

ON THE RELIGIOUS SOURCES OF AUTONOMY AND SELF-EXPRESSION : CHARLES TAYLOR AND MARCEL GAUCHET

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Introduction

Our generation considers self-expression as an issue of paramount importance. We are urged to be ‘true to ourselves’ and to live ‘an authentic life’. These notions are often used in a self-evident, self-explanatory way. Rights such as freedom of speech and expression are *prima facie*; they do not seem to require further justification. On the contrary, these rights are called upon when one is in need of justification of self-expression in the social sphere. They are justifying what should, and what should not be justified. Recent debates about the expression of religious identity attest to this. For example, self-expression is invoked as sufficient grounds to justify wearing a headscarf. In this article, I will argue for a genealogical approach to the phenomenon of self-expression. Self-expression can only serve as a ground of justification of both private and public issues when its origins are clear. What are its anthropological and historical conditions?

To answer this question, I will turn to a philosopher who has greatly contributed to this genealogy of self-expression, Charles Taylor. I will contrast his concept of self-expression with the notion of autonomy as it is developed in Marcel Gauchet’s genealogical reflections. In the first part, I will focus on the transcendental conditions of both concepts. I will look at Taylor’s and Gauchet’s anthropological presuppositions. In the second and more extensive part, I will examine how the notions of autonomy and self-expression came to the fore. My focus will be on genealogy, by exploring the historical path that led to autonomy and to self-expression. In this part, I will pay special attention to the way religion fostered the development of autonomy and self-expression. My thesis is that self-expression and its underlying notion of autonomy are not won *against* forms of religious paternalism but are, rather, the result of transformations established by (Christian) religion itself. As to the contemporary role of self-expression, I will conclude by pointing out the fundamental divergence of Taylor and Gauchet.

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I. Transcendental Anthropology

Charles Taylor (1931, Montreal, Canada) is one of the most famous and celebrated¹ philosophers of our days. Taylor masterfully combined different areas of research such as philosophical anthropology, theory of knowledge, philosophy of language, and philosophy of culture. Though his work contains a lot of in-depth analysis, he is foremost a synthetic thinker. These synthetic qualities make Taylor one of the most important intermediaries between analytical and continental philosophy. Another quality of his work is its accessibility. Taylor never abandoned the ‘ordinary language school’ of Oxford, by which he was deeply influenced during his studies in Oxford in the fifties.²

The constitutive source of Taylor’s thought is Aristotelian: human beings are self-interpreting animals. This centrality of self-interpretation resonates in almost all of his philosophical reflections. In this respect, Taylor developed the key concept of ‘strong evaluation’. Human beings have multiple desires. Some desires are experienced as stronger than other ones. Certain desires are *qualitatively* different - we desire some desires above others. Our desires are ‘strongly evaluated’. This concept of strong evaluation, for which Taylor is indebted to Harry Frankfurt’s concept of ‘second-order desires’, points to the importance of self-reflection in our lives.

Not every action can be the result of strong evaluation. What clothes I choose to wear today is rather inspired by practical matters – What is the weather like? Whom am I going to meet? – than by some process of strong evaluation. Taylor uses the term ‘strong evaluation’ to refer to a process of *moral* reflection. Some considerations that seem at first sight only practical, can turn into moral considerations in the operation of strong evaluation. Traveling by train instead of using a car can bear a merely practical meaning. Going by train allows one to read, or for this trajectory, public transport is faster and cheaper. Such a choice can also reflect a moral consideration. One can choose public transport for ecological reasons *despite* possible practical disadvantages. The deliberative character of strong evaluation then seems tied to some form of explicit rational articulation. However, Taylor also acknowledges more implicit forms of articulation. Strong evaluations are then contained in “a sense of a qualitative distinction”.³

Human beings are strong evaluators. In our evaluations, we prefer some options or values to other ones. For example, ecology can be considered

¹ In 2007, Taylor was awarded the prestigious Templeton price for research in the field of religion, the ‘religious Nobel price’.

² See Nicholas H. Smith, *Meaning, Morals and Modernity*, Polity Press & Blackwell Publishers, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 18-25.

³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1989, p. 21: ‘That is why I spoke above of acting within a framework as functioning with a ‘sense’ of a qualitative distinction. It can be only this; or it can be spelled out in a highly explicit way, in a philosophically formulated ontology or anthropology.’

more valuable than fast and comfortable transport. Taylor calls such values “life goods”.⁴ What is the *source* of these ‘life goods’? On what grounds do we value life goods and qualitatively discriminate between them? In asking this question in the context of strong evaluation, we might end up recognising our “constitutive goods” or “hyper goods”.⁵ Constitutive goods transcend life goods in that they justify and inspire the life goods. We can ask for the source of a life good such as ecology. That source might be the intrinsic value of nature. It might also be anthropocentric: we need to take care of the environment to ensure the survival of future generations and the human race. Both nature and human endeavor might also be connected to God as the ultimate source. Constitutive goods are not merely the object of intellectual reflection. As to our ultimate moral sources, “knowing a constitutive good means loving, admiring or respecting it. Because of this, one is moved by it and wants to move ever closer to it: loving the good and wanting to act in accordance with it are inextricably linked for Taylor.”⁶ *Knowledge is virtue*: Taylor seems to embrace this classic Socratic adagio. At the same time, he emphasises that we feel obliged to act in accordance with our constitutive goods, whether we like them or not. Our love for them is secondary to our obligation towards them.⁷

Further questions can be raised as to the range of constitutive goods. Are they merely human inventions or projections, or do they transcend human experience? And if they do so, what kind of objectivity do they entail? Are they ontologically independent from human experience? If a ‘realistic’ account of moral concepts were possible, what would it be like? What should we make of the plurality of constitutive goods and the possible conflicts that might ensue? However interesting these questions are, I will leave them aside to avoid sliding into a technical discussion.⁸

In our actions, we implicitly or explicitly *express* our constitutive goods. Taylor develops a teleological and expressive account of human action.⁹ Human actions are always intentional and, by consequence, not reducible to

⁴ *Idem*, p. 93: ‘I have been concentrating on qualitative distinctions between actions, or feelings, or modes of life. The goods which these define are facets or components of a good life. Let us call these “life goods”.’

⁵ *Idem*, pp. 91-107.

⁶ Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* in the series *Philosophy Now* (ed. J. Sand), Acumen, Teddington, 2000, p. 47.

⁷ Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Papers II: Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 120: “I want to speak of strong evaluation when the goods putatively identified are not seen as constituted as good by the fact that we desire them, but rather are seen as normative for desire. That is, they are seen as goods which we ought to desire, even if we do not, goods such that we show ourselves up as inferior or bad by our not desiring them.”

⁸ Taylor addresses these questions in *Sources of the Self*, pp. 53-90. Ruth Abbey described Taylor’s position with regard to moral concepts as ‘falsifiable realism’: until a theory refutes that moral concepts are to be considered in a philosophically realistic way and explains why this realism ultimately rests on some type of ‘illusion’, the theory of moral realism stands. See Abbey, *ibidem*, pp. 27-31.

⁹ See Taylor, *The Explanation of Behaviour*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964.

mere events. Such reductionism holds sway in naturalistic philosophy and can be traced back to Cartesian and empiricist dualism. These pioneer strands of modern philosophy distinguish sharply between inner mental states and outer actions. Human actions only differ from events in that they possess a 'mental background'. In contemporary naturalistic philosophy, 'mental causes' are replaced by 'physical causes', thereby rendering the distinction between actions and events obsolete. Human actions then become physical events. With his expressive theory of action, Taylor heavily criticises this reductionist theory.¹⁰ According to Taylor, it is impossible to ontologically separate mental and physical aspects of action. Intentional and physical aspects of action are like Aristotelian form and matter. Human action presupposes a minimal awareness of action as *my* action. Knowledge of action is by consequence always internal to the action itself: it is knowledge of the action by the agent himself, 'agent's knowledge', as opposed to the external 'observer's knowledge' of scientific research developed from a disengaged perspective.

Through articulation and strong evaluation, we discover our constitutive goods, our moral horizon. This horizon is far from an individual construction. It is a framework of 'transcendental propositions' we always share with a community.¹¹ As modern subjects, we are capable of choosing our own accents while employing our personality. We never fully escape a collective framework. The most significant example is language. We do not choose the language(s) of our education, yet language determines to a large extent our identity. Language constitutes a transcendental horizon within which we can freely express our identity.

Taylor defends the validity of transcendental arguments.¹² They deepen the insight in the object of research by exploring its conditions of possibility. However, Taylor's transcendental philosophy differs widely from Kant in that for Taylor, our transcendental framework is itself dependent on the historical context. In this respect, Taylor is in line with R.G. Collingwood, his philosophical 'grandfather',¹³ who emphasised the historicity of 'absolute presuppositions'. On the same subject, Taylor diverges from P.F. Strawson. Strawson recognises the historicity of *some* of our transcendental propositions.¹⁴ The proposition 'the earth is flat' once served as a transcendental horizon for human experience, but is now substituted with

¹⁰ See his essay 'Hegel's Philosophy of Mind', in *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, pp. 77-96.

¹¹ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 35.

¹² Taylor, 'The Validity of Transcendental Arguments' in *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge (Mass.), Harvard University Press, 1995.

¹³ If Isaiah Berlin can be regarded as Taylor's intellectual father, then Collingwood is his grandfather, because Berlin borrowed a lot from Collingwood's historical approach to absolute presuppositions. See Skagestad, Peter, 'Collingwood and Berlin: A Comparison' in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 66, Number 1, January 2005, pp. 99-112.

¹⁴ P.F. Strawson, *Skepticism and Naturalism: Some Varieties*, The Woodbridge Lectures 1983, Columbia University Press, New York, pp. 1-29.

‘the earth is round’. However, underlying these historical transcendental propositions remains a core of unchanging, a-historical transcendental propositions. Unlike Strawson, Taylor argues that all transcendental propositions are linked to a historical setting. Whereas Strawson is an adherent of descriptive metaphysics, a metaphysics that only tries to articulate our ever-lasting, bedrock presuppositions, Taylor is more inclined to adopt a revisionary stance towards our absolute presuppositions, especially in the field of morals. Articulation of our moral presuppositions may lead us to reconsider our moral priorities as an individual, or may induce political action that changes the moral background of our society. However, this openness to revision does not imply a slide into relativism. A transcendental framework may be historical as to its contents, its existence is as inescapable and necessary as it is historical. It is this narrow connection between transcendental philosophy and history which will urge us to follow Taylor’s historical narrative of self-expression in part two. Before doing so, we need to introduce the transcendental framework of Marcel Gauchet.

Marcel Gauchet (1946, Poilley, France) is one of the most important contemporary political philosophers on the continent. His main focus is on the structural conditions of contemporary democratic societies. He describes his philosophical enterprise as *anthropo-sociologie transcendente*,¹⁵ that is, he wants to articulate the conditions of possibility of human socialisation. But transcendental philosophy for Gauchet cannot be detached from history. If we study the history of our ‘being together’, Gauchet argues, that study turns out to be inextricably intertwined with both the transcendental structure and the history of religion. As I will elaborate in detail in the second part, autonomy and self-expression are, according to Gauchet, the result of both the inner logic and the historical contingencies of religion. Therefore, I will restrict myself to the book that best reflects Gauchet’s genealogy of politics and religion and contributed arguably most to his fame, *The Disenchantment of the World*.¹⁶ As Gauchet writes on the back flap of the French edition,¹⁷ he wants to reinvigorate the tradition started with Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and Rudolf Otto at the beginning of the 20th century. a tradition that intensely studied the link between religion and social organisation. His project is very ambitious in that it intends to overlook *all* human political en religious history. Far from reducing religion to some kind of supra-structure, as Marx had done, Gauchet attributes to religion a role encompassing the entire human collectivity.

What, then, does Gauchet’s fundamental anthropology consist of? In fact, it is difficult to answer this question before telling the historical account.

¹⁵ M. Gauchet, *La condition historique: entretiens avec François Azouvi et Sylvain Piron*, Paris, Stock, 2003, p. 10.

¹⁶ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World. A Political History of Religion*, transl. O. Burge, in *New French Thought*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1997.

¹⁷ Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde : une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, Gallimard, 1985.

However, in the introduction to *Disenchantment*, Gauchet points to our human experience of time as constitutive of our political and religious history. Our experience of time is ambiguous, “in the way in which our perception is divided between an “always already there”, which reduces us to nothing, and a “yet to be realised”, which throws us into the wide open space of action.”¹⁸ What is ‘always already there’ is an order of things which we have not designed ourselves. We simply have to comply with its rules. This is the ‘past’ dimension of human experience. On the other hand, there is the ‘future’ dimension. As Gauchet formulates it, “we cannot avoid changing ourselves and our surroundings, which is why we are beings of *action*.”¹⁹ Things are always interior to human beings, but at the same time, human beings also precede things. Gauchet argues that human history always favors one of two temporal dispositions. It is the ‘fundamental option’²⁰ of the human species to ‘choose’²¹ either to submit to the legacy of the past, to a heteronomous model of meaning, or to orient itself to a future founded in human will, autonomy, responsibility and self-expression.

Before embarking on the historical developments of this anthropological fact, I want to mention *a priori* two ontological models that are closely tied up with these two fundamental options, viz., temporal dispositions. The ‘choice’ of the human being for the realm of the past and for heteronomy is sustained by an ontological monism. The present is mere repetition and ritual re-enactment of the founding past. It does not entail anything structurally new. In this respect, the present *is* the past. The ‘choice’ for the future, by contrast, presupposes an ontological dualism. It is only when founding past and founded present are recognised as distinct that human creativity enters history that human beings ‘have a future’ in which they can project their vision of change in the relationship between present and past. But to shed more light on these ontological structures, we must now turn to Gauchet’s explanation of history.

II. Historical Implementations

II.1 Gauchet and the Christian Roots of Autonomy

¹⁸ *Idem*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 6.

²¹ Gauchet emphasises that this choice neither stems from rational deliberation nor from imagination, but from a limited set of transcendental conditions. ‘Choice’ then is understood negatively: the absence of determining factors pushing history in this way rather than in some other way. See *Disenchantment*, p. 12. The reason for the quotation marks of ‘choice’ is that Gauchet considers history as driven by both contingency and necessity. History is necessary, in that in every phase, a limited set of transcendental possibilities determines the further course of history. History responds to fundamental logical possibilities. On the other hand, history is contingent and to a certain extent free, because the *choice* for one possibility to some other is triggered by coincidence, or arbitrary decisions. At this point, the tide of history is simply unpredictable and inexplicable.

For Gauchet, the way society is politically organised today is deeply indebted to religious transformations. And vice versa: we can only understand why religion had to transform if we take into account its political setting. The history of religion and politics thus being deeply intertwined, Gauchet seems to set apart five different stages: first 'pure' religion or pre-political society; then, the emergence of the State in hierarchical societies; third, the development of the so called 'axial' religions from within hierarchical societies; fourth, the specific development of the Judaeo-Christian tradition; and then the fifth and final stage: the achievement of our contemporary secular age. Stages 1-3 generally correspond to the first part of Gauchet's *Disenchantment*; stages 4 and 5 are developed in the second part. We will now take a closer look at the transformations religion undergoes or develops itself in each stage, thereby doing injustice to Gauchet's detailed account of political change.

The first stage is the stage of 'pure' religion, or the realm of the pure past. At the beginning of humanity, mankind oddly enough gives in its own power of creation and transformation, its own ability of self-expression, to subdue itself to a heteronomous instance, the divine. Essential to this kind of society is that the social order is what it is since time out of mind. The society as a whole is concerned with the preservation of the divine customs. Religious acts are rituals re-enacting the foundational divine acts. No individual is considered to be 'higher' on the social scale or 'closer' to the divine, even not those actually performing the ritual, such as shamans or priests. Since the human world rightfully is the emanation of the divine, there is no real distinction between both levels. At this stage of history, - and, as must be remarked, its largest stage - humanity 'freely' admits of an ontological monism, annihilating its own creative powers to transform both nature and the social sphere. The only distinction to be made is a temporal one: the remote past of the constitutive divine acts versus the present concern to continue divine law. The present is ruled by the past. The present *is* the past. Gauchet describes the essence of this initial stage in human history as humanity's act of 'dispossession'.²²

This enduring stage gradually changes by the emergence of the State, which challenges the absolute heteronomy of the divine. A king or sovereign installs himself at the top of the social sphere, thereby introducing a relation of confrontation between rulers and subjects. Though the king's power is still legitimated in terms of its divine origin, the religious 'Other' now is localised for the first time within the human, visible sphere. It occupies a well defined *space*.

The consequences for religion are huge. Due to this first 'incarnation' of the divine, the problem arises of the relation between the presence of the sacred (the king, a sacred building, etc.) and its distant origin. Can the human form of the sacred really be a truthful incarnation or *expression* of the divine? We

²² Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, pp. 23-32.

are faced with the first theological questions of history. Secondly, the impersonal, remote divine now gets personality and subjectivity by delegation in the sovereign. This breeds the possibility of ‘axial’ religions – the term is from Karl Jaspers – , i.e. religions that center around the revelation in a human being. Despite these first signs of erosion of the divine, society as such is still oriented to the preservation of the divine law of the past.²³

The axial period – between 800 and 200 BC – faces a new situation: ontological dualism, of separation between the human and the divine, the visible and invisible, the ‘real’ world and the world of mere appearance. Now there are two possibilities: either the attempt to restore unity, or the road of innovation. The first possibility is largely developed in the East, whereas the West chooses to follow the second path. The road of innovation gradually leads to subjectifying the divine (instead of returning to the impersonal divine) and to objectivity of nature. It is important to note that religion itself transforms according to its own inner logic - the relation between immanence and transcendence. In the axial period of the West, God becomes subject and more and more transcendent, and thus *de iure* allowing for more human freedom. It is *de iure* and not *de facto* because the hierarchical society will continue to rule till the French revolution. However, underlying the hierarchical surface breeds the growing transcendence of God and the equally growing freedom of man.²⁴ At this point in the dynamics of transcendence, Gauchet repeats a ‘Blumenbergian’ insight. In his analysis of the legitimacy of the modern age, Blumenberg refers to nominalism as the trigger for modernity.²⁵ Nominalistic theology had refuted thomistic naturalism on grounds of unreliability. For if God is really omnipotent, His will cannot be determined by some rational order we find in the works of Creation. God’s will transcends every order at any time. By consequence, human beings are no longer safe in their natural environment, since the latter could no longer be assumed to be the reflection of divine will. Because the cosmos is no longer arguably the reflection of divine rationality, all what is left to human beings is to use their own rationality and will in order to transform nature. Divine transcendence and subjectivity on the one hand and human freedom on the other hand grow proportionally, the first being the transcendental condition of the latter.

The decisive leap to radical transcendence in the transformation of western culture was already triggered by Judaism. Mozes’ political model can be summarised as ‘dominating the dominance’. Being a minority culture, the Jewish people establish their own identity by affirming a God ‘higher than any other god’. Judaism thus is the first emergence of monotheism and radical transcendence. Even if hierarchical societies exist that are stronger than the Jewish people, God is still more powerful than these contingent

²³ *Idem*, pp. 33-46.

²⁴ *Idem*, pp. 47-75.

²⁵ Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, translated by Robert M. Wallace, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 1983, pp. 181-204.

earthly powers. Divine power transcends all imperial power, because God rules the entire universe, not just a small piece on planet earth.²⁶

Now the question rises how to reconcile this universality with the particularity of the Covenant of God with the Jews. Judaism itself offers a first answer: messianic thought. In the end, a Messiah will come who will subjugate all people to the God of Israel. But if this would happen by the sword, by a 'divine' ruler at the top of the social sphere, the imperial logic would return.

Hence the Christian solution:²⁷ God does not incarnate at the top of hierarchical society, submitting all kingdoms to his ultimate (imperial) Kingdom. Instead, God incarnates at the bottom of society. The divine is no longer associated to the king's person, as a superior over its subjects, but now appears as a radical other. It is exactly paradoxically through God's incarnation in Jesus that both the divine and the human level are considered as fully independent.

The Christian solution entails three innovations.²⁸ From now on, every Christian can, in the name of God and his personal conscience, challenge any worldly order. Since God is invisible, he can only be met through the most individual, interior conscience. Secondly, human collectivity sees the birth of an independent religious institute - the Church - amidst an independent social society. Thirdly, both Church and state have to recognise each other's powers in order to prevail in their own domain: priests rule in spiritual matters; kings in worldly affairs. Kings thus gradually lose their sacral status and come to be seen as merely representatives of the political level, not intermediates of the sacred.

The fifth and last stage, then, consists of the complete dissolution of (functional) religion as such.²⁹ Growing independence of transcendence and immanence, invisible and visible order allows humanity to take back what it once gave in to religion: its own creative powers. Not that men now have become gods: division, separation, otherness, heteronomy, etc. still remain, but now at the centre of the human condition. The otherness is no longer cut off from the human sphere. Ontological dualism has long functioned as the transcendental condition for human freedom and self-expression, but has now become obsolete.

Here Gauchet is very careful about the new political order. He calls heteronomy and otherness still constitutive for democracy, thereby avoiding

²⁶ Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, pp. 107-114.

²⁷ *Idem*, pp. 115-129.

²⁸ *Idem*, pp. 130-143.

²⁹ *Idem*, pp. 162-199.

a simple linear account, a ‘subtraction-story’ as Taylor would have it.³⁰ A solid separation between the state as institution and contingent individuals exercising power is crucial to any well functioning democracy. Every democracy needs an idea of ‘eternity’, of ‘collective permanence’ to persist.³¹ But even if forms of otherness still survive in contemporary liberal democracies, religion is on its way back. With the title of his concluding remarks, “the religious after religion”,³² Gauchet already suggests that the age of religion as the basic structure of political society has passed away. However, contemporary society leaves open the possibility that individuals may still be inspired by religious traditions. Another French philosopher, Luc Ferry, points out that Gauchet’s theory lacks a satisfying account of what happened to the ‘religious possibility’ of human beings after the decline of institutional religion.³³ Gauchet affirms this possibility in his conclusion by referring again to the transcendental anthropological structure of the self. The human being is a being between negation of itself (e.g. some forms of religion) and affirmation. This tension is inherent to the human being. What mankind experiences after the *Götterdämmerung* is not humankind transforming to divinity, but humankind discovering itself to be human, all too human.

³⁰ The ‘subtraction-story’ about the genesis of the modern age was developed by Enlightenment thinkers who wanted to free humanity from its religious tutor. It is based on the naïve assumption that if one dispels the transcendent from the pre-modern world view, the true face of humanity will appear. See Taylor, ‘Closed World Structures’ in Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *Religion after Metaphysics*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 2003, Chapter 5, pp. 47-68 and Taylor, *A Secular Age*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England, 2007.

³¹ Gauchet, *Disenchantment*, pp. 88-91.

³² *Idem*, pp. 200-208.

³³ Ferry, L., and Gauchet, M., *Religie na de religie. Gesprekken over de toekomst van het religieuze*, vert. J.M.M. de Valk, Klement/Pelckmans, Kampen, 2005.

II.2 Taylor on Expressivism and Authenticity

Taylor's historical account of the 'making of the modern identity' was first developed in *Sources of the Self*. There, Taylor goes into detail about how something like a 'self' could emerge from a gradual transition of moral sources from outside human beings to their inner subjectivity. To speak of the notion of 'self' is one thing, to arrive at a self yearning for self-expression is quite another. I will restrict myself here to the specific genealogy of self-expression. I will describe three axes that led to the contemporary notion of self-expression: Montaigne's project of self-exploration, the theory of moral sentiments in Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, and Hegel's and Herder's romantic expressivism. Since the concept of self-expression could only arise within a modern context, I will furthermore explore some facets of Taylor's account of the genesis of modernity as such, with specific attention for the role of religion.

Self-expression is a product of modern culture. Taylor traces this product back to a certain unease with the modern notion of a 'disengaged self' (*Sources of the Self*) or a 'buffered self' (*A Secular Age*). The concept of the disengaged subject found its first famous articulation in Descartes' *Cogito*. The human subject has to judge and act according to 'clear and distinct' ideas. The passions of the soul ought to be mastered by instrumental reason. The first reaction to this instrument of self-control came with Montaigne's plea for self-exploration. The soul is not an instance of self-mastery. On the contrary, the soul is highly unstable and needs to be explored. Its small and consistent islands are floating on a vast and rough ocean. The project of self-exploration remains thoroughly modern, because it locates sources of meaning within the self, whereas in ancient times, these sources were situated in the cosmos. But where the disengaged self leads to a disengaged, objectifying stance towards nature, Montaigne's self-exploration asks for a new submission to nature: "I have (...) taken for my regard this ancient precept, very rawly and simply : That "We cannot erre in following Nature": and that the souveraigne document is, for a man to conforme himselfe to her. I have not (as Socrates) by the power and vertue of reason, corrected my natural complexion, nor by Art hindered mine inclination."³⁴ Way before existentialism, Montaigne points to the finiteness of human beings. He appeals to undertake the quest of self-exploration, but warns against drawing universal conclusions from such an enterprise. In our self-exploration, we are looking for knowledge about ourselves without ending up with a universal theory on the essence of the human being. Taylor concludes that both Descartes and Montaigne are proponents of modern individualism, but in very different shapes: "The Cartesian calls for a radical disengagement from ordinary experience; Montaigne requires a deeper engagement in our particularity."³⁵ One could

³⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 180. Montaigne, *Essais*, III.xii in Pierre Villey (ed.) , V.L. Saulnier (re-ed.), *Les Essais de Michel de Montaigne*, , 2 vols., Paris, PUF, 1978, II 1059 and in *The Essayes of Montaigne*, Florio translation, New York, Modern Library, 1933, p. 958.

³⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 182.

say that Descartes *Cogito* inaugurates the modern Enlightenment notion of the autonomous subject, whereas Montaigne's emphasis on self-exploration and individual originality fits well the description of our age as 'post-modern'.

A second reactive emergence of self-expression is the 'theory of moral sentiments'³⁶ as directed against Lockean deism. This second appearance exhibits structural analogies with the first. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson dismiss deist instrumental reason and its extrinsic theory of morals. Lockean deism argues that moral conduct can only be forced by external divine punishment. Thanks to the instrumental use of reason, people are capable of following God's will. Reason can tell us what actions will cause pain or pleasure. Instrumental reason is therefore our external tool to shape our moral conduct.³⁷ According to Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, this theory neglects our inner sources to act morally. Human beings need not to be forced by divine punishment or instrumental reason to obey to God's will, but are naturally inclined to do so. Moreover, nature is not to be seen as a conglomerate of blind, neutral forces, but reflects God's love for his creation. Shaftesbury and Hutcheson propound a harmonious relation with nature, whereas deist philosophers propagate a relation of domination. The theory of moral sentiments encourages a re-engagement with nature, a striving for harmony.³⁸

Harmony or reconciliation are also central tenets of Hegel's philosophical system. Again, Hegel's expressivist philosophy is a reaction against the stifling operations of Kantian analytical *Verstand* that 'persists in its dissections'. In his reaction, Hegel was deeply influenced by Johann Gottfried Herder. As a proponent of the German *Sturm und Drang* movement that criticised Enlightenment thinkers for their one-sided emphasis on disengaged reason, Herder was the first to develop an explicit expressivist theory in the field of the philosophy of language. In 1772, Herder published an essay entitled 'On the Origin of Language', in which he refutes the naturalistic theory of language of Rousseau and Condillac.³⁹ According to Rousseau, language originates as the primitive expression of deep inner emotions, such as fear. The first words were primitive cries. Condillac, by contrast, argues that convention plays a constitutive role in the genesis of language. People convene on the meaning of certain sounds. However, Condillac's theory remains naturalistic. Because people react similarly to the

³⁶ *Idem*, pp. 248-265.

³⁷ *Idem*, pp. 236-237. See also p. 242: 'In this connection, the alignment of following God's will with maximising our pleasure, so shocking to the mainstream of Christian theology, is fully in keeping with the providential design of things. God, like a super-player in a game of rational choice, instrumentalises our instrumental reason by giving us a law which brings us into line with his purpose of general conservation. [...] Locke's psychology could be seen as a new transposition of the theology of ordinary life, on the way to its naturalistic successor doctrine.'

³⁸ *Idem*, p. 254.

³⁹ Beiser, Frederick C., *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, Harvard, H.U.P., 1987, chapter 5, *Herder's Philosophy of Mind*.

same stimuli, they have no difficulty in agreeing on which sounds refer to which meanings. In his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge*, Condillac evokes the situation of two children in the desert. The first child interprets the cries of the other child as expressions of the latter's feelings. Language then is not just a matter of spontaneous cries, but also consists of a process of cognition, of capturing what it is to refer to something. The denotative function of language is born.⁴⁰ Herder's comment on Rousseau and Condillac is very pointed: "If Rousseau reduces man to an animal, Condillac elevates an animal into man"⁴¹ Rousseau neglects the cognitive aspect of language. Condillac does recognise cognition, but presupposes it as innate. He falls prey to circularity, since he needs cognition to explain the origin of human language and knowledge. For Herder it is exactly the capacity for cognition or *Besonnenheit* that has to be explained; what Taylor translates as 'reflective awareness'.⁴² This reflective awareness is not something that is ontologically prior to expression, as it is the case in Cartesianism and empiricism.⁴³ It is only in the expression that our reflective awareness is realised. As Taylor writes, "the new expressive theory of human language that we find in Herder is [...] constitutive; that is, reflective consciousness only comes to exist in its expression."⁴⁴

Herder's expressivist theory of language suits well our contemporary conception of art. A piece of art is a medium that does not just reflect certain feelings, experiences or ideas already available, it also *constitutes* a new reality. An object of art is an expressive object, and "we think of its 'creation' as not only a making manifest but also a making, a bringing of something to be."⁴⁵ Herder's expressivism proved to be tremendously influential. The idea that our self is connected to sources which only come to be in *our* articulation of them paved the way for German idealism. Whether in its romantic or more rationalist, Hegelian form, German idealism is always about overcoming alienation, about reconciliation of man with nature. Something which might go beyond personal and subjective experience resonates in us, and urges us to the expression of that reality.

It is no surprise that this structure of expressivism recurs in Taylor's analysis of authenticity.⁴⁶ The ideal of authenticity starts from the concept of autonomy. We are no longer determined by an external framework that fixates our identity. Autonomy and authenticity are self-referential. Proponents of radical enlightenment and radical autonomy adhere to 'self-

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers 2*, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1985, Ch. 9 *Language and Human Nature*, p. 227.

⁴¹ Beiser, *op.cit.*, p. 133.

⁴² Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, p. 228.

⁴³ See our discussion of Taylor's philosophy of action above.

⁴⁴ Taylor, *Human Agency and Language*, p. 229.

⁴⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 374.

⁴⁶ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992. Translated into Dutch by M. van der Marel, *De malaise van de Moderniteit*, Kok Agora/Pelckmans, 1994.

referentiality of both manner and matter'.⁴⁷ When we articulate our moral sources, we must be able to do that 'in our own way'. But the ideal of authenticity differs from autonomy in that it does not necessarily imply self-referentiality of matter. As to the *contents* of our subjective articulations, it is possible that we express something beyond our inner subjectivity, something that resonates in us. Therefore we are in need of expressive, 'subtler' languages.⁴⁸ This subtlety of language is not restricted to our individual self-expression, but also applies to its collective forms. As Taylor argues in the debate on multiculturalism, differences between cultures need to be carefully expressed in order to respect the true identity of each culture. The modern politics of equality need a complementary politics of difference to arrive at a 'politics of recognition'.⁴⁹

So far I have described cultural and philosophical background of the modern phenomenon of self-expression. But what about its *religious* roots? The link between modern culture and religion is not altogether absent in *Sources of the Self*. In his concluding remarks, Taylor is for the first time explicit about his own religious confession: "There is a large element of hope. It is a hope that I see implicit in Judaeo-Christian theism (however terrible the record of its adherents in history), and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided. But to explain this properly would take another book."⁵⁰ From *A Catholic Modernity?*⁵¹ on, Taylor never ceased to shed light on the relation between modernity and religion, more specifically in its Christian form. His stakes are double. First, Taylor wants to show how modern culture owes a lot to Christianity in its coming to be. Second, Taylor argues that Christianity can still be an authentic source in a culture that seems to have shut down the window to any form of transcendence. Both lines of thought are developed at large in Taylor's most recent and probably last *opus magnum*, *A Secular Age*, which forms the culmination of a decade of research and writing on the topic of religion. Taylor's main intention is to find reasons for the altered conditions of belief: why was belief so evident around 1500 and no option at all, whereas in 2000, *not* believing in God seems "not only easy, but even inescapable"?⁵² However interesting, I will not exhaustively treat Taylor's answer to this question. I will restrict myself to passages where Taylor emphasises the role of religion in the genesis of the modern age, or where he discusses the role religion still might play in our self-expression.

I start with the continuity between religious reform and the modern attempts at reform of society. Religion played a major part in the transition from a

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, pp. 81-82.

⁴⁸ *Idem*, Chapter VIII, 'Subtler Languages', pp. 81-92.

⁴⁹ Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition' in *Philosophical Arguments*, pp. 225-256.

⁵⁰ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 521.

⁵¹ Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture, with responses by William M. Shea, Rosemary Luling Haughton, George Marsden, and Jean Bethke Elshtain*, James L. Heft (ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, *ibidem*, p. 25.

‘porous self’ to a ‘buffered self’. The porous self is Taylor’s term for the human being in a society that is ‘enchanted’. The term ‘enchantment’ obviously stems from the contrast with ‘disenchantment’. To live in an enchanted society means to live in a world where the boundaries between nature and human beings, matter and spirit, nature and supra-nature, are porous. It is a world of magic. All objects of nature may be inhabited by spirits. In the other direction, the world of the spirits can be influenced by manipulating concrete objects of the world, or the intentions of the gods can be read in ominous signs. It is precisely *within* religion that this magic account of the world gradually dissolves, more specifically with the emergence of axial religions. Here Taylor is indebted to Weber, and in one line with Gauchet. Axial religions adopt a revisionary stance towards the good.⁵³ A first movement towards disenchantment consists of the distinction between white magic and black magic. The Roman-Catholic Church goes further and denounces all forms of magic. Fear of God substitutes fear of black magic.⁵⁴ What to us may appear as equally magic practices in Catholic rituals, are in fact the results of disciplining by the Roman-Catholic Church. The ‘porous self’ needs to be protected against erroneous pagan views and vile attacks of pagan spirits. So in its rejection of magic the Catholic Church has already largely contributed to the genesis of the ‘buffered self’, and has established that typical dualism for western culture between nature and supra-nature, immanence and transcendence.

Furthermore, religious reforms helped to foster what Taylor has called ‘the affirmation of ordinary life’.⁵⁵ The Christian dogma of incarnation affirms this world to be worthy of engagement,⁵⁶ though in its encounter with neo-platonic philosophy, Christianity built itself a reputation of disdain for the world. Late medieval reforms tried to fill the gap between religious *virtuosi* like monks or hermits on the one hand, and lay people on the other hand. A new spirituality of death and suffering, focusing on Christ’s suffering on the cross, proved to be a powerful tool in filling that gap.⁵⁷ This new spirituality had an individuating side by stressing our *personal* responsibility for salvation on the Day of Judgment.⁵⁸ The ‘rage for order’⁵⁹ within the Church culminated in the decrees of the Council of Lateran (1215).⁶⁰ Another source of reform sprang from the universalist message of Christianity that was translated into the endeavor to reform the *entire* society.⁶¹ Furthermore, and running against the mainstream monastic spirituality of the Middle Ages, Franciscan and Dominican monks emphasised that Christians had an

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 152.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 74.

⁵⁵ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, pp. 211-302.

⁵⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ *Idem*, p. 64.

⁵⁸ *Idem*, pp. 65-69.

⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 62.

⁶⁰ *Idem*, p. 68.

⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 103.

apostolic mission in the world.⁶² Christians do not simply live *in* the World but can also live in a way *for* the world.⁶³ Taylor proves that prior to the Reform with capital R that swept Europe from 1517 and Lutheranism on, there were already lots of smaller reforms which contributed to disenchanting the world.⁶⁴ These reforms paved the way for nominalism, Reformation and deism, which all led to a *Deus absconditus*, a God so transcendent that He is no longer involved in this world, thereby leaving this world open to human curiosity and freedom.

But this movement of Reform does not mean a linear growing transcendence of God, and a corresponding increase of human freedom and decline of religious commitment. As to the path of modern secularism, Taylor offers “a zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences.”⁶⁵ One example of a religious re-engagement with the world can be found in the 19th century Age of Mobilisation, in which different ideological movements struggled to gain masses of people for their cause, which was always one for reform of society. In this context, Taylor argues, Christian spirituality often proved a strong source for transformation and ‘disciplinisation’ of working class men.⁶⁶

As we have seen, the whole story of Christian reform paves the way for the modern concept of autonomy. But Christianity also bears the germs of the expressivist critique on modernity. The Christian message is after all one of hope and redemption, one of the aspiration to wholeness and the ‘anticipatory confidence’⁶⁷ that this wholeness can be attained one day. The expressivist strand in our culture reflects a similar attempt at reconciliation of the self with itself, with other selves and with nature, albeit an attempt which is often narrowed to ‘the immanent frame’.⁶⁸ As Hegel had already noticed, modern culture remains divided between those who emphasise the autonomy and dignity of the subject on the one hand, and those who try to connect the subject to sources beyond itself on the other hand. This tension, well-reflected in the expressivist movement, generated a ‘super-nova’⁶⁹ of possible world views. According to Taylor, the contemporary self is neither porous nor buffered, but cross-pressured. The religion or world view one adopts does not seem to make much difference anymore, at least in western society.

⁶² *Idem*, p. 93.

⁶³ In this respect, Joachim of Fiore inaugurated against his own intention a secularisation of Christianity by announcing that we live ‘in the aeon of the Spirit’, in which the Kingdom of God already dawns in this world. Joachim carried through a secularisation of the Christian eschatological structure which deeply influenced Franciscan monks. See Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1949, p. 145-159.

⁶⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 62.

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 95. See also the Flemish philosopher Guido Vanheeswijck, ‘Charles Taylor en het zig-zag parcours van de westerse secularisering’ in *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, Leuven, 70/2008, pp. 373-395.

⁶⁶ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 453.

⁶⁷ *Idem*, pp. 550-551, 674-675, 703.

⁶⁸ On Taylor’s concept of ‘the immanent frame’, see *A Secular Age*, Chapter 15, p. 539-593.

⁶⁹ *Idem*, p. 300.

We more or less dress in the same way and live in the same cycle of working days and recreation. This puts a lot of pressure on any individual 'confession': I may be a Christian and my neighbour an atheist, but does that visibly make a difference? Our contemporary age is one of fragility of meaning.

But within the field of different outlooks on life, the religious option for transcendence remains, according to Taylor, a real and valuable one. It is an option in which Taylor discerns possible solutions for the dilemmas of (post-)modern culture. These dilemmas arise in the playfield of three positions: exclusive humanism, anti-humanism and any transcendent world view.⁷⁰ Exclusive humanism leans on the modern strand that stresses human autonomy. It believes that the world can be reformed in order to serve at best our human ideals of universal benevolence and individual freedom. It is *exclusive* in that it rejects any fulfillment of life beyond humanity, beyond the immanent frame. Exclusive humanism originates in Enlightenment thinking on autonomy.

But, as I have already mentioned above, this exclusive humanism provoked multiple reactions. I discussed different forms of expressivism above. The most fierce counter-Enlightenment reaction discussed by Taylor is anti-humanist, and was inaugurated by Nietzsche. Exclusive humanism flattens all differences between human beings since they are all equal in their dignity as 'rational agents'. It is too hopeful in that it purports to free humanity from all evil and suffering. It denies that life intrinsically contains violence and death. While Nietzsche denounces the perversions of the autonomous subject, he still remains within the immanent frame. Accepting violence and suffering as inherent to life does not open a perspective that transcends our human life, but points to a deeper, anti-human layer within human existence.

As to the transcendent option, Taylor almost always immediately shifts to his own confessional type of transcendence, namely Christianity. Like exclusive humanism, but unlike anti-humanism, Christianity brings hope to human history. But unlike exclusive humanism, this hope is beyond mere human fulfillment. The transcendent perspective implies the belief that some reality beyond the human sphere can transform human beings, and raise them to ethical sources that would otherwise remain hidden. Apart from some individual conversions such as Vaclav Havel's,⁷¹ Taylor names the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South-Africa as an example.⁷² In the latter case, ordinary human jurisprudence and logic were surpassed in the hope to find some new kind of truth. But Christianity is not an ultimate solution, as its dubious historical record proves. It is far from sure whether it can reconcile the two horns of the dilemma: affirmation of ordinary life, with all

⁷⁰ Taylor launches this three-cornered debate in his essay *A Catholic Modernity?* and elaborates it in *A Secular Age*, pp. 618-710.

⁷¹ *Idem*, pp. 728-729.

⁷² *Idem*, pp. 705-706, 710, 742.

its 'carnal' and earthly aspects on one side; aiming at (moral) sources beyond humanity that enable us to transcend our human limitations on the other. But one thing is sure: contemporary forms of self-expression will always be fragile and cross-pressured.

Conclusion

To conclude, I will make a brief comparison between the positions of Taylor and Gauchet. For Gauchet, the human being ultimately has two possibilities: self-negation ('dispossession') or self-affirmation ('possession' or 'autonomy'). Since both possibilities are inherent to being human, the tension between them can never be dissolved. It is open to the contingency of history which possibility prevails at a certain time. But underneath this emphasis on the contingency of history, Gauchet seems to discern an irrevocable logic in history that runs from dispossession to autonomy. By proclaiming Christianity as *la religion de la sortie de la religion*, the religion for departing from religion, Gauchet seems to read history as a movement of emancipation and progress. In that movement, Christianity played a pivotal role. The French word *sortie* indicates Gauchet's ambivalent attitude towards Christianity. On the one hand, Christianity is left behind, but on the other hand, our modern culture is the child of Judaeo-Christian parents.

Charles Taylor also underlined the Christian role in the making of the modern identity, though modernity has constitutive sources of its own as well. But whereas Gauchet's anthropology of self-negation and self-affirmation relegates our self-expression to the immanent frame, with an endless oscillation between these two poles, Taylor sees a third way, fostered by a certain unease with the modern concept of autonomy. It is the way of the anticipatory confidence that our self-expression will once attain wholeness. Gauchet's perspective on political history lacks this aspect of hope. It is Taylor's implicit claim that our age of authenticity cannot dismiss this hope for wholeness. Whether one situates this wholeness within the immanent frame, or whether one believes it only attainable by some openness to transcendence, by some kind of divine transformation of the human condition, the self has to express its choice amidst a field of dilemma's and cross-pressures.