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Divine Transcendence and the "Languages of Personal Resonance": The Work of Charles Taylor as a Resource for Spirituality in an Era of Post-modernity

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DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE AND THE "LANGUAGES OF PERSONAL RESONANCE"

THE WORK OF CHARLES TAYLOR AS A RESOURCE FOR SPIRITUALITY IN AN ERA OF POST-MODERNITY

The focal text for this essay is the final chapter of Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, which he has titled "The Conflicts of Modernity" (Chapter 25). I shall argue that this chapter, in ways that are at once provocative and richly allusive – yet also fragmentary and frustratingly elusive – has embedded within it resources for a spirituality appropriate to a culture standing on the cusp between modernity and post-modernity.

The confines of this essay do not allow rehearsing the full scope of the arguments constructed throughout *Sources of the Self* by which Taylor reaches the most encompassing of the conclusions about "the making of the modern identity" enunciated in this chapter. I thus simply take as a given starting point the reliability of the account he offers of "the modern self" and of the polarities that emerged in the long historical process of its construction – polarities that have more recently been named, dissected and dismantled by various forms of post-modernism. These polarities arise within and across the elements of the modern "sense of self" that Taylor takes to be "defined by the powers of disengaged reason as well as of the creative imagination, in the characteristically modern understandings of freedom and dignity and rights, in the ideals of self-fulfilment and expression and in the demands of universal benevolence and justice"¹. These polarities, moreover, pose in concert a serious challenge to the very possibility of construing the spiritual as a constitutive element of the deepest part of our reality as human and thereby rule out spirituality as an intelligible form of human activity.

In order to uncover the resources that Taylor's work provides for spirituality in a post-modern age, it will be useful to start with an examination of the strategy he proposes for addressing the most intractable of the

1. C. TAYLOR, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 503.

polarities he diagnoses in the dynamics of the modern self. He formulates this polarity as “the general truth that the highest spiritual ideals and aspirations also threaten to lay the most crushing burdens on humankind” and then observes that “[t]he great spiritual visions of human history have also been poisoned chalices, the causes of untold misery and even savagery”². Behind his remarks is an earlier discussion (Chapter 3) of “hypergoods” i.e., “goods which not only are incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these [other goods] must be weighed, judged, decided about”³. Taylor argues that the naturalist tendencies of modern moral theory – which rule hypergoods out of their explicit accounts of moral justification – have thereby occluded the “qualitative difference” so “central to much of our moral life, [namely] that something incomparably important is involved” in our moral conduct⁴. Although Taylor is well aware that many factors have played a role in such discrediting of hypergoods and the qualitative differences they indicate, he is most interested in bringing to the foreground the moral concerns that, even as they have fueled the engine of this naturalist critique, have themselves become opaque in consequence of that critique. The most prominent of these moral concerns cluster around the perception that, however noble the ideals that hypergoods inspire, they also have enormous power to distort, dominate and crush. Taking cognizance of more recent manifestations of that concern, such as Foucault’s insight into “the ways in which high ethical and spiritual ideas are often interwoven with exclusions and relations of domination” and the feminist critique “that certain conceptions of the life of the spirit exclude women, accord them a lesser place, or assume their subordination”, Taylor then observes: “The sense that in this and other ways hypergoods can stifle or oppress us has been one of the motives for the naturalist revolt against traditional morality and religion”⁵.

As Taylor sees it, this revolt has not been without its own price – especially in view of the fact that the twentieth century has shown that religion has no monopoly on the destructive power of hypergoods: “The Kharkov famine and the Killing Fields were perpetrated by atheists in an attempt to realize the most lofty ideals of human perfection”⁶. In the face of such destruction, a “sober, scientific minded secular humanism” takes the polarity embedded within hypergoods as a dilemma that

2. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 518-519.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

is inescapable. It therefore advises the “prudent strategy” of managing the dilemma “by stifling the response in us to some of the deeper and most powerful spiritual aspirations that human beings have conceived”⁷. It is a strategy of self-induced amnesia of the spiritual in the name of getting on with life⁸. Although Taylor acknowledges that this strategy may very well be “a good way to live with the dilemma”, he also quite cuttingly characterizes the choice it presents us with as one “between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds”⁹.

This strategy simply will not do because Taylor does not consider the dilemma that “a stripped down secular outlook” perceives within moral perspectives framed by hypergoods to be an *inescapable* one. He does not take it to be the case that “that the highest spiritual aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction”¹⁰. Even in the aftermath of modernity, he contends, we can rightly and coherently affirm our human possibilities in terms of such aspirations – but only to the extent we can legitimately articulate them by reference to a hope of the kind that is instanced (though not exclusively) in “Judeo-Christian theism and in its central promise of a divine affirmation of the human, more total than humans can ever attain unaided”¹¹. In this chapter Taylor thus connects his earlier analyses of the “inarticulacy” of moral life lived in accord with the ideals and demands of modernity to the claims he now sketches that the moral sources empowering the highest human spiritual aspirations can be articulated most adequately from “a certain theistic perspective”¹². These connections could be rendered, I believe, into a intriguing variant of a “moral argument” for God – but as challenging as that line of inquiry would be, it is not my focus here.

I am more concerned, instead, with exploring and understanding the proposal he sketches for removing our “selective blindness” about the goods that would fully empower the human spirit, and thereby restoring our articulacy about them – as well as our articulacy about our humanity as itself spiritual in its constitutive reality. This proposal instances the intent with which he has shaped the trajectory of *Sources of the Self* to be a work that is not mere diagnosis but also an aid to “liberation”

7. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

8. For a more extensive treatment of this, see P. ROSSI, *The Leveling of Meaning: Christian Ethics in the Face of a Culture of Unconcern*, in J. RUNZO – N. MARTIN (eds.), *Ethics in the World Religions*, Oxford, Oneworld Publications, 2001, pp. 161-174.

9. TAYLOR, *Sources* (n. 1), p. 520.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 520-521.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 521

12. *Ibid.*, p. 518.

from ways that “we tend in our culture to stifle the spirit”¹³. The path that he charts to such liberation lies through the devising of “new languages of personal resonance to make crucial human goods alive for us again”¹⁴. This kind of language is needed, he claims, “because we are now in an age in which a publicly accessible order of cosmic meanings is an impossibility. The only way we can explore the order in which we are set with an aim to defining moral sources is through this part of personal resonance”¹⁵.

The phrase “new languages of personal resonance” is certainly apt rhetorically in that it indicates the need for a new form of articulacy about matters of the [human] spirit that “have been read out of our official story”. Yet, to the extent that it also suggests that such new articulacy issues primarily from the very kind of “inwardness” of the self that has been deconstructed in post-modernist critiques, it seems also problematic with respect to the central issues it is supposed to address. The proximate origin of this notion of “languages of personal resonance” lies in what Taylor terms the “expressivist” strand of 19th and 20th century art and literature. He is well aware that a crucial issue with respect to such “languages” – and, *a fortiori* to his proposal that they are important to the recovery of the spiritual in human life – is that they are vulnerable to the same charges of subjectivism that he would himself acknowledge are often legitimately leveled against the expressivist movements that first articulated them. Put in terms of our conference theme of “Theology and Conversation”, the issue is whether such “languages” must remain trapped by origins that stamp them in some indelible fashion with a monological character – or can they, instead, function as modes of genuine conversation engaging selves with other selves who stand in a social wholeness that is itself referred to a transcendent divine Other. While Taylor implies that “languages of personal resonance” can function conversationally, he does not mount a full scale argument to show this – and so is my hope that the rest of this essay can provide at least an initial sketch of three of the important elements that are needed to mount such an argument.

The first important element needed to move these suggestive claims about the languages of personal resonance to a more clearly delineated

13. *Ibid.*, p. 520. “The intention of this work was one of retrieval, an attempt to recover buried goods through rearticulation – and thereby to make those sources again empower, to bring the air back again into the half collapsed lungs of the spirit”.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 513.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 512.

argument justifying their role in liberating us from the self-stifling of the spirit is, at best, only partially given in *Sources of the Self*. Moreover, because it is given quite early on (Chapter 2), it is quite easy to overlook as an operative element in the claims set forth in the concluding chapter. This element is one that Taylor terms “the transcendental condition of interlocution”¹⁶. It inescapably links a self’s identity – of which a fundamental function for Taylor is a self-interpretation that operates in a “space” of meaning and value – to “a defining community” in terms of “webs of interlocution”¹⁷. Taylor puts this conversational locus for a self’s identity in forceful terms:

... My self definition is understood as an answer to the question Who am I. And this question finds its original sense in the interchange of speakers. I define who I am by defining where I speak from, in the family tree, in social space, in the geography of social statuses and functions, in my intimate relations to the ones I love, and also crucially in the *space of moral and spiritual orientation within which my most important defining relations are lived out*.

*This obviously cannot be a contingent matter. There is no way we could be inducted into personhood except by being initiated into a language. We first learn our languages of moral and spiritual discernment by being brought into an ongoing conversation by those who bring us up*¹⁸. (Emphasis added)

“Languages of personal resonance” thus need to be understood to stand *within* this transcendental condition of interlocution, not as an exception to it. Placed within this condition, their origin from the “inwardness” of particular human individuals does not render them ineluctably monological; on the contrary, it orders them to the conversational.

Taylor’s placement of these languages under the condition of “interlocution”, however, may seem to many to be an *obiter dicta* that stands in tension with what is often taken to be the trajectory of the history from which “expressivist” understandings of the human person have emerged. According to this version of that history, the strands of science, literature, art and philosophy that weave into modern notions of

16. *Ibid.*, p. 39. Taylor’s frames this understanding of the self in terms of self-interpretation – and the related categories of meaning and strong evaluation – to be a programmatic counterweight to naturalist accounts of the human i.e., those that model the study of the human on the natural sciences. He gives an overview of this program in the introductions to *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985 and *Philosophy & the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers II*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985, a collection of essays published prior to *Sources of the Self*.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

the self have made it possible to deny that selves stand under the necessity of the condition of interlocution. Taylor describes this view quite pointedly:

Modern culture has developed conceptions of individualism which picture the human person as, at least potentially, finding his or her own bearings within, declaring independence from the web of interlocution which have originally formed him/her, or at least neutralizing them. It's as though the dimension of interlocution were of significance only for the genesis of individuality, like the training wheels of nursery school, to be left behind and to play no part in the finished person¹⁹.

Not surprisingly, Taylor views such a monological rendering of the self's identity to be incoherent – as well as dangerous. At the same time, however, he is very much aware that “there is a common picture of the self, as (at least potentially and ideally) drawing its purposes, goals and life-plans out of itself, seeking ‘relationships’ only insofar as they are ‘fulfilling’”, and that this picture manifests the “hold of certain deeply entrenched modes of thought in modern culture”²⁰. When understood as part of this picture, languages of personal resonance would indeed seem to be nothing but monological; but this conclusion goes counter to a key aspect of the “liberation” envisioned in *Sources of the Self* to be effected – at least in part – through languages of personal resonance, viz., loosening the hold this very picture of the monological self has upon the thought and imagination of modern culture. On Taylor's account, the monological self neither historically nor conceptually arises primarily in consequence of expressivist understandings of the human person; rather, those understandings have themselves been swept up into a monological trajectory that seeks to strip them away from any condition of interlocution.

Accounting for the grip that such a monological view has had upon modern thought is thus essential to the liberation Taylor hopes to effect in *Sources of the Self*. The account he gives, moreover, indicates that opposition to monological theories of language was itself fundamental to the historical origins of expressivism. As noted at the outset, retelling that account in all its complex historical and conceptual detail is not within the purview of this essay. I shall only attempt here to identify two elements in that account that I believe – in addition to his claim about the transcendental condition of interlocution – are needed to construct an argument on behalf of the conversational function of languages of personal resonance for “bring[ing] air back again into the half-collapsed

19. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

lungs of the spirit"²¹. The remainder of this essay will thus bring these two elements into focus and indicate their importance for that argument. One element arises from Taylor's analysis of the problematic character of designative accounts of language and meaning that he sees arising in connection with the seventeenth century scientific revolution. These accounts played a key role in "[t]he philosophies of the seventeenth century [that] remade our conceptions of man, thought and knowledge to fit the new [scientific] dispensation"²². He alludes to this in his discussion of the transcendental condition of interlocution when he notes that "the early modern theories of language, from Hobbes through Locke to Condillac, presented it as an instrument potentially inventable by individuals"²³. He does not, however, elaborate any further on this in *Sources of the Self*; he instead makes reference to an earlier essay, "Language and Human Nature", in which he analyses and criticizes those theories in the light of an alternate account, originating with Herder, according to which "language is not just a set of words which designate things; it is the vehicle of this kind of reflective awareness. This reflection is a capacity which we only realize in speech"²⁴. He then expands this remark along the following lines:

What, then does language come to be on this view? A pattern of activity by which we express/realize a certain way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness but a pattern which can only be deployed only against a background we can never fully dominate; yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, since we are constantly reshaping it. Reshaping it without dominating it, or being able to oversee it, means that we never fully know what we are doing to it ...

... If language serves to express/realize a new kind of awareness; then it may not only make possible a new awareness of things, an ability to describe them; but also new ways of feeling, of responding to things. If in expressing our thoughts about things we can come to new thoughts, then in expressing our feelings we can come to have transformed feelings²⁵.

Taylor sees Herder's expressivist understanding of language helping to launch a trajectory for understandings of the self that, even as they value

21. *Ibid.*, p. 520.

22. TAYLOR, *Language and Human Nature*, in *Id.*, *Human Agency* (n. 16), p. 224.

23. *Id.*, *Sources* (n. 1), p. 38.

24. *Id.*, *Language* (n. 22), pp. 228-229. Also relevant are his essays, *Theories of Meaning*, in TAYLOR, *Human Agency* (n. 16), pp. 248-292 and *The Importance of Herder*, in TAYLOR, *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 79-99. In the latter he notes (p. 92) that for Herder "expression constitutes the linguistic dimension" and "language comes about as a new reflective stance toward things" (emphases added).

25. TAYLOR, *Language* (n. 22), pp. 232-233; he reiterates this in *The Importance of Herder* (n. 24), p. 97.

“inwardness”, move in directions quite counter to a monological subjective individualism. These expressivist understandings are anti-subjectivist inasmuch as their “inwardness” provides a route of access for locating the self within a web of meaning that is larger than the self. In “the epiphanies of modernism”, which Taylor references to writers such as Rilke, Joyce, Mann, and Wallace Stevens, he finds a “multilevelled consciousness [that] is thus frequently ‘decentered’; aware of living on a transpersonal rhythm which is mutually irreducible to the personal”²⁶.

Taylor thus finds that these forms of expressivist understanding hold forth possibilities for an “interweaving of the subjective and the transcendent”²⁷. Such interweaving can then provide a basis on which to shape a spirituality appropriate to the human circumstances that Taylor describes as facing us in consequence of the polarities of modernity. This possibility – and the spirituality it can engender – may appear quite surprising if the origins of expressivist accounts of language and meaning are seen, as they most often are, in terms of a history of the inexorable progress of the forces of secularization. Taylor, however, vigorously contests this telling of history in *Sources of the Self* and suggests, in its stead, that we read the development of expressivist understandings of language, meaning, and self against the background of the Christian doctrines of creation and of grace. The link that Taylor makes between an expressivist account of language and the Christian doctrines of creation and transfiguring grace is the third element that I think needs to enter into the construction of an argument showing how “languages of personal resonance” can function conversationally to “bring air back again into the half-collapsed lungs of the spirit”.

Taylor finds this link in the history he recounts of the modern preoccupation with language. Behind designative theories of meaning lies the medieval nominalisms that rejected an ontology that had an expressivist theory of meaning embedded in it: this, however, was not a theory of human but of the divine language:

... Just as our thought is clothed externally in our words, so is the thought of God, the *Logos* – the *Verbum* for Augustine – deployed externally in the creation. This is, as it were, God’s speech ...

... the paradigm and model of our deploying signs is God’s creation. But now God’s creation is to be understood expressively. His creatures manifest his *logos* in embodying it; and they manifest the *logos* as fully as it can be manifest in the creaturely medium ...²⁸.

26. *Id.*, *Sources* (n. 1), p. 481.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 493.

28. TAYLOR, *Language* (n. 22), p. 223.

Human language thus is secondary in this account, and Taylor acknowledges that the nominalist rejection of this “discourse-thought model of the real” gave human language a far more central role. That role, however, is one of

... an instrument of control in the assemblage of ideas which is thought or mental discourse. It is an instrument of control in gaining knowledge of the world as objective process. And so it must itself be perfectly transparent; it cannot itself be the locus of mystery, that is of anything which might be irreducible to objectivity ...

... the alternative is to lose control, to slip into a kind of slavery; where it is no longer I who make my lexicon, by definitional fiat, but rather it takes shape independently and in doing shapes my thought. It is an alienation of my freedom as well as the great source of illusion; and this is why the men of this age combated the cosmos of meaningful order with such determination²⁹.

In this context, Herder’s challenge to a designative account continued to see human language as central but offered a strikingly different understanding of its role: “language is not just a set of words which designate things; it is the vehicle of ... reflective awareness”³⁰.

Herder thus reinstates the ... earlier expressivist theory, but as a theory of language, rather than of the cosmos. According to Taylor, Herder and other expressivist theorists “transposed what belongs to God on this older theory on to man. For man like God embodies his ideas and makes them manifest. But unlike God, man needs his expression to make his ideas manifest ... his ideas do not properly exist before their expression in language or some other of the media men deploy”³¹. Taylor is aware, of course, that this transposition of expressive power from the creative activity of God to the articulations of meaning in human language has taken trajectories along which lie the displacement of God – be it terms of an explicit atheistic denial of God or a pantheistic collapse of the difference between God and the world. While the credibility of the latter – at least in the form that Taylor terms the “too indulgent pantheism” of Romanticism – has receded, Taylor does not think that we must inevitably be drawn along the atheistic trajectory. There is a choice:

Is the expression which makes us human essentially a self-expression, in that we are mainly responding to our way of feeling/responding the world, and bringing this to expression? Or are we responding to the reality in which we are set, in which we are included, of course, but which is not reducible to our experience of it³²?

29. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-229.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

Using language he will later echo in *Sources of the Self* when describing moral sources as “something the love of which empowers us to be and do good”³³, Taylor sides with a choice for the latter:

Some contemporaries would argue that the most expressive creations, hence those where we are closest to deploying our expressive power at the fullest, are not self expressions; that they rather have the power to move us because they manifest our expressive power itself and its relation to the world. In this kind of expression we are responding to the way things are, rather than just exteriorizing our feelings³⁴.

There is a further connection Taylor makes between a Christian understanding of creation and this capacity of such expressive power to move us to be and to do good that has a bearing upon the function of “languages of personal resonance”. He makes this connection in terms of the affirmation of the goodness of creation.

Taylor claims that “a stark rejection of any spiritual dimension may easily engender a sense that the affirmation [of the goodness of nature] is insufficiently based, that there isn’t much to affirm at all”³⁵. In such a context, Taylor thinks it is necessary, even for those within a Christian theological “tradition [of] affirming the goodness of nature ... to find new languages to say what they wanted to say”³⁶ in this affirmation. He finds resources for such a new languages in the expressivist tradition, particularly as it understands such affirmation to involve “a transfiguration of our own vision, rather than simply ... a recognition of some objective order of goodness ... it may have to take the form of a transformation of our stance toward the world and self, rather than simply the registering of external reality”³⁷. In his account of such transformation, moreover, Taylor portrays it in terms of a link between creation and grace:

What we have in this new issue of affirming the goodness of things is the development of a human analogue to God’s seeing things as good: a seeing which also helps effect what it sees. This can mean, of course, that the self-attribution of this power is a resolutely atheist doctrine, the arrogation to man of powers formerly confined to God. This will be so with Nietzsche ... But this doesn’t have to be so. One of the most insightful thinkers to explore this power is Dostoyevsky, who sees it in a Christian perspective. In fact the notion of a transformation of our stance towards the world whereby our vision is changed has traditionally been connected with the notion of grace. Augustine holds that in relation to God, love has to precede

33. TAYLOR, *Sources* (n. 1), p. 93.

34. ID., *Language* (n. 22), p. 239.

35. ID., *Sources* (n. 1), p. 448.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 446.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 448.

knowledge. With the right direction of love, things become evident which are hidden otherwise. What is new is the modern sense of the place and power of the creative imagination. This is now an integral part of the goodness of things, and hence the transformation of our stance and thus our outlook helps bring about the truth it reveals³⁸.

The mention of Augustine is not a mere passing remark, inasmuch as Taylor had earlier characterized “the expressivist revolution” as “a prodigious development of modern post-Augustinian inwardness in its self-exploratory branch”³⁹. That development, however, has been one in which a fundamental Augustinian trajectory has been rendered problematic. In an age of post-modernity it cannot be taken for granted that exploration of “inner” will take a path by which we are also – be it by a Platonic attraction to the good or by the irresistibility of grace – drawn to the “higher”. At the same time, Taylor claims that, in circumstances in which “a publicly accessible order of cosmic meanings is an impossibility”, such an exploration of inwardness is needed to make it possible for us to have access to very goods that have been occluded by modernity.

In consequence, in order to make “languages of personal resonance” a fundamental resource for spirituality, ways must be found to restore credibility to the Augustinian trajectory that draws us to the higher along the path of the inner. How might this be done? I believe that Taylor provides at least two clues for this: the first is in his identification of the kinds of goods to which he thinks we have access primarily “through personal sensibility ... for instance, why it matters and what it means to have a more resonant human environment, and even more, to have affiliations with some depth in time and commitment”⁴⁰; the second is in a remark he makes about Dostoyevsky, who “brings together a central idea of the Christian tradition, especially evident in the Gospel of John, that people are transformed through being loved by God, a love that they mediate to each other, on one hand, with the modern notion of a subject who can help to bring on transfiguration by the stance he takes to himself and the world, on the other”⁴¹. As I read these remarks – particularly in the light of the important connections that I see them affirming between creation and grace – they suggest a spirituality in which “personal resonance” is attuned with and to “a demand that our natural surrounding

38. *Ibid.*, p. 449.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 389.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 513.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 452.

and wilderness make on us"⁴² and also with and to the most abiding affiliative relationship to which we have been granted graced access – the trinitarian dynamic of God's own life. As a Jesuit, I cannot help but thinking that what Taylor allusively suggests can be placed in continuity with the spirituality of the *Spiritual Exercises* with its attentiveness to the inner movement of God's grace in the individual and its deep rooting in the theology of Creation and the Trinity – but that is work for another essay.

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42. *Ibid.*, p. 513.