

Living in an Age of Authenticity: Charles Taylor on Identity Today

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Studies of contemporary Western culture, and of the conceptions of human agency which inform it, almost invariably identify an increasing emphasis on the individual as a principal theme. For some this individualising tendency is a matter of loss or decline: they believe that ours is a decadent age, a narcissistic culture, built upon corrupted views of the human.¹ Others offer a decidedly more up-beat evaluation of the individualising shift, prizing such fruits as the development of human rights and the capacity to mobilise sentiment in response to tragedies like the South East Asian Tsunami of 2004. For Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, neither the outright knockers of contemporary culture nor the straight boosters have plumbed the depths of our age; and nor will a simple trade-off between advantages and costs do justice to the transition taking place.² In his view, a new understanding of human identity, that of authenticity, has permeated Western culture since the 1960s, with its own insight into the human good as well as its own debased forms.

Reflection on human agency has dominated Taylor's writing to such a

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1. Popular versions of this view abound. See for example Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1980). Perhaps the most celebrated and insightful articulation of this 'cultural decline' thesis is Alasdair MacIntyre's groundbreaking *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (London: Duckworth, 2007). MacIntyre argues that post-Enlightenment concepts of the human are emotivist. He extends this argument in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988) and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990).
2. This theme pervades Taylor's recent work and can be found most accessibly in *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1991), 11-12.

degree that he describes his two-volume collected papers as ‘the work of a monomaniac.’³ In *Sources of the Self*, his major work of 1989, he writes a history of the modern identity, tracing from Plato to the present the sources of contemporary senses of self and their accompanying moral visions.⁴ He explores these issues in a more popular form in *The Ethics of Authenticity*, which began life as the 1991 Massey Lectures for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Besides these two books, Taylor has written numerous articles on the nature of the human in the West, engaging with the perspectives of other prominent scholars.⁵ His recent *magnum opus*, *A Secular Age*, seeks to understand the place of religion in this age of authenticity.⁶

Taylor is a synthetic thinker, drawing together philosophical and historical perspectives as well as those of social and political theory. Each of these perspectives is important for his argument. He aims to offer a faithful account of the journey to the present, insightful analyses of concepts of the human, and an adequate theory of previous and current sociological realities. The immensity of this task explains the length of *Sources of the Self*.

My aim in this essay is modest: firstly, to sketch the main lines of Taylor’s view of human identity today, particularly the place of language in human life and the relationship between identity and the good. Second, I will highlight some turning points in the journey to the present that have shaped the culture of authenticity. In conclusion I will discuss briefly what Taylor sees as the implications of the culture of authenticity for the place of religion in the West today—an issue which may be of particular interest to the readership of this journal.

Identity, Language and the Good

Taylor has broad philosophical interests, including hermeneutics, political philosophy, and beyond, yet two fields are central to his understanding of the human: philosophy of language and moral philosophy. In this section I will examine his contribution to these two fields in order to clarify what his understanding of authenticity entails.

Language became a major focus for philosophical reflection during the twentieth century. Although the linguistic turn is often identified with the work of seminal figures like Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the theme of language exploded across the academy into the disciplines of linguistics, structuralism, and social and political theory, among others, as well as into the work of postmodernist theorists, most notably Jacques Derrida. Furthermore, the

3. Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), 1.

4. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989).

5. Some of these essays are collected in his *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1995). Ruth Abbey maintains a comprehensive bibliography of works by and about this prolific scholar on the University of Notre Dame website: <http://nd.edu/~rabbey1/>.

6. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007).

explosion has reached beyond the academy to influence commonly accepted understandings of the human person. Taylor embraces the linguistic turn, describing the human as a language animal, and treats this theme in his particular way.⁷ A brief examination of his view of the place of language in human life will enable us to appreciate the richness of his concept of authenticity, and to reflect upon two related themes: an expressivist understanding of the person, and the fundamental place of dialogue in human life.

As with much of his work, Taylor's analysis of the nature of language runs alongside an account of how it came to be seen as central to human existence. Although language (*logos*) has been an important philosophical theme since ancient times, and its place in the Christian scriptures means that ancient understandings are still present in Western culture, Taylor sees the Enlightenment and Romantic periods as the sources of the two most influential theories of language in our day—designative and expressivist theories.

The seventeenth century scientific revolution rejected the vision of the world as a meaningful order.⁸ Meaning was no longer to be found in the ideas or in the divine Word revealed in creation. In response to a view of the world as an objective process rather than a meaningful order, eighteenth century Enlightenment views of language focussed on the meaning of words *qua* words. In these views, thought simply represents things and assembles ideas, and language comes to be seen as 'an instrument of *control* in the assemblage of ideas.'⁹ As an instrument of control, words must be clear and distinct in order to portray accurately the reality they designate. Language, therefore, cannot have a dimension of mystery; it must be perfectly transparent. In summary, words have meaning to the extent that they designate or point to objects. Eighteenth century French philosopher Condillac, who builds upon Locke, explains the origin of language with a fable of two children in a desert who invent signs (instituted signs) to refer to cries of distress (natural signs)—the sign would refer to the cause of distress, and in this process the first sign would be instituted.¹⁰

Following eighteenth century German philosopher Herder, Taylor argues that Condillac's story of origins presupposes the very reality that it attempts to explain. According to Taylor, Condillac's explanation amounts to saying that 'the words arose because the words were already there.'¹¹ Condillac's story takes

7. See particularly Taylor, 'Language and Human Nature,' *Human Agency and Language*, 215-47; 'The Importance of Herder,' *Philosophical Arguments*, 79-99; 'Heidegger, Language, and Ecology,' *Philosophical Arguments*, 100-26. For studies of Taylor's philosophy of language see: Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, Philosophy Now Series (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000), chapters 1 & 4; and Nicholas H. Smith, 'Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition,' *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey. Contemporary Philosophy in Focus Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29-51.

8. Taylor's account of the theories of language in the Enlightenment and Romantic periods can be found in Taylor, 'Language and Human Nature,' 222-34.

9. Taylor, 'Language and Human Nature,' 226. Emphasis in original.

10. See Taylor, 'The Importance of Herder,' 80-81.

11. Taylor, 'The Importance of Herder,' 81.

the relation of signifying for granted. It's always possible to learn a new word, Herder argues, but to understand what it means for a word to signify something is precisely the problem which Condillac does not address. Taylor sees Herder as a hinge figure in the transition to a new understanding of language—that of Romanticism.

Taylor believes that Romanticism gives a more adequate account of language than the designative view. Following Herder, he sees language as the vehicle of reflective awareness: it expresses and realizes reflective awareness. Finding the right word in a situation requires more than an adequate vocabulary: it requires the capacity to *recognise* that this word is the right word. And this capacity for recognition requires a person to locate an object within a whole web of meaning. For example, a triangle can only be named as such when a person can distinguish between different shapes, and distinguish shapes from colour and texture, and so forth. To use language, therefore, is not simply to designate something: rather, it is 'to touch a bit of the web [of meaning], and to make the whole resonate.'¹² This is what Taylor means by language as expressive and the person as a language being: human consciousness comes to be in its expression, in language.

It would be possible to take the expressivist view of language in a purely subjectivist direction and many people do. They see the act of expression purely in terms of the individual: expressing a meaning within an individual. But Taylor argues that although subjectivist views capture aspects of the activity of language, they are ultimately inadequate because language is embedded in a culture or form of life. In using language, therefore, each person is both shaped by and shapes language. Language is never a wholly individual matter—it is fundamentally dialogical. Taylor's view can be encapsulated in his definition of language as:

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 against a background which we can never fully dominate; and yet a background that we are never fully dominated by, because 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; we develop language without knowing fully what we are making it into.¹³

In summary, it can be seen that Taylor's expressivist understanding of both language and human existence has important implications for his concept of authenticity. Language is not merely a set of labels; nor is it simply instrumental.

12. Taylor, 'Language and Human Nature,' 231.

13. Taylor, 'Language and Human Nature,' 232.

Rather, it is formative of the subject in that it is the vehicle of self-awareness—language enables the subject to express him- or herself. Yet it is not the property of an individual since it is fundamentally dialogical: it shapes the speech community, which in turn shapes language. This leads Taylor to the insight that self-expression is never solely inwardly generated; it always exists in relationship to the speech community.

Alongside the theme of language, Taylor explores another dimension of human nature: that the person is always inextricably intertwined with the good. When we seek to understand human existence, Taylor believes that we quickly encounter the good. In the first section of *Sources of the Self* he develops the connection between identity and the good in dialogue with other influential moral theories of the twentieth century.¹⁴ A consideration of these other positions is well beyond the scope of this essay: I will simply outline the connection that Taylor sees between identity and the good. Yet it must be said at the outset that his understanding of the good avoids the narrow focus of many modern moral philosophies which pursue questions of the good only in terms of what it is right to *do*. For Taylor, the larger question of what it is good to *be* is primary, and in this context he explores questions of dignity, respect, and what makes life meaningful.

Taylor outlines the relationship between identity and the good in three fundamental steps: it involves frameworks, a defining community, and a constitutive good. First, in an argument which reflects some of his earlier work on language, Taylor states that our moral responses have meaning within a framework—a crucial set of qualitative distinctions. When we spell out what we presuppose in judging some form of life to be good, we necessarily make what he calls qualitative distinctions: we judge some things as higher than others. These higher things are ends or *life goods* which cannot be measured on the same scale as ordinary ends or goods. Our qualitative distinctions create a framework within which we make sense of our lives and our world and in reference to which we act. Taylor's argument is that living within a framework is constitutive of human agency; that living outside of some sort of framework is impossible. In his words: 'Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions or reactions. ... To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses.'¹⁵

One way of bringing these frameworks into focus is by asking the common question: who am I? It can only be answered in any meaningful way by stating what is of crucial importance for me. That is, in Taylor's words, 'my identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable.'¹⁶ Frameworks enable me to judge what is of value.

14. For reflection on Taylor's moral theory, see Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, chapter 1.

15. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 26.

16. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 27.

Second, in his study of the relationship between identity and the good, Taylor articulates another of the transcendental conditions of identity: that it necessarily involves a social or communal reference. Again, this argument has similar lines to his reflection on language. An answer to the question ‘who am I?’ can only be offered with reference to the people who surround me. In Taylor’s words, ‘The full definition of somebody’s identity thus usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters, but also some reference to a defining community.’¹⁷ Or, to use a linguistic image, we exist only within ‘webs of interlocution.’¹⁸ Yet here it is important to avoid a common confusion about the communitarian nature of identity. The fact that we come to be ourselves within a community does not mean that we are determined by that community. We may change our understanding of ourselves within our community and may even change our relationship to our defining community, but that in no way changes our dependence on the webs of interlocution. As Taylor says, ‘it only changes the webs and the nature of our dependence.’¹⁹

Third, Taylor traces another structural feature of our moral life: that underlying the life goods located by our qualitative distinctions or frameworks (the first step) is a deeper, more fundamental good, which he calls a constitutive good. As he puts it, our qualitative distinctions necessarily ‘refer us to some feature of the way things are, in virtue of which these goods are good.’²⁰ A constitutive good is good in a fuller sense because relationship to it is what constitutes our actions or aspirations as good. Furthermore, Taylor argues that love of the constitutive good is the source of human motivation: ‘The constitutive good does more than just define the content of the moral theory. Love of it is what empowers us to be good. And hence also loving it is part of what it is to be a good human being.’²¹ In surveying contemporary Western culture, Taylor sees a range of constitutive goods at work. For those who believe in God, it is the divine love which gives meaning to all life goods. For many humanists, deeply influenced by Kant’s notion of dignity, human autonomy and the agent’s capacity to act out of respect for the moral law form the constitutive good. Taylor also sees Plato’s notion of the Idea of the Good acting as a constitutive moral source for some.

In summary, the connections which Taylor makes between identity and the good give a particular shape to his concept of human authenticity. Authenticity concerns the way a person understands him- or herself; however, it is neither free-floating nor purely inwardly generated. Taylor’s three fundamental steps in the relationship between identity and the good—framework, defining community, and constitutive good—are inescapable structural requirements of

17. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 36.

18. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 36.

19. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 39.

20. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

21. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 93.

human agency. So, living an authentic life means that there are realities that I value, which I have come to discern within a significant community, and which make sense in relationship to an ultimate good, the love of which enables me to do and to be good. In that sense, the movement into an authentic life has the character of a 'quest' and is often articulated in narrative.

In examining Taylor's views of both language and the relationship between identity and the good, I have shown that the concept of authenticity has a central place. Yet it has specific parameters. An entirely subjectivist understanding of authenticity makes no sense in his terms. No one simply generates their identity from within themselves. Each person's identity is formed in relationship to those realities that he or she comes to see as good, discovered within a defining community, and in relationship to that which is ultimately good. This is one aspect—the philosophical aspect—of Taylor's view of the place of authenticity in contemporary culture. The other aspect is his historical account of the way in which the notion of authenticity has come to have such a prominent place today. I will turn to that now.

Identity in an Age of Authenticity

Taylor devotes over 400 pages of *Sources of the Self* to his history of the modern identity. He begins with Plato and moves on to Augustine but the heart of his story is the emergence of Enlightenment and Romantic concepts of the self. His argument is that the struggles and moral disputes that characterise our age have their roots in these two understandings of human identity. In *A Secular Age* he extends the story, showing how the individuating revolutions of the Enlightenment and Romanticism entered a new phase in the 1960s—a phase which he names the age of authenticity.²² The limits of this essay again demand only a schematic account of Taylor's detailed story of the development of the modern identity. I will highlight those three phases in the development of the modern identity in order to spell out what he means when he describes contemporary Western culture as one of authenticity.

Fundamental to the eighteenth century Enlightenment view of the human was a new understanding of freedom.²³ The radical thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected the notion of providence and providential order central to Deism. In turning away from a vision of the order of things, they regarded nature as a neutral domain which had to be understood in order to master it. In this context, human nature was also re-assessed and seen as neither inherently good nor bad but as neutral. The focus of reflection on the human changed: rather than looking to an external, cosmic order to understand human nature, Enlightenment thinkers looked inward. People would discover their purposes in themselves: the free

22. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, chapter 13.

23. My discussion of the Enlightenment and Romanticism follows Taylor's analysis in *Sources of the Self*, chapters 18-21. For a study of Taylor's approach to these matters, see Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 81-100.

subject had an internal purpose with no *a priori* allegiance to a pre-existing order. Freedom, therefore, was no longer defined in relation to the whole—the polis or republic: an atomist concept of freedom developed,²⁴ in which the subject was seen to enjoy natural liberty in the state of nature. So, characteristic of the Enlightenment approach to the human is the stance of disengagement: the capacity to stand over oneself in order to understand and master oneself.

Yet the Enlightenment approach to the human was not driven simply by theoretical speculation: it was ethically motivated. Utility was the key concern: the maximisation of happiness and the diminishment of suffering. Enlightenment thinkers saw themselves as the most effective defenders of the fulfilment of ordinary needs. Taylor summarises the moral motivation of the Enlightenment view: 'In giving central significance to sensual pleasure and pain, and in challenging all the different conceptions of order, the utilitarians made it possible for the first time to put the relief of suffering, human but also animal, at the centre of the social agenda. This has had truly revolutionary effects in modern society, transforming not only our legal system but the whole range of our practices and concerns.'²⁵

In summary, Taylor sees the Enlightenment as the first major step in the journey to the culture of authenticity. It was an individuating revolution, one which led to a certain sense of inwardness: people no longer understood themselves in relation to a cosmic order, but came to see their thoughts, ideas and feelings as within themselves. Of course, Taylor is not claiming that there were no opposing views at the time; nor is he claiming that no-one in our day understands human life in relation to a meaningful cosmic order. He is claiming that belief in a meaningful cosmic order no longer underpins the shared, public framework of meaning today.²⁶ He is also claiming that this notion of inwardness has profoundly changed contemporary self-understanding. An essential facet of the development of this disengaged sense of self during the Enlightenment was its moral motivation: the fostering of ordinary happiness and the relief of suffering. Both the sense of inwardness and the significance of ordinary fulfilments remain important facets of Western culture in the twenty-first century.

The second major step that Taylor identifies in the journey to the culture of authenticity is the Romantic reaction to the Enlightenment. Romanticism is a family of views that arose in late-eighteenth century Germany, and was profoundly indebted to the thought of Rousseau. Romantics reacted against the disengaged stance of the Enlightenment, arguing that in objectifying nature, Enlightenment thinkers erected barriers between humans and nature, and even

24. For Taylor, the term atomism characterizes 'a vision of society as in some sense constituted by individuals for the fulfillment of ends which were primarily individual.' See 'Atomism,' *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1985), 189-210, at 189.

25. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 331.

26. See Abbey, *Charles Taylor*, 81-82.

created divisions within humans themselves.²⁷ The Romantic movement aspired to bring the human back into contact with nature. Taylor sees the turn toward nature as the central philosophical insight of Romanticism: ‘This notion of an inner voice or impulse, the idea that we find the truth within us, and in particular in our feelings—these were the crucially justifying concepts of the Romantic rebellion in its various forms.’²⁸ Some Romantics identified the voice of nature as particular to each person. For others, the voice of nature is the voice in us of nature—the larger order in which we find ourselves. One of the earliest and most important proponents of this second view was Herder, for whom nature was a great current of sympathy flowing through all things. The role of humanity, in his view, was to bring the current of sympathy to consciousness.

Another integral feature of Romanticism is what Taylor calls expressivism. When access to nature is through an inner voice, we can only fully know nature through articulating what we find within ourselves. I must turn inward to discover what is within me; a task that only I can carry out and one which no-one else can fully understand. Therefore, the truth of my identity does not pre-exist my own expression of it: my expressing my inner truth brings it into existence.

It is Taylor’s claim that Romanticism, with its expressivist understanding of the self, is the second significant turning point in the journey to the culture of authenticity. Expressivism fosters a stronger emphasis on the individuality of every person: each individual is different and original and the originality of the individual determines how he or she should live. Of course, the understanding that each person is different is not a discovery of the Romantic period; but conceiving difference and originality as determining how a person should live is new. In the Romantic, expressivist view, each person has an original path he or she ought to tread.²⁹

The third and final step in Taylor’s account of the journey to the age of authenticity occurs in the 1960s. At this time, he says, expressivist individualism becomes a mass phenomenon.³⁰ The change was precipitated by a range of social factors, including social mobility, the consumer revolution and the creation of a special youth market, but what most interests Taylor is the changing understanding of human agency. He says: ‘We see a steady spread of what I have called the culture of “authenticity”. I mean the understanding of life which emerges with the Romantic expressivism of the late-eighteenth century, that each one of us has his/her own way of realizing our humanity, and that it is important to find and live out one’s own, as against surrendering to conformity with a model imposed on us from outside, by society, or the previous generation, or religious or political authority.’³¹ Nineteenth and early-twentieth century artists

27. See Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 383-86.

28. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 368-69.

29. Taylor’s *The Ethics of Authenticity* explores the richness and limitations of this view.

30. He explores this theme most fully in *A Secular Age*, chapter 13.

31. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 475.

and intellectuals were important figures in the gradual spread of expressivism, but it is only in the '60s that it swept through the popular culture of the West.

Taylor's account of the journey to the culture of authenticity provides us with an insightful perspective from which to discern the richness and limits of the present. Post 1960s Western culture is certainly filled with its own contradictions and dilemmas: some of its ideals exist in a great deal of tension. For example, the attempt to hold together and realize in any community the ideals of self expression, the fulfilment of ordinary desires, and equal relationships will necessarily involve a great deal of tension.³² But Taylor's account enables us to see that the strengths and limits of our culture must be judged from the perspective of this new vision of the human good—that of authenticity. The outright knockers, who judge this culture as narcissistic, fail to see how profoundly the notion of authenticity has shaped the self-understanding of this age for the good, whatever the culture's limits. It's difficult in our day to imagine what it might mean to be myself without the contemporary notion of authenticity. On the other hand, the straight boosters, who cherish the advances of science and the freedom that the culture of authenticity allows, often put out of the mind all that authenticity entails: that I only come to know myself in relationship to that which is ultimately good, and within a defining community. Fostering our common life and our relationship to that which is ultimately good is critical for the success of this culture.

Religion in an Age of Authenticity

In *A Secular Age* Taylor sets out to show that the place of religion in the West today is best understood in the context of the shift to the culture of authenticity. Yet again, this is a cultural perspective. He argues that accounts of the process of secularisation simply in terms of the separation of church and state, or simply in terms of a decline of religious belief and practice do not do justice to the broad cultural transition. The whole context of our moral and religious experience has shifted. The conditions of belief have changed, he says, 'the shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.'³³ Taylor's fascinating account, over almost 800 pages, shows expressivism making a critical impact on the imagined place of the sacred. As a result of the expressivist outlook penetrating popular culture in the 1960s, the choice over religious denominations that was already possible in the nineteenth century is taken a stage further. Now, in his words, 'the religious life or practice that I become part of must not only be my choice, but it must speak to me, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development as I understand this.'³⁴ While

32. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 477.

33. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 3.

34. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 486.

maintaining the frameworks of belief will be difficult in an expressivist age, the desire to live an authentic spiritual life must be applauded.

No doubt, the search for an experience of the spiritual that ‘speaks to them’ leads some people in our day to fairly undemanding spiritual options. In response, the outright knockers of Western culture condemn this age, equating it with these flattened forms of the spiritual life. But equating the age of authenticity with its most debased forms is a major error, in Taylor’s view.³⁵ The flattened forms do not do justice to the whole movement toward authenticity, which also has Christian roots and influences the best of religious lives for the good. The search for authenticity can be seen as an attempt at a cultural level to live out Augustine’s famous line: ‘You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.’³⁶

In this new cultural context, the critical question for the church is: how can it best proclaim the gospel? The Second Vatican Council, in the process of writing the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, recognised the need to re-consider the Roman Catholic Church’s relationship with the world. The Council abandoned an attachment to the worldview of Christendom, to which the church had clung through the nineteenth century until the eve of Vatican II.³⁷ In *Gaudium et spes*, the Council conceived of the church-world relationship in terms of a dialogue, through which the church could contribute to both individuals and societies. Recognizing that individuals are searching to make sense of existence, the Council sees the church as ‘entrusted with making manifest the mystery of God who is our ultimate goal, at the same time it discloses to us the meaning of our existence, or the intimate truth about ourselves’ (GS 41). The Council also sees the church making a substantial contribution to a dialogue with society, saying that the church’s ‘mission of a religious nature produces a function, enlightenment and resources which can be of service in constructing and strengthening the human community’ (GS 42). Yet a dialogue is two-way and with this in mind, the Council states firstly that the church has received much from the world, ‘from the history and development of the human race’ (GS 44). Because of what it has received, the Council then teaches that the believing community must constantly keep itself open to the world in order that it may learn of that to which it is called. In the Council’s words:

It is for God’s people as a whole, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and especially for pastors and theologians, to listen to the various voices of

35. Taylor discusses this issue in *A Secular Age*, 506-13.

36. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991), 3.

37. Second Vatican Council, ‘*Gaudium et spes*,’ in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils: Volume II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Norman P. Tanner, 2 vols. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990). References to ‘*Gaudium et spes*’ will be placed in brackets in the text. I have explored Vatican II’s understanding of the church-world relationship in: ‘Church and World at Vatican II: The Significance of *Gaudium et spes*,’ *Pacifica* 19, no. 1 (February 2006): 37-57.

our day, discerning them and interpreting them, and to evaluate them in the light of the divine word, so that the revealed truth can be increasingly appropriated, better understood and more suitably expressed. (GS 44)

Only through attentiveness to the various voices of the day will the church be able to proclaim the gospel faithfully. In summary, the dialogical relationship envisaged in *Gaudium et spes* could be put in these terms: the church, founded in the gospel, responds to the desires and struggles of this age, while listening for the voice of the Spirit in the world.

While engaged in dialogue with the world, the church will certainly run up against the limits of the culture of authenticity, and particularly the temptation to see authenticity in subjectivist terms. When authenticity is seen predominantly in terms of self-creation, it is difficult to engage the broader and deeper questions of meaning in which our moral and religious lives are situated. Those engaged in dialogue, therefore, will have to face the challenge of leading their interlocutors beyond the stance of self-creation toward the frameworks of meaning on which their stance depends.³⁸

38. I have discussed the church's proclamatory task in the age of authenticity in: 'Proclamation as Dialogue: Transition in the Church-World Relationship,' *Theological Studies* (forthcoming).