existing order of the world is questioned; third, putting under the critical prism the formulations in use in the world, putting oneself beyond in order to make an evaluation; fourthly, to assume the implicit universality, that is, the possibility of weakening the link with one’s own community in order to generate new ways of thinking, practicing philosophy and living religion; finally, transcendence expresses the possibility of opening up to a way of being in life and in the world where something beyond opens up for the human being, moving from human prosperity alone

comes from outside the subject and takes him beyond himself, beyond life, and beyond human flourishing. In his own words:

“I want to focus (...) also on the perspective of a transformation of human beings which takes them beyond or outside of whatever is normally understood as human flourishing, even in a context of reasonable mutuality (that is, where we work for each other’s flourishing). In the Christian case, this means our participating in the love (*agape*) of God for human beings, which is by definition a love which goes way beyond any possible mutuality, a self-giving not bounded by some measure of fairness. We grasp the specificity of this belief only by taking it from two sides, as it were, in terms of what it supposes as a supra-human power (God), and in terms of what this power calls us to, the perspective of transformation it opens” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 430)

Once again, Taylor’s nuance about *agape* is much broader than the appeal to grace, self-denying love, and the invitation to supererogatory acts. The route of contact with an external moral source remains, but with the added meaning of *beyond*. This qualifier alludes, on the one hand, to an eschatological aspect of hope in a life beyond the biological one (Taylor, 2007b, p. 20). But, on the other hand, also an openness to the meaning of one’s own life by turning to experiences and narratives open to transcendence. In a way, it is to move from “first person” narratives, where experiences have meaning only for me and what moves me, to the perspective “in the second- or third-person,” where we speak of meaning as something obtained in dialogue and encounter with something external to me (cf. Taylor, 2016, p. 183). Here is what lies behind the transformative experience of *agape*, of God’s love, which opens the way to the encounter with the other and the love of the neighbor, as well as the transformed

as a goal to a salvation of complete virtue” (Esteban Duque, 2020, p. 95; cf. Sepúlveda del Río, 2019, pp. 78–95). [“primero, ir más allá (going beyond); segundo, posicionarse desde un nuevo punto de vista desde el cual se cuestiona el orden existente en el mundo; en tercer lugar, poner bajo el prisma crítico las formulaciones al uso del mundo, ponerse en un más allá para evaluar; en cuarto lugar, asumir la globalidad implícita, es decir, la posibilidad de debilitar el vínculo con la propia comunidad para generar nuevos modo de pensar, filosofar y vivir la religión; finalmente, transcendencia expresa la posibilidad de apertura a un modo de estar en la vida y en el mundo donde se abre un más allá para el ser humano, pasar de la sola prosperidad humana como meta a una salvación de virtud completa” (translated by S.G.)].

possibility of conviviality and reconciliation between human beings and warring communities (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 736–744).

If we look closely at *agape* from the perspective of moral motivation, transcendence is both the origin and the goal, as we already saw talking about the phenomenology of the action of the Good Samaritan. In words that we already visited, “*agape* is both path and destination” (Taylor, 2007a, p. 604). That is, what is sought with *agape* is not the right motivation for achieving an act that was previously judged as just or good, as in the Kantian morality of duty. Rather, what is pursued by being motivated by *agape* is to be more in contact with the love of God through acts and attitudes as the meaning of one’s life.

Taylor also describes *agape* phenomenologically as a “call,” a gentle pressure by which divine love invites a response (Taylor, 2007a, pp. 20, 739). This call generates a “movement of love,” a desire to participate in what is given (Taylor, 2007a, p. 81). Although such language may evoke Levinas’s account of transcendence as relation to the Other, Taylor rejects a heteronomous reading: the call is always mediated through the subject’s own self-interpretations. Hence *agape* operates bidirectionally—toward the transcendent, as origin and goal, and toward the immanent, as the source of moral motivation that moves the agent beyond self-enclosure.

Moreover, in the case of *agape*, compassion toward the stranger is reinforced by a bodily experience, described as embodied pity, as moving “outward from the guts” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 115), as a reaction “in the bowels” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 741), as we already mentioned before. Such a bodily reaction is captured in the New Testament verb *splangnon*, used by Taylor in its middle voice, *splangnizesthai*.²¹⁹ In Taylor’s view, the incarnational movement of *splangnizesthai* enables the new compassion-based interpersonal relationships of *agapeic*

219 This is indeed how the compassionate movement of Jesus is described in the Gospels, as distinctive and qualitative of divinity. The verb appears in diverse inflections, for example, in Jesus’ encounter with the widow who lost her son (Lk 7:14), when he is moved by the death of Lazarus (Jn 11:33–34) in the story of the prodigal son (Lk, 15:20), when Jesus saw the hungry multitudes following him (Mt 9:36, 14:14; 15:32; Mk 8:2), around several healings (Mt 18:27, Mt 20:34; Mk 1:41; Lk 7:13), certainly also in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:33) and elsewhere in the Gospel. It is, therefore, an incarnated response to the pain of the other from an inward affection that becomes the model for forming the *agape-network* of which we spoke earlier.

transcendence, not the “excarnation” of agency, rules, and rational standards (cf. Redick, 2018; Kühnlein, 2019, pp. 138–141).

Through participation in *agape*, new social horizons are also achieved “fitted together in a dissymmetric proportionality (...) which comes from God, which is that of *agape*, and which became possible because God became flesh” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 739). In Taylor’s understanding, this incarnational perspective of the morality of compassion provides a rediscovery of how “life in our natural surroundings, as well as bodily feeling, bodily action, and bodily expression, can be channels of contact with fullness” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 766). Fullness, here understood as the impulse towards something greater, beyond life and profoundly transforming human life, inter-human relations and social coexistence.

In taking stock of this vision of *agapeic transcendence*, Taylor is making a central argument of his philosophy and even of his own Christian point of view. By appealing to what is beyond life, transformation beyond fulfillment, he tries to eliminate the dangers of exclusive humanism and atomistic, reductionist, or excarnated anthropological versions of human nature and its moral, political, artistic, and religious expressions. However, it is not just a matter of pious considerations and of presenting his own way of living his faith.²²⁰ Indeed Taylor admits that *agape* “cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 701).

8.1.1. The eschatological perspective of agape

One of the fragilities of the *agapeic transcendence* concept is that it can only be posited from the standpoint of faith. Although Taylor fights for the normalization of religiously based motivation and even has an open and generous position towards the use of reasoning with theological content in the public sphere (cf. Taylor, 2011a; Taylor & Habermas, 2011), the truth is that the potential of *agape* can only be felt and unveiled in its completeness by those who are already on a moral map oriented towards the transformation of

220 Richard Bernstein eloquently describes it as “nondogmatic (...), open to new forms of lived experience, flexible, pluralistic, and sensitive to the political and social conditions of the ‘immanent frame’” (R. Bernstein, 2008, p. 16).

divine love. In any case, following Taylor, the only ethics that can foster personal and social fulfillment is one that is open to divine transcendence (cf. Crittenden, 2021, pp. 5, 250–251). Only ethics open to transcendence provides an effective basis for respecting the dignity of every human being in every possible circumstance. Yet this would seem to exclude all those who do not have faith. However, Taylor believes that all of us, believers or non-believers, are fully imbued with an existential dimension that leads us toward encounter and communion.

For Taylor, moral crises and interpersonal encounters often open us—believers or not—to a “vertical” dimension in which love grows through vulnerability and mutual recognition. Whenever a human being opens up to both dimensions, “love calls for growth in openness and the ability to accept others” (Francis, 2020, §95; cf. Taylor, 2020b). Therefore, for Taylor, “authentic and mature love and true friendship can only take root in hearts open to growth through relationships with others” (Taylor, 2020b).

This anticipatory confidence is at the root of the eschatological dimension of *agape*: “suppose the highest good consists in communion, mutual giving and receiving, as in the paradigm of eschatological banquet” (Taylor, 2007, p. 702). Taylor illustrates this with parental love as communion: “where a bond of love arises, (...) where each is a gift to the other” (Taylor, 2007, p. 702). He also refers to the sphere of “reconciliation and trust” into which charismatic leaders lead whole societies, which “points beyond any merely intra-historical perspective of possible reconciliation” (Taylor, 2007, p. 706).

In the same way, anyone who feels the demand to strive for solidarity with the neighbor, even within an immanent frame, is imbued by the same sense of communion and bond of love and feels a non-categorized desire to achieve fuller expression of the demands of the Gospel. This generates what he calls an “ecumenism of friendship,” a shared struggle—across belief and unbelief—for justice and human dignity.(cf. Taylor, 2021b, pp. 495, 505). Here lies the outflow of love in the union of believers with other beings of goodwill who work for justice and human dignity, as is the case in many faith-based charitable organizations. This level, in short, expresses that we are all made for love, that the same desire for the union of all human beings, in its different levels of universality and particularity, manifests the same

love of Jesus Christ that will reach its culmination beyond life (cf. Taylor, 2003a, p. 15).

Finally, the eschatological dimension of *agapeic transcendence* not only allows us to unite individuals and communities on a broader level than consensus and agreements or the confession of the same faith can reach. It would also succeed in uniting the mental-emotional space of personal ethics, where we orient our decisions and our identity to our relative position toward the good on our moral map, and the broader and deeper space of shared ethics and moral frameworks in which higher ends and models of human fulfillment are discovered (cf. Ricken, 2011, p. 369). Taylor calls the latter “agapeic space” (Taylor, 2021a), which we can understand as a synonym for the *agape networks*. From this perspective, human history can be read as a slow growth of the ethical vision that leads teleologically back towards *agape*, as we saw above. Thus, whenever any individual succeeds in living from a deep and harmonious articulation of his or her identity, or whenever a community is able to overcome divisions by reaching broader and fuller levels of human coexistence, the *agapeic space* opens up. A space of communion, dialogue, exchange, mutual enrichment, recognition of the other, of giving and receiving generously. Until finally, both individuals and societies are up to the standards of the demands of this *agapeic space*, which are the same demands of the Gospel (cf. Taylor, 2021b, pp. 501–505).

Such a union of personal stories and History as a whole towards a focal point beyond time and life is a characteristic that puts us, once again, before the *catholic attitude* of Taylor, who perhaps here more clearly accommodates the Christian message to his philosophical endeavor. As Lubac says, “Christianity alone continues to assert the transcendent destiny of man [sic] and the common destiny of mankind” (Lubac, 1988, pp. 140–141). The unfolding of history, full of ontological density and fruitfulness, is “the penetration of humanity by Christ” (Lubac, 1988, p. 141). In Taylor, however, such a point of destiny is *agape* (Taylor, 2024, p. 554).²²¹ Individuals walk towards

221 Sciglitano (2019a) thinks that the fact that the story’s focal point is *agape* and not Christ would separate Taylor from a theologically orthodox Catholic view. For a complementary view on this and other points on the eschatology used by Taylor, see (G. Ward, 2010).

agape when they have “points of contact with fullness,” described as moments of being “surprised by love” (Taylor, 2007, p. 730).

At the social level, we approach our destiny when we read the “signs of the times (...) where a chance seems to offer itself to extend the area of compliance with these [the Gospel] demands” (Taylor, 2021a, p. 502). Even modernity and its occlusion of motivation and transcendence can be seen as a sign of the times by elevating the moral demand for the love of neighbor. Thus, Taylor maintains that “religious longing, the longing for and response to a more-than-immanent transformation perspective, (...) remains a strong independent source of motivation in modernity” (Taylor, 2007, p. 530) and remains so today.

8.1.2. The ambiguity of Taylor’s concept of transcendence and the catholic attitude

The above may shed light on the evaluation of some of the criticisms of Taylor’s view. Ian Fraser (2003, 2005) and, more sharply, Thomas Rentsch (2011) have criticized Taylor’s account of transcendence for its lack of ontological clarity and its avoidance of classical problems such as the immanence–transcendence relation. Their surprise is understandable, given the centrality Taylor assigns to religion and to *agape* in his moral anthropology. Somehow, many demand that he provide his own moral proof of the existence of God. Kant himself, in perhaps the most paradigmatic formulation of this argument, already admits that this argument does not provide objective proof of God’s existence (Kant, 2001, 5:450; see also Ricken, 2004; Tomasi, 2016). Kant links accepting the premise that there is a God, as *Summum Bonum* and as the moral cause of the world, with the postulation of happiness, human flourishing, as the highest possible good in the world. As for Taylor, the challenge is somewhat more significant, as his argument somehow implies the existence of a transformation related to the transcendent and goes beyond happiness or fullness as the highest immanent good in this world (cf. R. J. Bernstein, 2009).

Taylor, however, is not concerned with these questions. Instead, what underlies Taylor’s reflections on religion and transcendence is the search for an anthropology that makes sense of how human beings give meaning to their moral predicament and social practices,

with a narrow relation to other philosophical disciplines, especially drawing from hermeneutics. That is, by the way in which human beings make sense of their lives. Furthermore, he is concerned with the possibility of openness to transcendence within the immanent frame and the modern social imaginary, following the transformations we have observed throughout our historical reconstruction, including the collapse of the transcendent into the immanent through the rise of naturalism and the decline of moral articulations. In any case, as we have said, Taylor is not particularly concerned with studying these aspects from a purely theoretical approach. As he himself says, in response to Rentsch's criticisms:

"Now to 'transcendence.' Here there are numerous misunderstandings—the essential one is that I am often accused, by referring to my book, of having a certain view of what transcendence is and what it consists of. Rentsch is hence not alone here (though he adds the novelty that my conception of transcendence is onto-theological!). Only I did not take such a position in my book. Nor am I sure that I would want to resort to it at all to describe my own theological views (especially after the discussion that has taken place around this term)" (Taylor, 2011i, p. 846).²²²

As we will show, although Taylor does not want to show his own theological views, they are manifest from the attitude he takes, at least if we take his approach to *agape*. But undoubtedly, Taylor's vision of transcendence has given rise to many misunderstandings. The very plurality of references to which the term transcendence points, which we mentioned in the previous paragraph, makes it difficult to make sense of Charles Taylor's definition of it as *beyond life*. In fact, this metaphorical reference to space and time does not seem to be helpful in speaking of a reality that is, by definition, beyond time and

222 ["Nun zu »Transzendenz«. Hier gibt es zahlreiche Missverständnisse—das wesentliche besteht darin, dass man mir häufig mit Verweis auf das Buch eine bestimmte Ansicht darüber zuschreibt, was Transzendenz ist und worin sie besteht. Rentsch ist hier somit nicht allein (obwohl er die Novität hinzufügt, meine Vorstellung von Transzendenz sei onto-theologisch!). Nur habe ich in meinem Buch eine solche Position nicht vertreten. Auch bin ich mir nicht sicher, ob ich auf sie überhaupt zurückgreifen möchte, um meine eigenen theologischen Ansichten zu beschreiben (speziell nach der Diskussion, die um diesen Terminus geführt worden ist)" (translated by S.G.)]. Taylor also apologizes for his lack of clarity in this regard in the face of similar criticism.

space (cf. Fiorenza, 2021, pp. 381–384; Luling Haughton, 1999). On the other hand, we have already seen the difficulties in understanding Taylor’s moral realism and how difficult it is to understand its *robustness* without appealing to any experience of transcendence, however much Taylor’s interest lies more in human self-interpretations. In any case, Taylor himself is aware of this difficulty when he apologizes:

“How could I ever have used such an abstract and evasive term, one so redolent of the flat and content-free modes of spirituality we can get maneuvered into in the attempt to accommodate both modern reason and the promptings of the heart? I remember erasing it with particular *gusto*. Why ever did I reinstate it? What pressures led in the end to its grudging rehabilitation?” (Taylor, 1999e, p. 105).

The challenge becomes particularly acute when *agape* is presented as a driving force of morality. *Agape* intertwines an origin that transcends the world with an operative role in concrete domains of human existence—moral motivation toward the stranger, ethical self-understanding, political reconciliation, and the history of moral sources. To clarify this tension, Taylor repeatedly circles back to the problem of articulating transcendence and immanence in a way that does justice both to the experience of transformation and to the hermeneutic conditions under which modern agents interpret their lives. His difficulty stems in part from the fact that any definition of religion framed through the categories of transcendence and immanence must capture not merely doctrinal content but the lived orientation toward a good perceived as “beyond” ordinary flourishing. It is precisely here that Taylor’s otherwise ambivalent use of the term “transcendence” becomes justified: although he later admitted that he would have preferred another word, “transcendence” remains, for his anthropological purposes, the least misleading way to name this experiential orientation toward a higher good without committing himself to a theoretical or metaphysical account of what lies beyond.

This also helps to dispel a possible misunderstanding. Taylor’s acknowledged hesitation regarding the term “transcendence” does not signal an intention to abandon what the term seeks to name, but rather a resistance to fixing it within a determinate theoretical or metaphysical framework. The indeterminacy of the concept is therefore not a weakness accidentally incurred, but a consequence of the anthropological register in which Taylor deliberately operates.

Within his moral realism, experiences of orientation toward a good “beyond” ordinary flourishing are taken to be real and irreducible features of human life, even if their ultimate ontological status remains indeterminate. In this sense, the continued use of the language of transcendence is not an inconsistency but a methodological necessity: Taylor lacks a more adequate term that would preserve the reality of these experiences without prematurely resolving their meaning at the theoretical level.

Taylor’s approach to *agape* from the category of transcendence is also an attempt to account for the paradoxical dynamic of a relationship of humanity with divinity that runs through the concept of incarnation, as we have seen: God is not only beyond the world, but at the same time in it. His main attribute is love. His action is visible in history and in the social imaginaries that traverse it. In spite of the *zig-zag* and *landslide* changes, the presence of *agape* has not been absent in the lives of the saints, both known and anonymous. Therefore, its role in moral articulation is palpable, even being the origin of other sources that deny openness to transcendence. From this point of view, its origin is in grace, but its dynamism is etymologically describable from a phenomenology of one’s own experience, which is embodied, open to feelings, but also to the mystery of transcendence, as in the Good Samaritan. Just as the mystery of the Incarnation itself is corporeal, in which the attributes of the divine and its dynamic of love become history in space and time, in flesh and in relationship. And beyond any possible logical juxtaposition between the infinite and the finite, there is a unity—an “identity,” Rahner would say (2005)—between love of God and love of neighbor, mysterious to believers and non-believers alike, but at the same time both intuitively real for the former and superfluous or questionable for the latter.

In our view, the tension between transcendence and immanence in relation to *agape* can be seen as another characteristic of Taylor’s *catholic attitude* in the concept of *agapeic transcendence*. Typical of the Catholic interpretation is the tendency to see transcendence as embedded in the world of nature and human life, present in forms that point to the sacramental character of certain realities or rites and to the sacred character of certain human behaviors.

Thus, the Catholic tendency will strive to see love of God and love of neighbor as united in a relationship that goes beyond the domain

of moral discernment to reach spirituality. Behind this movement lies a way of seeing the world as created and sustained by God in such a way that all reality participates in transcendence and reveals his presence. Thus, sensitivity to those in the worst circumstances, even respect for pluralism, are aspects of the same way of understanding incarnate transcendence. In a sense, the origin of pure selfless love for the other is the outpouring of the Trinitarian love for the world in the whole history of salvation and in every person—and here we can perhaps find the greatest difference between Catholic and Hegelian thinking —. So much so, in fact, that for Rahner every positive act of charity presupposes a positive act in the supernatural order.²²³ In a way, the *catholic attitude*, though not affirmed in doctrine, is that every act of charity, even that which is not inspired by *agape*, actually contributes to the advancement of the universalism of love, to its final victory at the end of time (cf. Taylor, 2021a).²²⁴

223 “This theologoumenon says: Wherever man, in the full use of his free self-disposition, sets a positive moral act, this is, in the actual order of salvation, a positive, supernatural act of salvation even if its a posteriori object and the expressly a posteriori given motive do not tangibly derive from the positive word-revelation of God, but are in this sense ‘natural’” (Rahner, 2005, pp. 82–83) [“Dieses Theologoumenon besagt: Wo immer der Mensch im vollen Einsatz seiner freien Selbstverfügung einen positiven sittlichen Akt setzt, ist dieser in der tatsächlichen Heilsordnung auch dann ein positiver, übernatürlicher Heilsakt, wenn sein aposteriorischer Gegenstand und das ausdrücklich aposteriorisch gegebene Motiv nicht greifbar aus der positiven Wortoffenbarung Gottes stammt, sondern in diesem Sinn ‚natürlich‘ ist” (translated by S.G.)].

224 As is well known, this thesis has been contested from within Catholicism itself, in a particularly notorious way by von Balthasar, who went so far as to accuse the famous Rahner’s thesis about anonymous Christianity—which throbs behind the theologoumena we have quoted (cf. Rahner, 1965)—as Christian atheism (cf. Balthasar, 1987). For his part, Balthasar, while also affirming the necessity of the unity of both loves, prefers to accentuate the difference between the two from the primacy of the love of God over the love of man (cf. Balthasar, 2019). As Ángel Codovilla says, “while Rahner tends to stress the indivisible, Balthasar stresses the inconfuse” (Codovilla, 2009, p. 45). However, both authors, when they describe the daily life of the average Christian, that is, how both loves are intuitively combined in reality beyond the theological exercise, stress the importance of simple experiences in which grace is experienced naturally, as happens in the love of neighbor based on *agape*. Both, then, underline this *catholic attitude* informed by the intuition born of a way of seeing the world created and sustained by grace. On the

Again, the *catholic attitude* seeks to understand the two poles of a tension by affirming them in a way that maintains balance.

A similar tendency can be detected in Charles Taylor, for example, in his measured judgments of modernity. Or in his tendency to always perceive a transcendent depth in acts of charity, manifested both in his encouragement to recognize many alternative moral sources to *agape* as originally grounded in it, and in his constant call for an articulation of goods capable of sustaining our ethical commitments. Also his confidence that *agape* is somehow manifested in the plurality of goods that motivate those who work together for the good of the neighbor, in what he has recently called the “ecumenism of friendship” (Taylor, 2021b, p. 495, cf. 2015). But his conviction, from his *catholic attitude*, is, as Rahner also put it elsewhere, that Christianity in its true understanding must defend openness to transcendence (“Vertikalismus” for Rahner), because without such openness the modern high demands of solidarity cannot be sustained in the long run.²²⁵

However, returning to the pitfalls of understanding the concept of transcendence he uses, we believe that looking at Taylor’s treatment of transcendence from the perspective of neighborly love can help us understand more of the particularities of *agapeic transcendence*. To this end, Taylor proposes a three-way debate between his transcendence-open humanism with Martha Nussbaum and Friedrich Nietzsche. In dialogue with them, Taylor offers a deeper insight into their perspective on the specificity of the *agape* transformation.

possible connections between Rahner’s and Taylor’s thoughts see (Horan, 2014).

- 225 That is why we find in the following Rahner’s quotation a similar concern to that expressed by Taylor in *A Catholic Modernity*, though this time from theology, albeit based on the same *catholic attitude*: “Christianity, in its true understanding, defends verticalism because it knows that without it horizontalism cannot exist in the long run, or at best will exist in a happy inconsistency in which God is expressly denied or renounced in order to affirm him again implicitly, even in the absoluteness of charity” (Rahner, 2002, p. 721). [“Das Christentum in seinem wahren Verständnis verteidigt den Vertikalismus, weil es weiß, dass ohne ihn der Horizontalismus auf die Dauer nicht bestehen kann oder höchstens in einer glücklichen Inkonsistenz bestehen wird, in der ausdrücklich Gott gelehnet oder von ihm abgesehen wird, um ihn implizit, Eben in der Absolutheit der Nächstenliebe doch wieder zu bejahen” (translated by S.G.)].

As we shall see, Taylor seeks to defend openness to transcendence against the effects of its “mutilation” by both Nussbaum’s exclusive humanism, open only to horizontal transcendence, and Nietzsche’s immanent counter-enlightenment and his reluctance to recognize *agape* as the authentic motivation source for human action.

8.2. A trialogue on Christian neighborly love

To approach Taylor’s debate with Nussbaum and Nietzsche, it is useful to adopt the perspective of the *Best Account* argument. As we know, the *BA*-Argument seeks the most comprehensive and falsifiable explanation—the one that offers the “richest account” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 326)—of how human beings make sense of their lives and respond to the dilemmas of modernity. As we did with Hartmut Rosa and Taylor’s moral realism, we will approach the hermeneutical triangle he draws in the early sections of chapter 17 of *A Secular Age*, where he confronts Nussbaum’s secular humanism and the exclusive humanism of Nietzsche and his successors with his position of *agapeic transcendence* (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 636–637, also 1999b, p. 29; B. K. Ward, 2014).²²⁶

Taylor’s debate with them revolves around the concept of fulfillment lying behind each of the proposals and the considerations about human nature behind them. The question is, therefore, to elucidate “who can make more sense of the life all of us are living” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 635), bearing in mind that it is necessary to find the “best phenomenology with an adequate ontology” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 609).²²⁷ In addition, the reconstruction of the two authors will consider their vision of the Christian motivation toward neighborly love.

226 Shearn describes this triangle as “agonistic” (Shearn, 2016, p. 271). Taylor himself, elsewhere, characterizes this debate as a “three-cornered battle” (Taylor, 2011b, p. 22).

227 This is an addition to the original Best Account question of which moral account best serves our moral commitments, which is added here to the question of how to fulfill our life (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 607).

8.2.1. Martha Nussbaum and the Mutilation of Transcendence

The debate begins with Taylor's discussion with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. He maintained a lengthy discussion with her, precisely on the subject of transcendence. From the outset, the positions are divergent as to the basis of morality. Overall, she has been critical of the ontological commitments implied by Taylor's insistence on a transcendence "beyond life" and beyond the meanings we can find in it. Taylor, for his part, already in his *Review of The Fragility of Goodness* (1986), believes that Nussbaum falls into the same error as the Stoics or Kant by introducing the good under the pure view of the Will, which has a tremendous cost for the goods of human life:

"What is against them? Simply that they involve us denying and forgoing central human good. This is in any case what we can plead against them, and what Nussbaum in the end pleads very convincingly. What above all falls victim to [Nussbaum's strategies] are the goods of friendship and love. To love humanly is to love particular people, and hence to be terribly vulnerable to fortune; it is to be open and receptive, and is incompatible with the drive to dominate; and it places us squarely in the realm of the incommensurable: someone really loved is precisely not replaceable by another with the same universal properties. The three strategies—of restriction, commensuration and control—all sideline or denature love. If this is an important good, then these are strategies of mutilation, rather than the preservation of the good" (Taylor, 1988c, pp. 807–808).

At the center of Taylor's critique lies the concept of love that Nussbaum uses. She would begin her book with a favorable opinion towards the aspiration to transcend one's humanity, agreeing with Plato's *Republic* that aspiring to the life of the gods is something beautiful and valuable (Taylor, 1988c, p. 813). But restraint and commensurability in the face of the weakness caused by love appear more clearly in his view of Aristotle, at the center of the book. According to Taylor's interpretation, Nussbaum's understanding of the Stagirite excludes transcendence life and takes up only a view in which the whole human good is immanent. There is no place for seeking the good itself. A harmonious life would consist of various forms of excellent activity. Love (*philia*) remains, if there is no other impediment, "within the reach of any good and moderately

fortunate man" (ibid.). In this sense, the question Taylor leaves to Nussbaum is whether the human good includes the desire or aspiration for transcendence.

In *A Secular Age*, Taylor returns to the debate, alluding to Nussbaum's response to his Review in *Transcending Humanity* at the end of *Love's Knowledge* (cf. Nussbaum, 1992, pp. 365–391). On the one hand, her desire for transcendence is rooted in the deep discomfort and fear we experience in sensing the finitude and contingency of our lives. Transcendence would be then a way of compensating for human limits and vulnerability, but at the price of renouncing many of the elements that are part of the experience of being human: having a history, the possibility of overcoming oneself, of loving (cf. Nussbaum, 1992, p. 366). Such an escape from the limits of the world would leave behind even the possibility of feeling compassion, the basis of human justice (cf. Nussbaum, 1992, p. 375).

In that sense, Nussbaum does recognize in this moment that Christianity represented an advance over the image of the impassibility of the Greek gods in the face of human problems. The Christian God is at once human and divine and understands human life not from above but having fully known it from incarnation. Thus, she adds that "surely, at any rate, the universal compassion for human suffering which one associates with Christianity at its best is difficult to imagine apart from the paradigm of human suffering and sacrifice exemplified in Christ" (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 376). Indeed, other religions also believe in gods who die, but what is unique to Christianity is that it "links this conception to a new idea of the moral example God provides to humans" (ibid.).

Such proximity to a type of compassion open to transcendence like the Christian one—even though focused on a plain moral approach to it—soon vanishes, however. According to Nussbaum, the desire for transcendence would incapacitate us to achieve human fulfillment, not in the hereafter, but *hic et nunc*, also in agreement with Nietzsche. She places St. Augustine and the doctrine of original sin at the center of this critique. Thus she understands that based on this element of the Christian faith, repugnance to our natural and ordinary desires would justify openness to transcendence (cf. Nussbaum, 1992, pp. 286–313).

Rather than paying the price of rejecting the body for vertical transcendence, Nussbaum prefers to explore horizontal transcen-

dence, namely that which takes place within the immanent limits of the human character. Accordingly, she rejects any standard for human excellence that is different from the immanent realm: “what my argument urges to reject as incoherent is the aspiration to leave behind altogether the constitutive conditions of our humanity, and to seek for a life that is really the life of another sort of being-as if it were a higher and better life for us” (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 379). Consequently, Nussbaum says that “there is a great deal of room for transcendence of our ordinary transcendence—transcendence, we might say, of an internal and human sort” (Nussbaum, 1992, p. 379). Hers is thus a transcendence within immanence, open to the internal of the human being without pretending ever to leave it (see also Kavka, 2003; McNerny, 1997; Gordon, 2008, p. 665ff.)

Elsewhere, Nussbaum asserts that the very moral-spiritual experience of transcendence applies only insofar as it is interpretatively human-centered. That is, those aspects of divinity that human beings find illuminating for their flourishing are those that human ethical experience has proven practicable in their own lives, not those aspects of the experience of transcendence that are beyond human control: “The aspect of divinity that proves morally illuminating is the part that has been modelled on human excellence; but that is the part that would not figure in a divine and unlimited life, consistently imagined” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 446). For this reason, the good would have no putative character detached from life. Therefore, even if Christian compassion is admirable, she neither considers a notion of the transcendent good that illuminates compassion nor that what motivates the transcendent is, in essence, distinct from the immanent force that motivates empathy (cf. Nussbaum, 1985).

Again, the question Taylor asks at this point is whether we can really renounce the aspiration to transcend and return to “immanent” life” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 626). Taylor does not want to disparage Nussbaum’s position, for he too wants to liberate faith from the hyper-Augustinianism that hypostatizes the human body and sensuality (Taylor, 2007b, p. 652, see also 2007c, 2012a). Furthermore, he values Nussbaum’s highlighting that the line between internal and external transcendence appears slender at times so that she may see an open door to go beyond life in matters such as heroism, dedication, or the defense of the weak (Taylor, 2007b, p. 632). On the other hand, he also affirms in several places that secular ethics has

allowed significant advances and that even God's will is that human beings flourish in this life.

Nevertheless, he does not understand Nussbaum's need to renounce any external transcendence to attain fullness as long as she wants not to abandon whatever is inherent in human nature. Moreover, as far as our question is concerned, he is not sure that giving up the advance achieved by *agape* universalism will leave us in a better position. In his own words:

"The question arises, is this a desirable goal? Is it even a possible goal? In view of the importance of Christian universalism and *agape* in the constitution of the modern idea of moral order, ought we really to hope for the utter uprooting of all the beliefs and desires which Christianity has inculcated in our civilization?" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 626).

Taylor also poses this question to Nietzsche. Nevertheless, in his view, to renounce *agapeic transcendence* would be a "mutilation" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 631) because of the loss it would entail and the possibilities that would be closed. Above all, the opportunity to give meaning to our lives and direct them toward higher ends and even acts of heroism. We are, therefore, back to the same concern with which Taylor closes *Sources of the Self*. And yet we are also left with the same lack of clarity and ambivalence, for it is not easy to draw the line that divides internal transcendence from external transcendence or "good" transcendence from "bad" transcendence.

Similarly, it is not easy to determine what parts of human life are worth bringing to fullness while still considering the harmful effects of doing so. Or what is worth giving or renouncing in a generous and selfless act for a stranger. Taylor, at this point, makes a defense rather in favor of tolerating pernicious effects in order not to mutilate the good to be pursued, "a genuine and valuable aspiration, one to a fuller love" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 631).

In any case, the latter leads Taylor to point out a lack of consistency in Nussbaum. For instance, Taylor alludes to the fact that erotic love often goes hand in hand with jealousy and anger and that this does not mean that the goodness of love should be denied, as Nussbaum also asserts. He goes further by saying that the horror of war goes hand in hand with human excellence, such as heroism, dedication, and the defense of the weak. Nor is it easy to draw the line between selfishness or legitimate self-interest, and at what point these may be at odds with a more universal and decentered

concern. To paraphrase the Gospel, it is not easy to sort the wheat (the virtues) from the tares (the vices) without damaging the harvest (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 646). Thus, Taylor cannot simply condemn renunciation that is done in the name of a greater good: “renunciation was part of an attempt to find a fuller response to the *agape* of God as seen in Christ, to take part in a fuller, more all-embracing love” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 631). Nor, therefore, can he understand Nussbaum’s argument against vertical transcendence.

Again, for Nussbaum, *agape* achieves an advance over Plato’s vision by offering an idea of love that is “more vulnerable and humble” (Nussbaum, 2001, p. 563). But in discarding any essentialist or transcendent concept of love, she also diminishes the transformative power that *agape* love can show through the new horizons it imagines. The horizon envisioned by *agape* would not, on principle, fit in with the prevailing moral and political convictions of the moment, which would be, for her, on the other hand, the criterion of validation (cf. Nussbaum, 2013; see also Wischmeyer, 2015, pp. 235–240). *Agape* will constantly challenge our emotions—for Nussbaum, compassion is one of them—and, above all, the judgments we make from them. *Agape* challenges reason by leading the individual to higher things, sometimes even heroism or self-sacrifice. Even *agape* can challenge the structures of injustice present in social relations.²²⁸

For Taylor, to deny as a matter of principle the transformative capacity of human nature allowed by *agapeic transcendence* is a self-mutilation. Thus, Taylor denounces the inconsistent character of Nussbaum’s immanent humanism because it annuls *agape* and transcendence by not wanting to assume their negative consequences but tolerating them concerning other human realities, as happens regarding erotic love. In short, Taylor points out that she has a persistent suspicion toward religious sources of moral motivation

228 Moreover, Taylor seems to actually reference Nussbaum when in *The Language Animal*, in addressing the moral force of feeling for benevolence of Hume and Hutcheson, he refers to *agape* as a way out of the mundane mediocrity in which these authors seem to indulge: “Someone might think that this heroic, even ‘*agape*-istic’ mode of benevolence is asking too much of the fragile, self-bound creatures we are; that this striving after an impossible perfection can only lead to self-mutilation, and perhaps to an even nastier form of felt superiority. Such a person would recommend that we be satisfied with the less disinterested benevolence of *l’homme moyen sensuel*, and eschew the search for higher perfection, repudiating the ‘monkish virtues’” (Taylor, 2016, p. 20).

that is sometimes not very well concealed. In any case, Nussbaum's vision of altruism detached from transcendence and ontology is an example of the impoverishment of ethics that occurs when reason forgets the attachment to higher things and when one attends only to motivation by emotion, without a vision of the value that lies behind the good.

8.2.2. Friedrich Nietzsche and the lack of articulation of the good

However, immanent humanism's double standard does not appear in immanent counter-enlightenment, on the other side of the hermeneutic triangle, where Taylor locates Friedrich Nietzsche. Both he and a follower of his philosophy, Michel de Foucault, later endorse the debauchery in sex and the ambiguities of violence as an expression of the Will to power (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 634, see also 1985h, 1989b). Taylor places at the corner of the triangle those mainly postmodern currents and authors who contest the Modern Moral Order and its rejection of the heroic dimension of ethics and tragedy as belonging to the drama of human life.

Although Taylor rejects the idea of Will for power, he agrees with Nietzsche and those who follow him in doubting the mutilation of aspects of human character in the name of happiness and fulfillment. He also joins Nietzsche's lucidity on the dark sides of humanity, as well as in denouncing the feet of clay upon which Modernity is built. Along with Nietzsche, Taylor advocates the realization of freedom and the affirmation of life. He also sees how modern society imposes on the individual a "crisis of affirmation" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 448), which attacks his freedom as a fulfilled possibility (cf. Taylor, 1988d; see also Knapp, 2010, pp. 292–295). Indeed, he finds Nietzsche to be a brother who basically seeks the same goal: "The profoundly Christian resonance which remains paradoxically in Nietzsche in spite of his virulent opposition to Christianity lies in his aspiration to affirm the whole of reality, to see it as good, to say 'yes' to it all" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 452). They even share to a large extent the use of the genealogy to show the weaknesses of its modern moral order. The big difference, however, lies in Taylor's doctrine of strong evaluation, with which he tries to overcome Nietzsche's critique (cf. Meijer, 2017b, p. 381).

In that sense, Taylor agrees with Nietzsche that there are higher forms of life, but unlike him, Taylor is open to these forms being based on something beyond life and the subject. In that sense, he also accuses Nietzsche and immanent counter-enlightenment of being closed to transcendence and causing mutilation, as he does with immanent humanism (see also Taylor, 2018a). On the one hand, Nietzsche sees renunciation for the sake of the greater good as incompatible with the nature of free and non-slave human beings.²²⁹ He discovered how beneath reason and consciousness circulates the unstoppable current of Life, which he summarizes in essence as *Wille zur Macht* (Nietzsche, 1988a, III). From there, the whole human world must be rooted. Hence his use of genealogy, which attempts to dig beneath the visible to find the hidden roots from which all our acts spring, whether they promote and stimulate Life, or hinder and obstruct it (cf. Pintor Ramos, 2002, pp. 126–127). One can understand in this way Nietzsche’s fierce criticism of historical Christianity and the morality of slaves that originates from this perspective of debunking everything contrary to Life. This is how he formulates it in *Der Antichrist*:

“The Christian concept of a god—the god as the patron of the sick, the god as a spinner of cobwebs, the god as a spirit—is one of the most corrupt concepts that has ever been set up in the world: it probably touches low-water mark in the ebbing evolution of the god-type. God degenerated into the *contradiction of life*. Instead of being its transfiguration and eternal Yea! In him war is declared on life, on nature, on the will to live!” (Nietzsche, 1940, §18).²³⁰

229 In another place, Taylor refers in this way to Nietzsche’s attitude against goods beyond life: “Nietzsche, of course, rebelled against the idea that our highest goal is to preserve and increase life, to prevent suffering. He rejects this both metaphysically and practically. He rejects the egalitarianism underlying this whole affirmation of ordinary life. But his rebellion is in a sense also internal. Life itself can push to cruelty, to domination, to exclusion, and indeed does so in its moments of most exuberant affirmation” (Taylor, 1999b, p. 27, 2011b, p. 21). On Nietzsche’s challenge to Freedom according to humanism, see (Heit, 2017).

230 [“Der christliche Gottesbegriff—Gott als Krankengott, Gott als Spinne, Gott als Geist—ist einer der corruptesten Gottesbegriffe, die auf Erden erreicht worden sind; er stellt vielleicht selbst den Pegel des Tiefstands in der absteigenden Entwicklung des Götter-Typus dar. Gott zum Widerspruch des Lebens abgewartet, statt dessen Verklärung und ewiges Ja zu sein. In Gott dem Leben, der

The above fragment's aggressive tone against the Christian faith can be found in many other passages. In fact, right at the end of *Der Antichrist*, we find a text that actually rejects the humanitarianism linked to Christian morality and spirituality:

"Let any one dare to speak to me of its "humanitarian" blessings! Its deepest necessities range it against any effort to abolish distress; it lives by distress; it *creates* distress to make *itself* immortal... [...] The "equality of souls before God"—this fraud, this *pretext* for the *rancunes* of all the base-minded—this explosive concept, ending in revolution, the modern idea, and the notion of overthrowing the whole social order —this is *Christian* dynamite.... The "humanitarian" blessings of Christianity forsooth! To breed out of *humanitas* a self-contradiction, an art of self-pollution, a will to lie at any price, an aversion and contempt for all good and honest instincts! All this, to me, is the "humanitarianism" of Christianity!" (Nietzsche, 1940, §62).²³¹

As the last two quotations show, humanitarianism and altruism are, in Nietzsche's vision, two consequences of the corruption of humanity that came through Christianity. As Taylor describes, Nietzsche understands this fact as a "hyper-sensitivity to suffering, a weakness" (Taylor, 1989a, p. 575, n.2). Modernity and its imperative to avoid suffering would not be for Nietzsche but "one all in the cry and impatience of pity, in the mortal hatred of suffering at all, in the almost feminine inability to keep spectators watching, to make them suffer" (Nietzsche, 1988b, p. §202).

The transformation that auspices *agape* and the love of neighbor born of it create an illusion, would oppose the Will to Power, and

Natur, dem Willen zum Leben die Feindschaft angesagt"] (translation copied from Nietzsche, 1918, p. 67).

- 231 ["Man wage es noch, mir von ihren "humanitären" Segnungen zu reden! Irgend einen Nothstand abschaffen gierig wider ihre tiefste Nützlichkeit,—sie lebte von Nothständen, sie schuf Nothstände, um sich zu verewigen ... [...] Die "Gleichheit der Seelen vor Gott", diese Falschheit, dieser Vorwand für die rancunes aller Niedriggesinnten, dieser Sprengstoff von Begriff, der endlich Revolution, moderne Idee und Niedergangs-Princip der ganzen Gesellschafts-Ordnung geworden ist—ist christlicher Dynamit... "Humanitäre" Segnungen des Christenthums! Aus der *humanitas* einen Selbst-Widerspruch, eine Kunst der Selbstschändung, einen Willen zur Lüge um jeden Preis, einen Widerwillen, eine Verachtung aller guten und rechtschaffnen Instinkte herauszuzüchten!—Das wären mir Segnungen des Christenthums!"] (translation copied from Nietzsche, 1918, pp. 180–181).

would ultimately engender resentment. Again in Taylor's words, Nietzsche "would see *agape* as a cover for a twisted will to power, motivated ultimately by hatred and revenge" (Taylor, 2016, p. 207; see also 215).²³² Although Nietzsche acknowledges that altruism is a potent moral force operative throughout history, he denies its real plausibility in its pure state. Thus one can read in his critique of Schopenhauer's thesis that selfless action is "impossible but real" ("unmöglich und doch wirklich") and that its origin is indeed compassion, even *agape*.²³³ Nietzsche argues that all human actions, even the most selfless, can only be psychologically motivated by the agent's self-interest. There will always be some inclination because of a desire, an impulse, or a longing ("Die Neigung zu Etwas (Wunsch, Trieb, Verlangen) ist [...] vorhanden" (Nietzsche, 1988c, §57; cf. Schopenhauer, 2007; see also Elgat, 2015). We will always find personal pain or desire in the interest for compassionate action (cf. Nietzsche, 1988c, §104, §133, see also 1887, 1988d).

Taylor, however, does not see that Nietzsche's critique of Christian agency advances his main thesis of closed-mindedness to transcendence. Per se, the fact that aggression is, for Nietzsche, something ineradicable from human nature and something to be celebrated makes him incompatible with the transformation proposed by *agape* and the Christian conception of eschatological hope (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 635). Taylor's response is to recall the essential

232 In another place, he says ironically that "nothing gave Nietzsche greater satisfaction than showing how morality or spirituality is really powered by its direct opposite, e.g., that the Christian aspiration to love is really hatred of the weak for the strong" (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 698–699).

233 Schopenhauer specifically refers to *agape* in the following paragraph excerpted from *Parerga und Paralipomena*, in which he contrasts compassion with the Kantian notion of dignity: "for every human being with whom one comes into contact, do not undertake an objective evaluation of him according to value and dignity, hence do not take into consideration the baseness of his will, nor the limitation of his understanding and the wrongness of his notions, because the former could easily arouse hatred, the latter contempt for him. Instead, focus alone on his suffering, his distress, his fear, his pain—then you will always feel kinship with him, sympathize with him and instead of hatred or contempt sense that compassion for him which alone is *agape*, and to which we are exhorted by the gospels. In order to prevent hatred and contempt from rising up against him, truly it is not the seeking of man's 'dignity' but, quite to the contrary, only compassion that is the suitable position".

elements of his defense of strong evaluations as the basis of our morality (cf. Taylor, 1989a, pp. 70–75). In short, Nietzsche would also make strong evaluations, although the moral source is not *agape* or any of the others that Taylor explores, but resentment: “it is only an additional ironic twist in Nietzsche’s argument when he shows that ‘love’ here is controlled by its opposite: by resentment and hatred (Taylor, 2011i, p. 837, cf. 2011c, p. 298).²³⁴ And in addition, Nietzsche would add further reasoning as an adverse reaction to altruistic moral behavior. Thus, for Nietzsche, “the reduction of suffering is not a good idea, because this would (...) block the way to *Übermensch*” (Taylor, 2011i, p. 833, cf. 2011c, p. 298).

Hence, Taylor’s response to Nietzsche is to bring his critique of transcendence and humanitarianism to the coordinates of his moral realism. In the case of Nietzsche, what changes with respect to the position of *agapeic transcendence* is the ground understanding. The moral reactions of rejection and repugnance to neighborly love are a strong mode of evaluation that also entails a particular conception of the world. Therefore, Nietzsche also makes his own evaluation, but he would not recognize the same reality behind what Taylor sees. Thus, the difference between Taylor and Nietzsche is not one of class or degree but of the reality they see behind the moral reactions and the articulation that follows them. Ultimately, however, resentment excludes *agape* by definition. As Taylor himself says, “the account of what truly inspires wonder will distinguish theists and atheists, and will connect with different things for each” (Taylor, 2011i, p. 836).²³⁵

In short, Taylor sees Nietzsche’s challenge as going to the heart of moral motivation toward benevolence and altruism (cf. Redhead, 2001, p. 83). Moreover, he goes so far as to say that “Only if there is such a thing as *agape*, or one of the secular claimants to its succession, is Nietzsche wrong” (Taylor, 1989a, p. 515). However, it is clear that Taylor thinks that Nietzsche, on this point, is wrong.

234 [“So ist es nur eine zusätzliche ironische Wendung in Nietzsches Argumentation, wenn er zeigt, dass »Liebe« hier von ihrem Gegenteil gesteuert wird: von Ressentiment und Hass” (translated by S.G.)].

235 [“Allerdings wird die Darstellung dessen, was das Wunder wirklich inspiriert, Theisten und Atheisten unterscheiden und sich für beide mit jeweils verschiedenen Dingen verbinden” (translated by S.G.)].

As he already said in *Sources of the Self*, also referring to exclusive humanist positions, “They make once again what I believe is the cardinal mistake of believing that a good must be invalid if it leads to suffering or destruction” (Taylor, 1989a, p. 519). That is to say, by eliminating transcendence from the equation, they incur an unjustifiable mutilation since the truth is that even without the help of transcendence, evil continues to run wild. For Taylor, Nietzsche would not articulate reality correctly and observes it mutilated and distanced from the sources that can give it more meaning. His virulent opposition to Christianity and ontology behind is what makes him not offer a better and richer proposal to cope with the pain of the stranger and the demands of motivation to help him.²³⁶

8.2.3. Agape as a fuller account

Against Nussbaum’s and Nietzsche’s rival accounts, Taylor argues that openness to agapeic transcendence yields a fuller explanation of neighbourly love and moral motivation. As he puts it, “invoking the vertical dimension brings us in another way back to the missing perspective in modern moral philosophy, that of moral motivation” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 707). However, his strategy is often indirect: rather than offering a deductive proof, he tests rival frameworks by exposing what they leave unexplained, under-describe, or tacitly presuppose.

Taylor is aware that a faith-based stance such as his needs to present itself today as plausible, showing how it “can make more sense of the life all of us are living” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 638). Any such option must account for evil, violence, exploitation, domination, and the many forms of human self-destruction and indignity—no less than non-believing options do. It must also explain our impulse to help the stranger while sustaining moral motivation in the face of discouragement, powerlessness, and injustice. In essence, a belief-option has to render an account of these realities just like any other non-believing option. Any option must explain why we want to help

236 More on the antagonism of Nietzsche and Taylor on this matter in (Connolly, 2010, 2011). Besides, Meijer (2017b), Redhead (2001), Shapiro (1986), and Shearn (2016) also read the debate between Nietzsche and Taylor from the Best Account argument, as we do here.

the stranger (the kind of explanations that clarify our moral predicament) and, at the same time, provide us with a source of moral motivation that does not faint in the face of the powerlessness, discouragement, and injustice that is perceived, endured, or consented to in doing good.

Taylor gathers these requirements under the name of *maximal moral demand*. That is, in terms of the dilemma posed by the question of “how to define our highest spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn’t crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?” (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 639–640). The tension is such that, according to Taylor, “we either have to scale down our moral aspirations in order to allow our ordinary human life to flourish; or we have to agree to sacrifice some of this ordinary flourishing to secure our higher goals” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 640). Moreover, in light of his dialogue with Nussbaum and Nietzsche, *agapeic transcendence* must contend with the charge of “mutilation” from exclusive humanism and immanent counter-enlightenment. All in all, this is the same dilemma with which *Sources of the Self* ends: “The dilemma of mutilation is in a sense our greatest spiritual challenge, not an iron fate” (Taylor, 1989a, p. 521).

We are thus, to a large extent, facing the union of the main storyline of Taylor’s two great works, just as we saw when we referred to the argument of the *Best Account*. Taylor summarizes the challenge as:

“finding the moral sources which can enable us to live up to our very strong universal commitments to human rights and well-being; and finding how to avoid the turn to violence which returns uncannily and often unnoticed in the “higher” forms of life which have supposedly set it aside definitively” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 726).

Focusing on the Christian option and whether it is better equipped to meet these higher forms, Taylor speaks at various points of overcoming tensions, avoiding mutilation, or transforming the human condition by the irruption of *agape*. Taylor speaks first of recovering the centrality of the body and ordinary life for a religion based on the Incarnation in a context, the modern one, affected by excarnation. Taylor explains that to do this properly, we need to avoid misunderstanding Christianity, particularly the kind of exaggerated “hyper-Augustinian” view that treats body and soul as completely

opposed or separate. This must be replaced by *agape*, “which will ultimately sideline and make irrelevant the satisfactions of ego-boosting [and] is itself bound up with a compassion which is itself incarnate as bodily desire” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 644). The irruption of *agape* and compassion would overcome the mutilating dichotomies of the relationship between body and soul.

Taylor again uses the same schema to treat *agape* in relation to evil and suffering and to the “spiritual hunger” that arises from the question of “how we live with it” (Taylor, 2007a, p. 681). He surveys a range of responses—revived sacrificial mechanisms (propitiation, scapegoating), Stoic disengagement, and modern inward sources such as disciplined reason or sympathy—yet finds that these options either blunt the demand of solidarity or struggle to sustain concern beyond the immediate circle, especially when confronted with the distant stranger. Taylor also notes harder-edged responses: Nietzschean suspicion toward benevolence and equality, as well as secularized “victim” postures that claim innocence by projecting evil entirely onto others—forms that can slide into cruelty or indifference (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 683–684). Across these outlooks, believers and non-believers alike remain tempted “to neglect the failures, the blackguards, the useless, the dying... in brief, those who deny the promise” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 684).

Christianity is not exempt from this danger. But what does Christianity add, distinctively, or contribute to, according to Taylor? On the one hand, he speaks of a purified Christianity, based on *agape*, “where one could aim to dwell in the suffering and evil without recoil, sure of the power of God to transform it” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 685). On the other hand, this confidence in the transformation of the world is fueled by spirituality: “One is part of the solution by being there and praying, being there and affirming the good which is never absent. You see the good through the eyes of God” (ibid.). In part, such spirituality is about opening one’s eyes to the evil in the world, including the evil present in oneself, which Christianity knows as *sin*.²³⁷ Taylor speaks of recognizing a “pedagogy of God” in the transformation of humanity in explaining the historical presence

237 It would seem that a purified Christianity would have to get rid of terms such as sin. Undoubtedly, it may be a theological category that would hide an anthropological vision that denies human flourishing and introduces distrust of human nature. However, a good Christian theology will always see the

of evil. A transformation that “is not just a matter of plasticity” but “is much more mysterious, and involves offering another spiritual direction” in collaboration “with God’s pedagogy.” The difference between the transformative vision with that of the humanists and the Nitzcheans is that the irresolvable tension of human dilemmas is lived before the force of a different pole that leads to a resolution *beyond life* and not before the “demands of the immediate agenda” (Taylor, 2007b, pp. 672–674).

8.3. Agapeic transcendence in the later work of Charles Taylor

Further arguments and counterarguments could be advanced, but the preceding discussion already allows us to draw some conclusions to help us better understand Taylor. On the one hand, it seems that Taylor allies himself with Nietzsche —at times also with Foucault— to criticize secular humanism as an inconsistent attempt to retain the force of *agape* without the believing and transcendence-open grounding that strengthens it. However, the danger with this line of argument is that Nietzsche’s use of genealogy as a critique leads us to the deconstruction of compassion based on faith in God. On the other hand, Taylor allies himself with Nussbaum’s humanism in his restitution of the importance of compassion as a crucial value for human flourishing. He also joins secular humanism against Nietzsche in drawing a line under genealogical deconstruction, for Taylor finds some comfort in the Enlightenment (cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 637). Nevertheless, both rival positions ultimately challenge *agapeic transcendence* by rejecting the idea that authentic compassion could

possibility of sin and the existence of evil counterbalanced by the abundance of grace and the certainty of salvation in Christ. Properly understood sin allows us to grasp the reality of evil committed or suffered and human beings’ difficulties in achieving existential freedom (cf. Rahner, 2013, pp. 101–104). Moreover, it allows us to understand how human beings do not pay attention to the call of the other. Sin, according to the Catholic Church, “is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity” (CCC, §1849). A proposal of Christian spirituality based on opening the eyes to the evil of the world can be found in Johan Baptist Metz (2017b) or the spirituality of liberation (for example, Casaldàliga & Vigil, 1992).

be oriented by a good perceived as coming from beyond ordinary human life.

In any case, Taylor's response may seem insufficient to overcome the sense of lack of persuasiveness of an argument that ultimately relies heavily on belief. When it comes to defining what is the specific contribution of *agapeic transcendence* in the face of the dilemmas imposed by the integration of human life or the violence that allows us to overcome the mutilations into which other positions would fall, Taylor points, once again, more to a *hunch* than to a reasoned position. Rosa's harsh criticism goes in this direction. He expected the book as an elaboration of the "hunch" with which *Sources of the Self* closed, and yet what he encountered he summarized as unsatisfactory, as an "almost theological" analysis of an apologetic defense that falls far short of expectations in that particular matter (cf. Rosa & Kern, 2012, pp. 5–7; a similar argument in Roothaan, 2017, pp. 19–22).

However, Taylor's later work offers resources that allow for a more constructive reconstruction of the theistic moral map and of the phenomenology of *agapeic transcendence* itself. In particular, three elements deserve attention: the indirect mode of hermeneutic argumentation, the role of moral exemplars and admiration, and the significance of what Taylor calls "subtler languages." As this study has suggested, these features—together with others explored throughout the book—can be understood as central expressions of Taylor's *catholic attitude* toward transcendence and moral life.

8.3.1. On the significance of hermeneutic interpretations

Taylor attempts to restate the theistic moral map in *The Language Animal* (2016, pp. 177–263), approaching openness to transcendence from the active and expressive self-interpretations of human beings. That is, from the relationship between the moral articulation of strong evaluations and language, with the addition of the horizon of transformation invoked by *agape*. As we saw in Chapter 2, Taylor is interested in language dimensions open to *metabiological meanings*. He anchors in them the motivations toward something higher, and, as evidence thereof, he speaks of the inspiration and admiration that *agape* can provoke as a moral source.

Taylor brings this line of argument to a close by contrasting the possibilities opened by *agapeic transcendence* with those offered by immanent alternatives. His commitment to openness to transcendence remains grounded in the *Best Account* argument, but the novelty here lies in how this argument is deployed. Rather than merely counting the blind spots of rival theories, Taylor shows how openness to transcendence makes better sense of agents' self-interpretations. Thus, he starts with the following question that introduces a *hermeneutic Best Account*: "can the sense we can make of things be challenged by a rival hermeneutic which can account for these matters, for instance varieties of action and feeling, and distinctions between them, that we cannot?" (Taylor, 2016, p. 216). Here, Taylor emphasizes that a hermeneutic approach to moral sources does not aim to establish causal relations between sources and actions, but rather to render actions and responses intelligible within the narratives through which agents make sense of their lives. Making sense means rendering moral actions comprehensible, albeit within the particular narrativity with which people's lives unfold and with which individuals give meaning to their actions and their moral choices.²³⁸

For Taylor, the question calls for a positive answer, since explaining moral motivation requires widening the interpretive horizon within which actions are understood. But the point is that he argues for the need to widen the interpretation of the meanings of actions, enriching the understanding and "the landscapes of meaning that these agents act within" (Taylor, 2016, p. 217). Thus, this widening would test the different ethical outlooks "by testing the motivational constellations that each presupposes" (Taylor, 2016, pp. 220–221). By "motivational constellations," Taylor refers not to isolated moral reactions, but to the broader configuration of meanings, experiences, motivations, impediments, and self-understandings that shape an agent's life. This is what Taylor calls an "indirect" way of arguing,²³⁹

238 Taylor refers here to Dilthey's "empathic understanding" (1981; Harrington, 2001; see also S. Gallagher, 2019) and Max Weber's "verstehen" (1988, 2013; see also Herva, 1988; Balog, 2008). That is, he focuses the hermeneutic analysis from the point of view of the meaning that the agent himself gives to his action (cf. M. Martin, 2018; Raza, 2022).

239 To show what this "indirect" way of arguing consists of, he relies on the notion of a "hermeneutical circle." He draws on Heidegger (1927; see also

which would be proper to the hermeneutics he proposes since it involves opening the focus of the “direct” way, which only focuses on the moral reaction or on the right or wrong action (see also Taylor, 2012b).²⁴⁰

In this sense, the interpretations of the altruistic act, in their different versions—also Nussbaum’s or Nietzsche’s —, must be understood as parts of a whole. An individual decision must be understood in view of the whole of a life. Or an emotional response must be understood with the whole pattern of feelings that are part of a person’s character. Moreover, meaning also requires making sense of the moral sources from which it draws. In the same way, solidarity with the distant, both the concrete reaction to the need and its role in a person’s life decisions, must be understood from the set of meanings that are part of a person’s life. So too from his openness to transcendence, or his lack of it, from how he articulates goods, whether conscious or not. The indirect hermeneutic argument allows us to access the whole from this small part. In this sense, looking at the Good Samaritan, we must go beyond the concrete action of helping the neighbor and interpret it from the whole of the Samaritan’s life. If we do so, we will understand that *agape* love, with its openness to transcendence, is indeed relevant and is not just one more option for the good Samaritan.²⁴¹

Taylor, 1995j, 2006), Gadamer (1975), and Ricoeur (2007), contextualizing such a conception from the interpretation of texts to the “human meanings” of action: I believe that the notion of a hermeneutical circle can be generalized to understand how we operate with the skeins of interdependent meanings which are central to our human self-understanding” (Taylor, 2016, pp. 218–219).

240 As he says elsewhere, distinguishing himself from overly narrow conceptions of reason such as that of Rawls, Korgaard, or Habermas, what he seeks with hermeneutic reason “is not to avoid contradiction, but to offer the best and most comprehensive interpretation of very deep human intuitions” (Taylor, 2021b, p. 504).

241 Moreover, this way of arguing entails responding to the usual *overlapping consensus* surrounding altruistic actions, in which attention is focused on the act itself and not the motivations that support it. Such overlapping consensus is well reflected in Amartya Sen’s idea of “neighborhood” when he comments on the passage of the Good Samaritan: “It does not matter whether the Samaritan was moved by charity, or by a ‘sense of justice,’ or by some deeper ‘sense of fairness in treating others as equals.’ Once he finds himself in this situation, he is in a new ‘neighborhood’” (Drèze & Sen, 1989, p. 172). Taylor would answer that, precisely, what moves the Samaritan is of supreme importance for

Now if we go back to the previous hermeneutic triangle, philosophers like Nietzsche would deny this hermeneutic argument. From the part (the mere possibility of altruistic action), they would deny the whole (motivation from a source such as *agape*). Specifically, “Nietzsche is too firmly convinced that the appeal for mercy cannot but emanate from the slave’s will to power for him to accept its face validity” (Taylor, 2016, p. 219). Moreover, when Nietzsche grounds *agape* in resentment, he also breaks with any possibility of a hermeneutic explanation. Thus, the explanation of *agapeic transcendence* better explains the whole moral experience.²⁴² The same argument can be made for Nussbaum’s case, *mutatis mutandis*: on a first, direct level, she gets the origin of our moral intuitions right; on a second level, however, she mutilates the prospect of a broader interpretation that captures the true meaning of altruism for many people by closing herself off to transcendence. Thus, Taylor maintains that *agapeic transcendence* offers a more comprehensive hermeneutic account of the moral whole than either Nietzsche’s or Nussbaum’s immanent frameworks.

In any case, as we indicated in chapter 2 when evaluating Taylor’s interpretative frameworks, we also miss here a greater attention to the phenomenology of moral action, that is, to the causal relationship between the articulation of moral source and concrete action. Perhaps this phenomenology would not help much in the dialogue with Nussbaum and Nietzsche, since the debate revolves around the frameworks of understanding from which to comprehend the

the reasons we are explaining. In any case, we should remember that Taylor accepts the pluralism of moral sources as something proper to the modern moral order and that he welcomes the ecumenism that occurs *de facto* in non-profit organizations dedicated to helping others.

- 242 Taylor also cites in this context Ayn Rand as a follower of Nietzsche. She stated in an interview in 1964: “My views on charity are very simple. I do not consider it a major virtue and, above all, I do not consider it a moral duty. [...] I regard charity as a marginal issue. What I am fighting is the idea that charity is a moral duty and a primary virtue” (Rand, 1964). Its main problem is how much aiding the stranger involves violating one’s self-interest. A supererogatory act without benefit to the agent becomes indefensible to her: “The proper method of judging when or whether one should help another person is by reference to one’s own rational self-interest and one’s own hierarchy of values: the time, money or effort one gives or the risk one takes should be proportionate to the value of the person in relation to one’s own happiness” (Rand, 2005, p. 45).

motivation towards love of neighbor. But it would help in the context of debates with utilitarianism and Kantian formalism, as it does in *Sources of the Self*, in the same terms as they do, that is, around the criteria of judgment towards right action. However, as we shall see in the conclusion, this may not be possible given the different departing positions and interests of their theories.

8.3.2. On the admiration towards moral exemplars

A second element that helps to reconstruct the moral map is admiration for morally exemplary individuals. Taylor admits that an appeal to faith alone cannot demonstrate the greater hermeneutic adequacy of a transcendence-open option; rather, one can “only point to the exemplary lives of certain trail-blazing people and communities” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 643). For Taylor,

“strength and dedication can also be mediated to us by exceptionally good and/or right-acting people: some saint, or hero, or exceptional political leader (e.g., Nelson Mandela), who has risen above the temptation of personal ambition, or resentment, or desire for revenge, who is, on the contrary, really moved by the common good” (Taylor, 2016, p. 213).

Admiration for exemplary personalities is framed within the question of moral sources as well as the query about how they can bring us closer to the Good and strengthen our commitment. Moral admiration, like nature or art, leads a subject to wonder about the force behind and how it is communicated. Above all, the perception of that force can give the subject a better understanding of the meanings of his or her own life. In a way, if the source that motivates the person one admires comes from transcendence, we will also be coming into contact with it indirectly.

It must be assumed that the topic of admiration shown for morally exemplary persons is a recurrent subsidiary motif in Taylor’s realist moral theory. We have reviewed Laitinen’s critique of realist moral motivation theory with moral sources and alluded to the need to revisit the transcendence-open nature of *agape*. With moral admiration towards virtue—in particular, we mentioned Mother Teresa of Calcutta—we have established the qualitative difference of *agape* with respect to other sources or constitutive goods. This difference

was based on the peculiarity of their articulation and because sometimes they require the renunciation of other goods also appreciated by the subject for their realization. In this chapter, we have seen how Taylor defends its renunciation as a consequence of allowing the “transformation” that openness to transcendence entails. The denial of renunciation would be really a mutilation.

On the other hand, Taylor mentions Mandela, Tutu, Michnik, MLK, or the Dalai Lama as paradigmatic social and political figures who were able to envision new ways to overcome violence and inequality by opening up to the vertical dimension and making transparent the normativity of *agape*. We referred to how the admiration for these characters in positions of authority and leadership gave new horizons to the dialectic between justice and good, making entire peoples glimpse paths of peace, reconciliation, and recognition. We define *agape* in politics of recognition as “generous detachment” because it represents an abandonment of positions and ways of seeing, even of the legitimate coercive force of code enforcement, to achieve a new horizontality that is more just for all. In this sense, we speak of their *quasi-sacramental* position and of motivational power of the language of religious content in the public space for political transformation used, for example, by MLK, who used “metabiological meanings” that everyone understood.²⁴³ Their leadership opened new horizons of peace, reconciliation, and recognition, revealing the normative force of *agape* in the public sphere.

These personalities can be added to the references to others “who broke out of the immanent frame” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 728) examined by Taylor in the final chapter of *A Secular Age*. These individuals glimpse the transcendent strength of *agape*. They can transit in the

243 Bernard V. Brady refers to MLK as a “Love Activist” inspired by Christian love. One of the defining characteristics of the Christian love manifested in MLK is the proper articulation of coping with the negative consequences of altruistic motivation itself. In his view, MLK “holds that before one can be involved in direct action, that is to say, before one can appropriately face the consequences of direct action, that is, brutality, insults, and violence from angry racist mobs, one must be solidly grounded with a sense of purpose” (Brady, 2003, p. 211) Furthermore, for MLK, love transforms enemies into friends with redemptive power. The ultimate causation of that transformation is *agape*: “When Jesus bids us to love our enemies, he is speaking neither of eros nor philia, he is speaking of *agape*, understanding and creative, redemptive goodwill for all men” (King, 1981, p. 50).

cross-pressures of the secular age even while seeing the flaws of present moral self-understanding. They would trace the paths that traverse “this gap and tension between the demands of Christian faith and the norms of Civilization” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 745) in their meaning-seeking life itineraries and their use of “subtler languages” (see also Coyle, 2016; cf. Taylor, 2007b, p. 353; B. K. Ward, 2014). Taylor cites Ivan Illich, Jaques Maritain, Charles Péguy, Gerard Manley Hopkins, or Vaclav Havel, who was “stuck by love” in his conversion (Taylor, 2007b, p. 729; cf. M. P. Gallagher, 2013; Sciglitano, 2019a). They all “enlarge our palette of such points of contact with fullness” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 729). These characters, this “constellation of Taylor’s saints” (J. K. A. Smith, 2014, p. 133), appeal to a sense toward the meaning of things.

In any case, the examples that Taylor calls to mind are not intended to serve primarily as apologetics for religion and transcendence (cf. Jager, 2010). Instead, a crucial question may be to know in what way or in what form the inspiration of *agape* is through these individuals. We can ask ourselves, for example, if there is some kind of caution not to place admiration on a character whose ideas or practices are entirely controversial or abominable.²⁴⁴

We can attempt to answer these questions by turning again to the history of ethical growth and the idea of angles of transcendence that Taylor takes from David Martin (Taylor, 2024, p. 559, 2021b). Drawing on Taylor’s account of ethical growth, admiration for exemplars can be understood through different “angles of transcendence”. Ethical growth operates with two dynamics in close relation to transcendence; on the one hand, dynamics of opening up the degree of transcendence increase the ethical demand and raise the standards to almost supererogatory levels, as in the example of the Good Samaritan or with the figures of many saints; on the other hand, some movements seek to close the degree of transcendence, in which, without lowering the degree of demand, the repertoire of possible actions that allow the whole of society to be raised towards a different moral horizon is broadened, such as the truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, the movements for the abolition of slavery or civil rights.

244 These questions and others are what exemplarist moral theories attempt to answer, most notably in the debates surrounding Linda Zagzebski’s recent proposal (cf. Zagzebski, 2017; see also Szutta, 2019).

In any event, underlying these two modes of opening up the degree of transcendence is a twofold way of understanding transcendence: on the one hand, as a going beyond life and the cosmos, with an accent on the abandonment of the world, so to speak; and, on the other hand, transcendence as “the discovery or invention of a new standpoint from which the existing order of cosmos or society can be criticized or denounced” (Taylor, 2021b, p. 498). Of course, the two may be related. We can emphasize from the second definition, however, the creation of these new anchor points from transcendence that had not been imagined before and that, he adds, serve to criticize and transform the moral order of each historical moment.

In any case, we are inclined to think that Taylor trusts more and prefers to be inspired by charismatic individuals who close the angle of transcendence, that is, individuals who transform the world and do not simply abandon it. Or to put it in another way, individuals who somehow are able to represent the *catholic attitude* that unites openness to *agape* with effective action.²⁴⁵ He prefers to be inspired by individuals such as those we have mentioned: Mandela, Tutu, Gandhi, Dalai Lama, and most recently, Pope Francis (cf. Taylor, 2020b, 2021a, pp. 10–11). Conversely, a certain mistrust of very open degrees of transcendence manifests itself in a bias against the “transformation” that radical openness to transcendence or “hyper-agustinism” can have, especially in its necessity for the renunciation of many human goods for the sake of a greater love of God.

We speak of a certain distrust; we can even speak of ambivalence. On the one hand, we have spoken of the qualitative distinctions between life goods and constitutive goods and the incommensurability of these, which often go hand in hand with renunciation. Moreover, in this chapter, we have seen Taylor defend openness to transcendence from the accusation of mutilation made by Nussbaum. But he does manifest a particular fear of transformation in some places, as when he speaks of how the axial revolution *de facto* ended social equality or of how spiritual elites were created that moved away from

245 In another context, speaking of the meaning of the sacred after the disenchantment of the world, he states similarly: “The upshot of these reflections is that a strong, anchored-in-reality-beyond- us sacred can be denied, while another, arising in the interface, can be affirmed” (Taylor, 2011a, p. 118).

the affirmation of ordinary life or the drive to reform, which strove to raise the degree of evangelical demand of all society.

More clearly, we can see the distrust towards more open degrees of angles of transcendence in an older text published in a Jesuit journal of spirituality. Taylor tries to understand the current spiritual emphasis on the enhancement of life and ordinary existence, but he also tries to reconcile this with the demands of the older spirituality and the demands of something beyond life (Taylor, 1996b; see also Taylor & Costa, 2021, pp. 132–136). In the text, he even presents graphically his representation of some of the current forms of spirituality, which he classifies according to two dimensions. In the horizontal dimension, he moves from Christian to pagan sources. Meanwhile, he moves on the vertical axis between transcendence and what he calls life-centered spirituality.

The latter polarity is crucial. Taylor represents a difference between the “purity stance,” closer to the upper vertical pole of transcendence, and the “*agape/karuna* stance,” down nearer to the centrality of life, yet still on the axis of transcendence. In Taylor’s view, the *purity stance* insists on the return of religion to its purity, elevating the renunciatory ends by proposing them as goals for all, detached from the pursuit of prosperity. In contrast, in the *agape* stance, neither renunciation for the sake of the greater good nor human flourishing is rejected. However, it is assumed that the divine will desires, at least in part, precisely human flourishing (cf. Taylor, 1999a, p. 20, 2007a, pp. 17, 500, 2011e). For Taylor, the concern of spiritual persons should not be elevation as a departure of the world or the restoration of past times animated by nostalgia, but rather “our major concern must be our dealings with others, in justice and benevolence and on a level of equality: to increase life, relieve suffering and foster prosperity. To lead one’s ordinary life rightly in this way is open to everyone” (Taylor, 1996b, p. 12).

Such a practical-focused *agape*, or *agape* with a closed angle of transcendence, is concerned with healing the world’s injustices and with fulfilling the sensing subject’s expectations of meaning. We can find this *agape* in the charismatic characters that close the angle of transcendence. Thus, we can characterize these characters as individuals who transit the angles of transcendence, having one foot in the immanent moral order they live in and another foot in the broader horizons, beyond life, that the inspiration by *agape* opens

for them. The articulation of *agape* allows them not only to have a quasi-utopian vision of how interpersonal and societal relationships should aspire to be but also provides them with a reliable commitment immune to any unexpected negative consequence, such as moral superiority, misanthropy, ethnocentrism, discouragement in the face of an unresponsive reality or the use of any violence and imposition as a means to an end (cf. Taylor, 1999b).

Furthermore, not only do these individuals see the possibility of breaking through the ceiling of the immanence of the current moral framework, but they not only see the possibility of achieving fulfillment in their lives. In addition, *agape* allows them to dream of more just and equitable worlds in the social and political realm and gives them the moral motivation to put them into practice. They form the “loyal opposition” of Modernity (Taylor, 2007b, p. 745), in the midst of it as “mustard seed,” as “grain in the world” (see Taylor, 2018b):

“The mustard seeds are the points at which acts happen which break the ordinary course of things and show the love of God, like the conversion of St Francis, or the work of Jean Vanier, or the courage of non-violent resistance which brings not just liberation but peace with the former oppressors” (Taylor, 2021b, p. 493).

Therefore, charismatic figures are the privileged agents of an articulated altruistic behavior that allows History to advance, leading the way to universalism. With one foot in life and the other *beyond life*, forming an angle between the love received and the love that seeks to give itself to those who need it most, they are Taylor’s examples of what we have called *agapeic transcendence*. In essence, they provide the model of altruism and love of neighbor that we can suggest through Taylor’s thought: of deep inspiration from an external source, so that not only the motivation towards concrete action is given, but a deep identification of the individual with that constitutive good takes place, which is the basis of the choices he makes, both in leading his life and in his social and political involvement.

These *agapeic leaders*²⁴⁶ are a “fuller expression of the demands of the Gospel,” extending beyond the integral following of Christ’s actions in the New Testament to realize them more fully in new contexts, such as our post-Christian one (Taylor, 2021b, p. 502). By being inside the world, they can discern those situations in which to move forward and meet those demands more fully. As he himself remarks:

“So the Christian supports and tries to live some version of the Enlightenment ethic, but in the different register of *kenotic* compassion. And this leads to important differences, both in assent and dissent. And these differences may just plant the mustard seeds whose growth may transform the world for the better, more than the best ethic of rules could ever do. This I take to be a tenet of Christian faith, not an apodictic certainty” (Taylor, 2021b, p. 505).²⁴⁷

Referring to these *agapeic leaders*, the quote is meant to emphasize that they can live the call to universality present in an *agape*-based ethic, ensuring that they do not fall into the codification and normativization of apodictic certainty. Again, certainty is needed, and truth is to be sought. However, compassion serves as a counterbalance to identifying the core of religion with a particular set of truths or an established code. *Agape*, as the source of the moral articulation of the Christian religion, allows for avoiding any claim to truth or normativization that, by any extension, involves failing to love the neighbor or generating unbridgeable distinctions between individuals or communities. *Agapeic leaders* can also project such articulation on history and society, generating new horizons previously unimagined or unattainable without generosity, forgiveness, and the original interest for the neighbor.

246 Carvalho and Mulla (2021, 2023) have recently sought to provide a model of leadership based on *agape*. However, their research applies only to management and the business world, with little attention to the influence of *agape* on social and political leadership.

247 The allusion to kenotic compassion is undoubtedly an invitation that *agape*-love is best realized when it involves radical self-dispossession. Besides, behind this kenotic compassion, a nod to a particular theology invites us to see the descending love of the trinity as a movement of suffering, compassionate and sacrificial love that invites us to do the same in response (cf. Balthasar, 1990). Also, together with the renunciation of apodictic certainties, certain proximity to the kenotic ontology of authors such as Derrida or Levinas can be noted (cf. Balthasar, 1990; Davies, 2003).

In any case, we should be cautious with admiration for charismatic characters. First of all, because of the ambivalences we have already noted. Secondly, it would be necessary to consider all the factors that can help to understand the success or failure of their inspiration. In fact, some characters Taylor refers to are not exemplary in all aspects of their lives. Others, such as Mother Teresa or Gandhi, do not arouse global agreement on the exemplarity of their political or charitable action. Furthermore, Jean Vanier's work has definitely been called into question after the investigations into cases of sexual abuse.²⁴⁸ As the New Testament itself says at the end of the first letter of St. John, shortly after speaking of the commandment of love: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

Habermas himself, in a dialogue with Taylor, already spoke of the danger of certain political theologies that center on the charisma of leadership, such as Carl Schmitt, who, in his revolt against the dissolution of the metaphysical truth of liberalism, ends up proposing an identitarian conception of a mass democracy led by a Führer. He adds, "Of course, Carl Schmitt's clericofascist conception of 'the political' is a matter of the past, but it must serve as a warning to all those who want to revive political theology" (Habermas, 2011, p. 23; see also Schmitt, 2015). It would be inelegant for that to be a warning to Taylor, however much he also appeals to the recovery of a certain ontological notion of the good and flirts with the charism of certain leaders. The discussion, of course, did not go down those paths but was coming to the use of religious language in the public sphere (cf. Taylor & Habermas, 2011). This brings us to the next point to test the viability of the moral map of *agapeic transcendence*: the *subtler languages*.

8.3.3. On the use of subtler languages

One of the distinctive qualities peculiar to these characters that we can trace in Taylor, albeit briefly, is their ability to articulate their

248 The study on abuses in *L'Arche*, the community founded by Jean Vanier, warns that "the institutionalization of charismatic authority (...) could constitute a breeding ground favorable to the development of configurations of control and the perpetration of abuse" (Higgins, 2023; see also Mertes, 2023).

experience of love in languages that are understandable to many other people.²⁴⁹ His moral exemplarity is often accompanied by a use of language that opens horizons of understanding of reality that facilitate ethical and moral progress.

It seems that the capacity to mobilize through presence, example, and words of the personalities alluded to by Taylor refers to the concept of *subtler language*. With the notion of “subtler language,” borrowed from Earl Wasserman (1979), Taylor describes forms of expression that can open cracks in the immanent frame and gesture toward transcendence without fixing it conceptually (Taylor, 2024, pp. 31–36, see also 1989a, p. 393ff, 2007b, pp. 353–361, 718–720, 755–761). Since the post-Romantic period, Taylor has been attentive to any attempts to abandon the limits of the “languages of objective reference” (Taylor, 2007b, p. 357), especially from literature, poetry, and music (cf. Taylor & Costa, 2021).

In that sense, Taylor is somewhat interested in how language is interwoven in life, shaping human experience, creating new meanings, and being an integral part of the construction of the individual self and the community. From the symbolic, what *subtler languages* allow is both to embody the constitutive and existential meanings internal to the human being as well as the realities external to them with which they resonate, including also the constitutive goods of moral and spiritual experience: “Symbols can help bring to bear what I called in another work ‘moral sources’” (Taylor, 2016, p.

249 Referring to Martin Luther King and Lincoln, Timothy P. Jackson said that they were “individuals capable of cross-fertilizing the languages of biblical religion and liberal politics,” which helped them “to check the pretensions of both democracy and philosophy” (Jackson, 1993, pp. 71–72). Of course, this ability has to go hand in hand with the skill to recognize those voices and separate them from those with twisted purposes. In that sense, Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly speak of the current need to develop what they qualified as metapoietic ability: “Living well in our secular, nihilistic age [...] requires the higher-order skill of recognizing when to rise up as one with the ecstatic crowd and when to turn heel and walk rapidly away”. As an example, they explain that “the person who has acquired this skill knows that it’s not always appropriate to walk away from the crowd—getting caught up in the mood of “I have a dream,” and rising with 200,000 people to cheer Dr. King, is not an event one should be proud to have walked away from” (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2011, pp. 211–212).

168).²⁵⁰ In any case, as we saw in comparing Ricoeur's and Taylor's view of *agape*, in Taylor's case, symbols are reinforced by the view of the constitutive good behind them, giving them greater normative value, circumventing the coercive weakness and interpretive relativism of symbols. Taylor also suggests that contemporary religious expression increasingly unfolds through *subtler languages* that allow experiences of transcendence to be shared while leaving ontological commitments open. *Subtler languages* "allows us to manifest an order in things while leaving our ontological commitments relatively indeterminate" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 607). In this way, *subtler languages* allow us to share the experience of openness to transcendence, especially in times of mutual fragilization of any moral and spiritual perspective and search for authenticity.

The characteristic of these languages is also the ontological indeterminacy, again distinctive of Taylor's moral realism. As with the reconversions he presents at the end of *A Secular Age*, these languages allow us to express what Taylor sees as the future of the religious predicament in the West: "one feels oneself to be breaking out of a narrower frame into a broader field, which makes sense of things in a different way" (Taylor, 2007b, p. 768).

What he says about poetry and other arts serves Taylor to suggest that religious expression today must be explored through *subtler languages* (cf. Taylor, 2007b, pp. 486, 489). Taylor mentions numerous authors throughout his work as true admirers of literature and poetry. In any case, to illustrate the itinerary of these languages—as a bridge between life and what goes beyond it, as a pore that cracks the *buffered* identity of modernity, as an angle open to transcendence—we can use Paul Celan's image of the "meridian" that he rescues:

250 Taylor is especially sensitive to how this openness occurs in the language of poetry: "The extensions of language that one needs to be fully aware of this, to be fully nourished, are poetic. So "poetically man dwells" [dichterisch wohnet der Mensch]" (Taylor, 2016, p. 97; cf. Heidegger, 2009, 2:25–26). Taylor is heavily influenced by August Wilhelm Schlegel on this point: "Poetry... is nothing other than a perpetual symbolizing: either we seek an outer shell for something spiritual, or else we relate something external to an invisible inner reality" (Schlegel, 1963, pp. 80–81; quoted in Taylor, 2016, p. 168). [Dichten ...ist nichts anderes als ein ewig Symbolisieren; wir suchen entweder für etwas Geistiges eine äussere Hülle oder wir beziehen ein Äusseres auf ein unsichtbares Inneres (translated by Ch.T)].

“I find something that binds and leads to encounter, like a poem. I find something—like language—immaterial yet earthly, terrestrial, something circular, returning upon itself by way of both poles and thereby—happily—even crossing the tropics (and tropes): I find... a *meridian*” (Celan, 2001, p. 413; quoted in Taylor, 2011g, p. 65).²⁵¹

Meridian provides a metaphor to describe the connectivity that leads to encounters, “a moving place which reconnects” (Taylor, 2011f, p. 65). Celan refers to the places of his origins, the places of his childhood. Yet the metaphor goes still further if we read Taylor’s interpretation. Although it appeals to a special image of a place, it actually invokes a non-place, a utopia. It refers to a horizon that gathers the different horizons through the performative power of language and “its ability to restore the contact across the lines of fracture, and thus reconstitute the underlying integrity” (Taylor, 2011f, p. 65).

The language of *meridians*, then, allows the gathering of spaces and times through imagination and inspiration beyond all pressures. And it also allows “the reconnection of persons, the restoration of a lost, or never possessed, mutual presence” (Taylor, 2011f, p. 67). It allows the eruption of the Other within a context of signification that rescues the universal union of all human beings. Moreover, beyond that, the reconnection of all human beings with the sacred that lies behind the intuition of *agapeic transcendence*—the wonder of nature, the love to which we open ourselves, the solidarity lived and felt, even beyond the boundaries of the self and what is familiar to open ourselves to the stranger. *Subtler* or *meridian* languages would ignite an instinct that accompanies us even before the Axial Age but is present in the *agape* force. The opening to the *agapeic transcendence* would connect us through these languages with this instinct to ethical transformation:

“To carry through integrally on this ethic would involve a transformation, a kind of transcendence in relation to the instincts which the first humans inherited from their evolutionary ancestors. It would require an instinct of belonging, of solidarity, without the obligatory contrast case of the other, the outsider. A transformation of belonging and friendship,

251 [Ich finde das Verbindende und wie das Gedicht zur Begegnung Führende. Ich finde etwas—wie die Sprache—Immaterielles, aber Irdisches, Terrestrisches, etwas Kreisförmiges, über die beiden Pole in sich selbst Zurückkehrendes und dabei—heitererweise—sogar die Tropen Durchkreuzendes—: ich finde... einen Meridian (translated by John Felstiner)].

therefore, which transcends the need for the enemy” (Taylor, 2016, p. 340).

Language thus can change our goals, broaden our life horizons, aspirations, and even the way we understand the world. “It is this kind of articulacy, which changes its object—which is in other words, constitutive” (2016, p. 191). Thus, when we formulate *agape* and its content and open ourselves to its articulation—or stand before someone who embodies it and admires us —“we grasp a new vocabulary (...) and hence alter the shape of the issues we recognize, we become capable of explorations we couldn’t make before” (Taylor, 2016, p. 193). Such a reliance by Taylor on constitutive languages is based on his conviction that the power of semantics also lies in its possibility to generate new articulations of our motivations: “articulated meanings may draw us more powerfully,” and “they may also repel us more decisively” (2016, p. 189).

