

1-1-2005

The Authority of Experience: What Counts As Experience?

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Published version. Published as a chapter of a book entitled *Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology*. Eds. L. Boeve, Y. de Maeseneer, S. van den Bossche. Leuven: Peeters-Leuven UP, 2005.: 269-284, [Publisher link](#). © 2005 Peeters Publishers. Used with permission.

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INTRODUCTION

In an elegant essay, “The Method of Philosophy: Making Distinctions”, published in *The Review of Metaphysics* in 1998, Robert Sokolowski argued that “the making and the questioning of distinctions” is *the* method of philosophy:

[P]hilosophy is the intellectual activity that works with distinctions; its method is the making and the questioning of distinctions. Philosophy explains by distinguishing. This does not mean that philosophy just asserts distinctions and lets it go at that; it works with distinctions, it brings them out and dwells on them, showing how and why the things it has distinguished *must* be distinguished from one another¹.

In this essay, I propose to engage the theme, “Religious Experience and Contemporary Theological Epistemology”, by “bringing out” and “dwelling on” a key distinction that deserves attention in efforts to conceptualize (or re-conceptualize) “religious experience” for the work of contemporary theology. I plan specifically to explore how the notion of experience functions as itself a distinction – and a multivalent one at that – in crucial strands of discourse that philosophy and theology have employed to articulate human encounter with what is “other” – whether that other be construed as the cosmos of nature, the human (social) cosmos, or divine otherness. As part of this exploration, I will argue in Part I that attention to that from which “experience” is distinguished is crucial for articulating notions of “religious experience” that can function effectively for theological inquiry in the aftermath of modernity. Analyses drawn from Michael Buckley, Kenneth Schmitz, and George Schner will help to locate initial markers for delimiting key ways in which experience has functioned, often unwittingly, as a distinction within the discourses of modernity. These analyses indicate that typically modern readings of experience frequently render it as a function of a self-enclosing human subjectivity of consciousness. Such taking of experience “as” subjectivity, constricting it to self-conscious dimensions of human reality, marks it off as distinct from the full reality of human interiority. Notions

1. R. SOKOLOWSKI, *The Method of Philosophy: Making Distinctions*, in *The Review of Metaphysics* 51 (1998) 515-532, p. 516.

of experience referenced to such subjectivity thus also fail to do justice to the inner intelligibility of human interiority as it is constituted in relation to all that is². They thereby make problematic those paths by which we may be led to God in experiential encounters with the worth of what is "other" to and for such self-consciously referenced subjectivity.

In Part II, I will then suggest a contrast to those renderings of experience that make problematic the worth of the other encountered in human subjectivity. This contrast emerges from recent re-readings of two figures usually taken to offer prototypically modern accounts of experience and of the conscious subjectivity to which it is fundamentally referenced. One figure is William James, as recently re-read by Charles Taylor; the other is Immanuel Kant, as recently re-read by Jacqueline Mariña. These re-readings suggest that resources drawn out of dialogue with James's and Kant's construals of subjectivity can contribute to an account of human interiority in which encountering the moral worth of the other opens a path to God. In particular, these re-readings draw attention to the social and relational space in which moral subjectivity is constituted. I will thus suggest that such space makes possible an enlargement of subjectivity into an interiority that, because it is sufficiently robust to recognize the gifted character of its relationality to the other, is open to encountering the Other who is God.

I. WHAT COUNTS AS EXPERIENCE?

During the past twenty years, I have periodically taught a graduate course in which my first lecture begins: "The title of this course is 'The Structure of Religious Experience'. The only word in the title that is *not* problematic is 'of' – but by the end of the semester, we may find that word to be problematic as well!" I open the course in this way to post an initial reminder to students – and to myself – that we first need to examine the unstated presuppositions and distinctions we already bring to *any* conceptualization of "religious experience". As the course unfolds, I then suggest that we also need to give serious consideration to the likelihood that chief among these unstated presuppositions and distinctions are those that bear upon conceptualizations of our *general construal of experience*. We hold unstated presuppositions about the nature of "experience" even

2. Some post-modernisms have noted how such failure ironically doubles back to undermine the very subjectivity of the "experiencing" self; cf. J. WEBSTER, *The Human Person*, in K.J. VANHOZER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 219-233, esp. 221-222.

prior to our specification/qualification of it, or of some aspect of it, as a specific *kind* of experience, e.g., as “religious” experience. As a way to bring these presuppositions to light, I encourage students to make the question, “What *counts as* experience?” the first one to pose to the texts and authors we consider during the course, before they then pose the equally important and related questions of “*Whose* experience counts?” and “What does experience *count for*?”

This first question has usually proved helpful for opening quite useful lines of discussion – if for no other reason than making it abundantly clear how easy it is to assume uncritically that there is a common, indisputable understanding of what constitutes “experience” which “we” (in this case, the members of the class and I) unproblematically share, be it with one another or with any author we read. More recently, in the light of Sokolowski’s article, I have come to see that this question has also been useful precisely because it helps us attend to crucial ways in which a concept of “experience” often functions *as itself a distinction* – but, far too frequently, a distinction for which we leave less than adequately specified *that from which “experience” is to be distinguished* and to which “experience” – and thus the authority of experience – is taken to stand as a *counterweight*. Three essays published more than a decade ago provide a particularly useful context for probing further how experience itself functions as a distinction. They provide an initial orientation from which to pose the question “What *counts as* experience?” in order to determine whether and how particular construals of “experience”, as well as argumentative appeals to these construals, often function implicitly to distinguish “experience” from something that is *not* taken *as* experience. Locating and articulating such a distinction then proves useful to the extent that it alerts us to the possibility that the authority claimed *for* experience may rest upon unarticulated, unanalyzed and/or un-argued claims *against* that which is construed to be, in some significant way, *non-experiential*.

Some help from history: I

In his Presidential Address to the Catholic Theological Society of America in 1992, “The Rise of Modern Atheism and the Religious Epoché”, Michael Buckley observed that “[t]he concept ‘experience’ is a notoriously ambiguous one in the history of Western thought”³. In that talk, Buckley offered three historical “soundings” of this term – from

3. M. BUCKLEY, *The Rise of Modern Atheism and the Religious Epoché*, in *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention*, Santa Clara, Santa Clara University, 1992, pp. 69-83, esp. 73.

Aristotle's concept of experience as "an acquired skill", through Kant's rendering of it as "the empirical dimension of all theoretical knowledge", to Dewey's "double-barreled" articulation of experience as both "content and process" of "everything that a human being knows and does". Even though one can draw certain lines of connection among these three "soundings", the differences among them help to illustrate why neither the philosopher nor the theologian can take for granted that any single notion of "experience" will function with immediate and unproblematic conceptual transparency in all contexts. Buckley's own procedure for distinguishing these particular conceptualizations of experience – and, even before that, for selecting these three from among the historical range of other renderings – allows him to locate one complex meaning of the term that, for his purposes, can then function "as a heuristic device of some importance" for exploring "the concrete experience of coming to belief in the reality of God"⁴. This meaning of experience is referenced to "the categorical disclosure of God ... in lives of holiness"⁵ as well as to "an interior acceptance of an orientation to a reality that is absolute – whether that be truth or love or justice"⁶. Buckley's procedure is quite wise in that its movement does not start from an abstract account of "experience in general". He indexes his account instead to particular instances of experience in which human interiority manifests holiness and shows an attentive response to the absolute claim of truth, love or justice. To that extent, his account comports well with an emphasis on particularity that has become a marker of the post-modern. At the same time, his procedure goes against the grain of at least some important post-modernisms, inasmuch as it takes these particular instances to function also as categorical markers of the transcendental: "[F]or religious experience, if it is to be human experience, must have both the transcendental and the categorical dimension"⁷. This tension is relevant for discerning the functioning of experience as a distinction, inasmuch as it raises two questions that help locate what some crucial uses of the notion of experience *distinguish it from*. The first question asks how we might construe and articulate properly such a transcendental dimension in or for experience: Can this "transcendental dimension" itself be construed in any way as "experiential"? The second asks whether in such a construal there can be anything that stands in contrast to "experience": At this level is there anything that possibly could count *against* experience?

4. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 77.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Some help from history: II

While not purporting to offer an historical analysis, the late George Schnier's essay, "The Appeal to Experience"⁸, teaches a similar lesson about the need to attend to the multiplicity of ways in which "experience" has been construed – and argumentatively employed – since its "rise to prominence" in philosophical and theological discussions, starting from the 17th and 18th centuries into the present. Schnier does propose four "general rules" that seem to govern the notion of experience in philosophical discussion⁹ and constructs a five-fold typology of the uses of appeals to experience in theological argument¹⁰ – but these, however, are not offered to function as an account of experience "in general". His concluding paragraph offers much for us to ponder regarding the function of appeals to experience:

In conclusion I would suggest that the appeal to experience seems to be an instance of itself: *it is itself evidence of a particular kind of experience and of a particular context for theological work within church life and culture at large*. As such it is a Janus figure, poised between worlds of discourse and construction. As its doors open to offer those employing it a reconsideration of previous agendas and principles, it returns the contemporary theologian to many past problems and issues which have intricate and well-established histories. As the doors open upon the future, then the ladder by which they have reached the position can be thrown away, as Wittgenstein suggested in another context, so that the work of Christian theology can go forward. *There is the potential for a certain bewitchment by "experience" as an element of theological construction which, like Scripture and philosophy, can become disproportionately preoccupying and autocratic. It is equally important to note that the theologian who neglects the appeal to experience does so at great peril*¹¹.

I have emphasized the last two sentences of this citation because they indicate what seems to be a further tension within the construal and use of notions of experience. On the one hand, Schnier notes that appeals to experience have a dynamic toward comprehensive *totality* – perhaps to a point at which one starts to wonder whether there is anything that could *not count as* experience or, equally, whether anything *not* considered experience simply *doesn't count*. On the other hand, he affirms the importance – and perhaps even the necessity – of such appeals when they function as

8. G. SCHNIER, *The Appeal to Experience*, in *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 40-59.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-49. The four "rules" are "experience is a construct", "experience is intentional", "experience is derivative", and "experience is dialectical".

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-58. These are the appeal "transcendental", the appeal "hermeneutical", the appeal "constructive", the appeal "confessional", and the appeal "immediate" or "mystical".

11. *Ibid.*, p. 59 [emphasis added].

part of a larger enterprise of theological construction. This affirmation suggests that there are elements in such construction other than experience that also "count" – i.e., they function in such a way that they can be weighed either "with" or "against" experience. Given the generally formal structure of analysis in the essay, Schner does not, however, venture to specify what such elements might be nor what weight they might have with respect to experience in each of the five forms he typifies as an appeal to experience.

Buckley's and Schner's forays into the complex conceptual geography of "experience" explore that terrain primarily as it has been mapped by modernity. They are both attentive to the fact that pre-modern mappings chart the topography of experience differently, so that one cannot be completely sure what – if anything – may serve best as a set of reference points for what they have in common with the mappings of modernity for locating "experience", be it on the "map" or on the "ground" on which the map purports to guide us. In particular, it is far from clear where (or, in some cases, even whether) one can locate the central reference point for so many modern mappings – "the (self-) conscious human subject" – on the maps or on the terrain of the pre-modern. They both are aware as well that the very possibility of distinguishing between the map and the terrain of "experience" has been called into question by various post-modern displacements of the (individual) conscious subject from any position of privilege as point of reference for construals of experience.

Some help from history: III

At the same CTSA meeting at which Buckley delivered his Presidential Address, Kenneth Schmitz presented a plenary session paper, "St. Thomas and the Appeal to Experience"¹². Schmitz places modern renderings of "experience", which shift its locus to the "subject as subjectivity"¹³, over against Aquinas' understanding of "conceptualization". The latter is a process that Schmitz sees not as "merely the formation of abstract concepts"¹⁴ or as "a kind of theoretical cognitive mechanism that goes its own impersonal and merely abstracted way"¹⁵ but as "*the entire range of the intellectual life of the human person in community and*

→ (12. K. SCHMITZ, *St. Thomas and the Appeal to Experience*, in *The Catholic Theological Society of America: Proceedings of the Forty-Seventh Annual Convention*, Santa Clara, Santa Clara University, 1992, pp. 1-20.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

in the world"¹⁶. Schmitz notes that there is a "difference in the relation between the quite general modern role of conceptualization *within* experience, on the one hand, and the more restricted role of experience *in relation to conceptualization* in Thomas"¹⁷. Schmitz then frames a crucial outcome of his analysis of this difference in terms of a contrast in understandings of interiority: "[...] the interiority of modern subjectivity is vastly different in character and motive from the ontological interiority that, as the metaphysics of St. Thomas insists, is resident in all being as the heritage of every created being"¹⁸. According to Schmitz, Aquinas' metaphysical construal of interiority "is the quite general causative condition of every created being, and it is this depth that sets the comprehensive horizon of all created being"¹⁹. Conceptualization thus functions as a "trans-historical movement and depth *within* the human person"²⁰ and "situates human interiority with its historicity within that broader horizon"²¹. It offers passage to "a more *determinate* quasi knowledge (and not simply an indeterminate negative apprehension) of what is both higher and deeper than us"²².

In contrast to Aquinas' account, Schmitz contends that modern understandings of subjectivity and interiority "yield only a muted sense of trans-human reality and a muffled transcendence"²³ inasmuch as "various post-Cartesian strategies have absorbed reality into the horizon of subjectivity, giving us at best a shadowy and indeterminate transcendence"²⁴. As a result, any "positive appreciation of transcendent depth and breadth...must capitulate to human terms and be absorbed and refracted into the horizon of human immanence before it is acceptable"²⁵. In framing this contrast in terms of "interiority", Schmitz's analysis works, I believe, along lines that parallel the notable larger scale accounts of the shift to modern renderings of the human subject that have been given by Charles Taylor (*Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*²⁶), George Steiner (*Real Presences*²⁷), and Louis Dupré (*Passage*

16. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

26. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

27. G. STEINER, *Real Presences*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1989.

✓ | *to Modernity*²⁸), each of whom sees the “turn to the subject” as coordinate with the diminishment and eventual loss of a sense that there is inner intelligibility to things.

Schmitz’s analysis is helpful for my purposes of exploring how “experience” functions as a distinction on two counts. First, it refers us back to a framework that provides a carefully elaborated and multi-layered account of human engagement with the world (including its “otherness”) in which “experience” functions *as explicitly differentiated from* other elements of that engagement and thus as just one among a set of factors that “count” in rendering that engagement intelligible. Second, it raises the possibility that what may be needed to place the authority of “experience” properly is an account of “interiority” large enough to do justice to the inner reality not just of subjectivity but of all that is. By Schmitz’s reckoning, the subjectivity that has typically functioned as the lens for modern readings of “experience” does not have resources adequate for articulating an account of interiority of the requisite scope and depth. I would not dispute the general thrust of Schmitz’s argument that modern construals of experience have often rendered problematic claims about pathways that lead from subjectivity to the transcendent. I am, nonetheless, more optimistic than he that, within at least some of these construals, we can locate genuine possibilities for a retrieval or a reconstruction of a notion of interiority capable of providing, in the context of the multiform dynamics of contemporary culture, a “positive appreciation of transcendent breadth and depth”. The next section will thus briefly explore some of those possibilities. Central to these possibilities is their location of human subjectivity within a social space of a relationality that, by enabling mutual moral recognition, renders experience open to God as the source of that relationality.

II. EXPERIENCE, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE INTERIORITY OF THINGS

The Long Shadows of Kant and James

Immanuel Kant and William James are by no means the only thinkers who have had long lasting influence on subsequent renderings of the notions of “experience” and “religious experience”. This is so even though there is some cogency to placing the former’s critical idealism

28. L. DUPRÉ, *Passage to Modernity*, New Haven, CT – London, Yale University Press, 1993.

and the latter's empirically rooted pragmatism at contrary ends of the philosophical spectrum. There is, nonetheless, also reason to think that, when they are taken jointly, they – or perhaps more accurately, the commonly received views of their work – have played a influential role in firmly establishing one crucial “given” about “experience” for the era of modernity. This “given” is that, for many uses of “experience”, its locus rests squarely in the ambit of a subjectivity construed primarily in terms of individual consciousness and the conscious activities of individuals.

There are, of course others who have played key roles in shaping modern construals of both experience and religious experience, such as Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, and Otto. I am limiting discussion here to Kant and to James, in part to keep it within manageable length, but more fundamentally because each has had an important influence upon answers that have subsequently been given both to the general question “What counts as experience?” as well as to the more particular question “What counts as religious experience?” In Kant's case, his influence has functioned, with respect to the first question, in terms of a construal of experience that frames it within a *structure* of human subjectivity to which there is no direct access *in* experience. With respect to the second question, it has functioned in terms of tracing a trajectory along which human subjectivity moves from engagement with the moral to engagement with the religious²⁹. In James's case, the influence on the first question has operated within a larger tradition of pragmatism that, as Buckley has noted, takes experience to encompass both “process and content” in a way that, at least initially, seems to enlarge the ambit of subjectivity beyond that bounded by a Kantian rendering of experience. With respect to the second question, James's influence bears upon the identification of individual human consciousness as the primary locus in which “religious experience” occurs even as it traces a trajectory different from that of Kant's for linking the religious with the moral.

From the perspective of Schmitz's reading of modern renderings of experience, the views of James and of Kant embody two of the post-Cartesian strategies that “[absorb] reality into the horizon of subjectivity, giving us at best a shadowy and indeterminate transcendence”³⁰. Given the role that interpretations of their work have played in the construction of the problematic of selfhood and of subjectivity in modernity, neither of them might seem to provide significant resources for articulating the kind

29. My characterization of Kant's views here would not evoke a universal consensus among Kant scholars, though I believe it represents one that can be found among at least a respectable minority.

30. SCHMITZ, *St. Thomas and the Appeal to Experience* (n. 12), p. 19.

of robust interiority that Schmitz argues is needed to provide access to more than a “muffled transcendence”³¹. Recently, however, Charles Taylor, in *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*³², has provided a preliminary exploration of elements emerging from a dialogue with James that I believe could be useful in such an enterprise. Since I think that other resources can also be recovered from Kant, I propose two tasks for the rest of my discussion. First, I will note some points Taylor makes in his discussion of James that bear most directly on articulating a robust account of subjectivity, i.e., one for which interiority is not merely “a restless starting and transient stopping point”³³ but has [and is] “an inexhaustible depth...that is partly its own but that also proceeds from and leads back to its creative Source”³⁴. These points bear upon the recovery and reconstitution of appropriate social and collective mediations of the sacred. Second, I will briefly identify and articulate some elements that have their origin in a deeply Augustinian structure within Kant’s account of the subjectivity we exercise in the practical – i.e., the moral – use of our finite reason. I will then suggest how attention to this structure may be of particular help in articulating an account of subjectivity that, by virtue of the recognition and respect that it gives to the worth of others as fellow and co-equal moral subjects, can again render us attentive to that depth, both within and beyond such mutual moral recognition, to which more corrosive forms of modernity have educated us to conceal from ourselves.

Taylor places James’s treatment of religious experience in the context of a larger analysis of the social mediation of a sense of the sacred. In so doing, Taylor adds to his prior articulations of the rise of “expressive individualism” an account, cast in Durkheimian categories, of shifts that have taken place in the relationship of self-identity to political and religious institutions. He describes this movement as one that starts from “societies in which the presence of God was unavoidable”³⁵ and in “which the presence of God in the cosmos is matched by the idea of his presence in the polity”³⁶. This idea of God’s presence in the polity has further ramified historically into what Taylor denominates “baroque” (or “paleo-Durkheimian”) and “anglophone” (or “neo-Durkheimian”) modes, differentiated in terms of the way in which the link between religion and the state is construed:

31. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

32. C. TAYLOR, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, Cambridge, MA – London, Harvard University Press, 2000.

33. SCHMITZ, *St. Thomas and the Appeal to Experience* (n. 12), p. 20.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

35. TAYLOR, *Varieties of Religion Today* (n. 32), p. 64.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 67.

The "paleo" phase corresponds to a situation in which a sense of an ontic dependence of the state upon God and higher times is still alive, even though it may be weakened by disenchantment and an instrumental spirit; whereas in "neo" societies, God is present because it is his design around which society is organized. It is this we concur on as the identifying common description of our society, what we call its "political identity"³⁷.

Both the "paleo" and "neo" forms contrast with more recent forms "in which the spiritual dimension of experience is quite unhooked from the political", a condition that Taylor terms "post-Durkheimian"³⁸. This last condition is the one that Taylor sees as characteristic of the current age, certainly in the North Atlantic, but it also has had at least partial manifestations in other regions of the world.

Taylor is well aware that James himself construes "religious experience" so strongly in terms of an individual's inwardness that socio-political contexts of any kind are, at best, of secondary concern in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Taylor recognizes the force of the standard criticism that this general absence of attention to social context in James's account is a serious flaw, but he does not set forth these limitations in order to polemicize further against James on this point³⁹. Instead, Taylor argues that James's detachment of the inner experience of individuals as the real locus of religion from their social contexts and connections, as well as from normatively construed, communally acknowledged conceptual articulations such as doctrine and tradition, turns out to have been remarkably prescient with respect to much in the contemporary situation:

It might seem that our post-Durkheimian world is a paradigmatically Jamesian one. Individuals make what they can of their "religious experience," without too much concern about how it fits together or how it affects the fate of different churches⁴⁰.

Taylor has a certain sympathy with what he terms James's "special sense of 'religious experience'" that places us at a cusp of decision between belief and unbelief⁴¹. He sees this as comporting well with the place that an expressivist outlook gives to religious living and practice,

37. *Ibid.*, p. 76. He later remarks (pp. 93-94): "Under the paleo-Durkheimian dispensation, my connection to the sacred entailed my belonging to a church, in principle coextensive with heretics, although in fact there were perhaps tolerated outsiders, and as yet undisciplined heretics. The neo-Durkheimian dispensation saw me enter the denomination of my choice, but that in turn connected me to a broader, more elusive 'church', and, more important, to a political entity with a providential role to play. In both these cases, there was a link between adhering to God and belonging to the state - hence my epithet 'Durkheimian'".

38. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-29.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

41. *Ibid.*, pp. 58-60.

inasmuch as these are construed as proceeding both from and beyond the Jamesian “cusp” of decision: “The religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but must speak to me: It must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this”⁴². One element in this expressivist outlook that goes beyond the Jamesian “cusp” involves what Taylor calls “languages of personal resonance”, which he sees as necessary for appropriate articulations of the life of the spirit in contemporary culture: “But if this focus [on individual choice] is now going to be my spiritual path, thus on what insights come to me in the subtler languages that I find meaningful, then maintaining this or any other [external] framework [of belief] becomes increasingly difficult”⁴³.

The link that Taylor makes here between his own notion of “languages of personal resonance” and James’s “special notion of religious experience” suggests that, even though he seems in agreement with Schmitz that James’s focus on individual inwardness runs the risk of absorbing (transcendent) reality “into the horizon of human subjectivity”, he is more sanguine than Schmitz that the Jamesian path inward has not yet definitively closed off all links to Augustinian paths leading upward. At the same time, he seems well aware of what seem to be the unprecedented obstacles that contemporary culture places before the task of clearing paths to link expressive languages of personal resonance with social mediations of the sacred. His closing assessment of James nonetheless indicates possibilities for linking those paths, including one that, somewhat surprisingly, suggests a route that might lead from Kantian moral subjectivity back to Augustinian interiority.

Taylor provides a succinct phrase to characterize the post-Durkheimian condition that he thinks contemporary culture has reached: “The spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society”⁴⁴. In the typically generous spirit that characterizes Taylor’s evaluation of the oft-fractured culture of modernity and its aftermath, he sees in this condition both loss and gain. The brief sketch he provides of this in the final chapter, “Was James Right?” is merely suggestive with respect to the question of

42. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 95. Cf. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self* (n. 23), p. 513 for Taylor’s coinage of this term. For further discussions, cf. P. ROSSI, *Divine Transcendence and the ‘Languages of Personal Resonance’: The Work of Charles Taylor as a Resource for Spirituality in an Era of Post-modernity*, in J. HAERS – P. DE MEY (eds.), *Theology and Conversation: Towards a Relational Theology* (BETL, 172), Leuven, Leuven University – Peeters, 2003, pp. 783-794.

44. TAYLOR, *Varieties of Religion Today* (n. 32), p. 102. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 95: “In the new expressivist dispensation, there is no necessary embedding of our link to the sacred in any particular broader framework, whether ‘church’ or state”.

reconstructing an account of interiority in which attention to a depth that is within makes possible recognition and “positive appreciation of transcendent breadth and depth”. These suggestions, even though they center upon what Taylor thinks that James missed, are offered neither to contradict the core of the “special sense” of religious experience in James’s account, nor to suggest that we can – or should – go back to a “previous dispensation” of the paleo/neo-Durkheimian kinds of social mediation of the sacred. They offer, instead, markers of the further elements, besides that of the “languages of personal resonance”, that Taylor sees as also necessary for an account of human subjectivity that enables us to recognize its creative Source. Implicit in Taylor’s discussion is that such an account would have to be, in some significant sense, more expansive than what can be constructed solely on the basis of the highly individualized “special sense” that James gives to “religious experience”.

Of the three elements that Taylor notes in this chapter, the most important one for my purposes concerns “how our relation to the sacred will be mediated by collective connections”⁴⁵. Taylor takes it to be the case that these social mediations will continue even in a post-Durkheimian context in which their locus is no longer assumed to be in the institutional forms of political and social life, but he does not provide a full scale account of why he thinks this will be so. Nor does he offer anything more than tantalizing hints of why he might also think that such “collective mediations” *must* enter into the constitution of an account of religious experience that would be appropriately larger in its social dimension than the Jamesian one without thereby undercutting the personal indexing that gives it a special stamp. In the absence of any detailed treatment of this by Taylor, I will close my discussion by briefly indicating how another figure whose shadow looms large over accounts of religious experience – Kant – may provide a resource for relocating interiority within the ambit of the relational. I will point to elements within Kant’s account of human moral subjectivity that might provide a strong and appropriate *social* path along which a Jamesian construal of religious experience as standing on the “cusp of decision” between belief and unbelief opens a route for human subjectivity to be drawn from an “inexhaustible depth [of its interiority ... back] to its creative Source”⁴⁶.

Like James, Kant initially seems a less than promising resource to address the problematic status of self-enclosed human interiority. Kant’s account of human epistemic subjectivity, as it has been portrayed in many

45. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

46. SCHMITZ, *St. Thomas and the Appeal to Experience* (n. 12), p. 18.

historically influential readings of his work, has played a major role in the construction of that image. Those readings presume, however, that the epistemic bears the central weight of Kant's account of subjectivity and that the Kantian subject thus stands in unbroken continuity with the self that the Cartesian *cogito* has bound within the limits of its own self-consciousness⁴⁷. Matters come out differently, however, if one places the primary locus of Kant's account in the sphere of human *moral* agency and activity⁴⁸. There one can argue – as Jacqueline Mariña recently has – that, far from being self-enclosing, the character of Kantian moral subjectivity requires that the self acknowledge that its agency requires it to stand in fundamental relation to others: “[T]he nature of this unconditioned demand [of the moral law] is such that it immediately places the self in relation to other rational selves”⁴⁹. She notes that the transcendence of self required by Kant's understanding of the moral law stands in close parallel to the transcendence of self “at the heart of what it means to be genuinely religious”⁵⁰.

From this parallel, Mariña then offers a way of reading Kant's account of the requirements of the moral law and of “the structure of human rationality [... that] supply us with concrete and fruitful guidelines as to how we should conceive of what equips persons for the religious life”⁵¹. More speculatively, and contrary to many standard readings of Kant's account of human moral agency and rationality – which take him as leaving little room for the love of God enjoined by the first great commandment – she suggests that it is possible to read Kant's account so that it comports with the mutual implication that Christian theology has articulated as a way to construe the relation between the two great commandments: to love God and to love one's neighbor. A key element in this reading of Kant, for which she had argued in an earlier essay, is that the unconditioned worth of human beings consists in God's empowering us to do good (in Kant's terminology *Wille*) “before any act on our part”⁵². Our fundamental relation to *God* is in our being constituted as *moral* agents

47. For a recent challenge to the view that places Kant and his successors as the ones who complete the Cartesian program of (self-enclosed) subjectivism, see F.C. BEISER, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism, 1781-1801*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2002.

48. For an important recent exposition of this view, see S. NEIMAN, *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

49. J. MARIÑA, *The Religious Significance of Kant's Ethics*, in *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75 (2001) 178-200, p. 181.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

52. *Id.*, *Kant on Grace: A Reply to his Critics*, in *Religious Studies* 33 (1997) 379-400, p. 383.

and this is Kant's most general concept of grace. Grace functions primarily in the relational context constitutive of human moral agency so that "the very possibility of our doing good rests on grace"⁵³.

If Mariña is correct – and I think that she is – then this may have major import with regard to a central feature of Kant's account of moral subjectivity that Taylor sees as inscribed into our post-Durkheimian context; the moral recognition of others exemplified in matters such as the "principles for the mutual respect of rights [that] have become embedded in our cultures in the Atlantic world"⁵⁴. To the extent that the language of rights has come to function most recognizably in terms of legally enforceable claims and practices, it may not seem to provide an immediately promising context in which our age might locate any significant social mediation of the sacred. For an era in which "the spiritual as such is no longer intrinsically related to society", the juridical and legal structures that have been erected to secure the exercise and protection of rights may seem a field overgrown with abstractions and contentions from which the spirit can draw little nourishment, let alone encounter an otherness to be revered in religious awe.

Taylor's account of the moral terrain that modernity has cultivated, however, suggests otherwise. As he points out many times in the course of his analyses, modernity often displays a self-induced amnesia about its deepest spiritual roots and motivations – perhaps no more so than in its portrayal of the articulation of human rights as an achievement of a secularity purified of religious faith. While noting the irony that "modern culture, in breaking with the structures and beliefs of Christendom, also carried certain facets of Christian life further than they ever were taken or could be taken within Christendom"⁵⁵, he has no illusions about the price such amnesia exacts. He thus writes eloquently about the dilemmas of "living beyond our moral means"⁵⁶ that arise from modernity's self-imposed inarticulacy about the moral sources needed to support its "far reaching moral commitments to benevolence and justice"⁵⁷ that ensue upon our recognition of the mutual respect due to others. He notes that it is when "we are moved by a strong sense that human beings are eminently *worth* helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value" that "we have come into contact with the moral sources which

53. *Ibid.*, p. 399.

54. TAYLOR, *Varieties of Religion Today* (n. 32), p. 93.

55. *Id.*, *A Catholic Modernity?*, in J. HEFT (ed.), *A Catholic Modernity? Charles Taylor's Marianist Award Lecture*, Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, pp. 13-37, esp. 16.

56. *Id.*, *Sources of the Self* (n. 26), p. 517.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 515.

originally underpin these standards"⁵⁸. Like Mariña, he traces the origin of such worth to nothing for which *we* may claim credit: "The original Christian notion of *agape* is of a love that God has for humans which is connected with their goodness as creatures (though we don't have to decide whether they are loved because good or good because loved)"⁵⁹.

This suggests that a prototypically modern recognition of rights may yet serve as an appropriate social locus for the disclosure of an interiority expansive enough for experience to be receptive to and of the otherness of the sacred. Perhaps the path to God is one that God opens for us in the recognition that, even in the depths of our otherness to one another, we are still bound to one another in a shared human moral journey that is empowered by the Other beyond us all. In philosophical terms, this suggests that a full articulation of the human dignity that is consequent upon our interiority has the potential to display how recognition of our human solidarity with one another stands in full reciprocity with a full – indeed joyful – affirmation of the genuine otherness we encounter in one another. In theological terms, such a referencing of our moral subjectivity to an original gifting of our agency by God can then be articulated into an account of human interiority rich enough to display the connections that deeply link the structure of our human moral agency to the graced dynamisms of Creation and Incarnation. If this is so, then a path to *our* creative source opens whenever you and I are empowered to recognize one another in benevolence and justice⁶⁰.

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58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*, p. 516.

60. I wish to thank Aaron Smith for helpful comments on the earlier drafts of this essay.