

Transcendent Turn to *Agape* Love

Response to PP 2.0

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Deep Structure Dilemma

- A deep structure philosophical issue at work in the West. Eminent Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor: we are caught on the horns of a dilemma (*Sources of the Self*, (C. Taylor, 1989, 495-521), within our *immanent frame* (*A Secular Age*): between self-hatred and moral/spiritual lobotomy. This is called the *crisis of affirmation*. It is important to feel the *angst*, it is a terrible existential problem. It implies the inability or struggle, in a broken world, to see both the world and the self as *good*. Either we hate ourselves for our moral failure, or we hate the very morality that makes us feel guilty in the first place, leading to a *spiritual lobotomy*. This results in nihilism, or violence.

Morality, Identity, Spirituality

- Taylor (1989, p. 3) argues that the human self is an inherently moral entity; *the self is always situated in moral space*: “Selfhood and the good ... or selfhood and morality, turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes”. Morality, identity and spirituality are interwoven.
- His Proposal: a transcendent turn to *agape* love can provide a way out of this dilemma of guilt/shame/low self-esteem on the one hand, or moral/spiritual suicide, on the other. This move will allow us to ground the self in robust meaning amidst suffering and tragedy. Transcendence is the critical factor. In the Wong-Bowers discussion of mature happiness, they are invoking both the moral and the spiritual dimensions of human consciousness and wellbeing.

(T2) Strong Transcendence

- Charles Taylor, at the end of his tome *Sources of the Self*, speaks of the *strong* type of transcendence, one that does not involve escaping the world, nor does one have to take a position of contempt for, or harm towards the world, or scapegoat the other. It respects plurality of being. Philosopher Calvin Schrag (*The Self After Postmodernity*, 1997, 110-148) offers important insights into the distinction between *strong* and *weak* transcendence. With Taylor, I want to offer a *wager on such strong transcendence* as a route to mature happiness. This is a cultural recovery prospect.

Scenario 1.

- Scenario 1: We close ourselves off to grace, out of loathing for self and the world. Because this is so existentially painful, we project evil outward in an act of polarization between self and world. We are both alienated and disgusted. We rationalize that this justifies terror: thus, the evil world must be destroyed. We cannot associate our identity with such a world, cannot accept being part of it. Brilliantly, Dostoyevsky (*Brothers Karamazov*) showed how terrorism is a spiritual response to self-hatred. Suicide for the noble, or terror for the ignoble, seem our only choices within this stance. Pride is involved in this violence: *Arrogance, Deceit, Resentment*.

Scenario 2.

- Scenario 2: In a radically different stance, we invoke transcendent *agape* love. It allows us to love both the world and self at the same time, despite its brokenness and injustice. We accept that we are part of the world, and accept our part, our responsibility for its evil and brokenness (a major miracle, an *epiphany*). This miracle comes through accepting love from others and from God—we open ourselves to grace and switch over to an economy of grace. This is a critical new stance to self and world. *Humility and Servanthood, Other-orientation, Hospitality.*

Agape as Life Force of Transformation

- This *strong* version of transcendence means that, while such love comes from outside human culture, it offers transforming dynamics within the economies of the full range of the culture spheres: in science, the arts, ethics and religion. This has implications for positive psychology. Taylor believes that the *epiphanic* discovery of *agape* love can act as a *hypergood*, in that it influences a rearrangement of the hierarchy of one's moral goods or values, bringing into play both a *transfiguration* and *transvaluation* within the horizon of the moral self. This impacts self-transcendence and motivation for embracing the good, sacrificing for the other.

Transcendence as Epiphany

- The self is receiver, but a receiver, not of a content, a proposition, a truth, but rather of a 'Presence, a Presence as Power'. Furthermore, that Presence provides "the inexpressible confirmation of meaning", a meaning that calls out to be done, to be confirmed by the self in this life and in this world ... This confirmation and this affirmation of God and self in the world are what Taylor calls a "changed stance towards self and world, which doesn't simply recognize a hitherto occluded good, but rather helps to bring this about." (M. Morgan, 1994, 60) This is quite profound.

A New Orientation

- As the individual encounters the radically transcendent other, this person is re-oriented in the presence of the inaccessible or sublime. It involves both an existential *I-Thou* encounter and a revelation. This is where one is taken beyond the present realized bounds of one's self to discover new depths. The self is coming in touch with that which lies beyond it, a ground or qualitative pre-eminence. One becomes open to its empowerment. Taylor clarifies, using his language of *articulation*. The process involves naming a good in its depth, and illuminating its power as an engine for ethical discourse and agency. This is what we mean when we say that *God is love*.

Agape as a Source of the Self

- But God's love is one active contemporary source of the good, the love of which has empowered people to do the good and exemplify the good in their character, social life and politics. He suggests that we need a transcendent turn to avoid the extremes of self-hatred, guilt and shame or alternatively the extremity of hating morality itself—*spiritual lobotomy*. The transcendent turn to *agape* becomes vital to solve this problem. “The only way to escape fully the draw toward violence”, he writes, “lies somewhere in the turn to transcendence—that is, through the full-hearted love of some good beyond life” (Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?*, 1999, 28).

Resolution

Taylor hopes for a participation with the divine that returns us to this world in such a way that we are able fully to embrace our deepest spiritual aspirations and fully to affirm the world, others, and ourselves without spiritual mutilation and without simply denying the reality of suffering and evil—a miraculous transformation indeed ... As a thinker situated within the mainstream of Western culture ... Taylor's proposed path to resolution of the crisis of affirmation involves appeals to God, grace, and agape, and there is no *a priori* reason to judge these appeals false or misleading. (W. Greenway, 2000, 38-9)

Conclusion

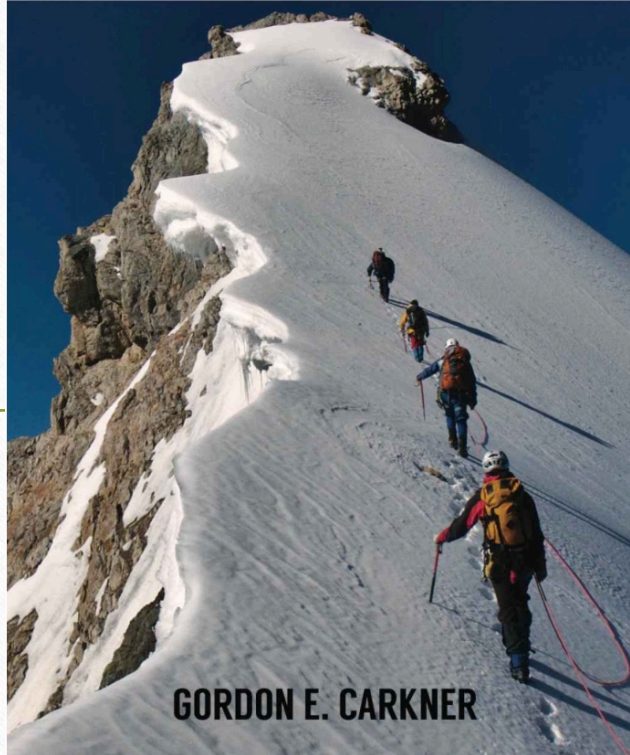
- In the quest for mature happiness and meaning amidst suffering and tragedy, the West is not without a response from its own philosophical, cultural, and spiritual tradition. *Agape* love, according to Charles Taylor, posits a stance towards self and the world that is morally courageous and life-affirming, enhancing the common good and promoting the wellbeing of the community. It offers to reduce violence, promote justice and improve an individual's mature responsibility—in line with mature happiness. It also offers the motivation to do the good that one knows—addressing the moral gap (John Hare). Taylor suggests that the first question we should ask is “Who or what do we love?”, rather than “What are we obliged to do?”

Bibliography

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THE GREAT ESCAPE FROM NIHILISM

Rediscovering Our Passion in Late Modernity



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