

1-1-2016

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Published version. "Seekers and Dwellers: Some Critical Reflections on Charles Taylor's Account of Identity," in *Seekers and Dwellers: Plurality and Wholeness in a Time of Secularity*. Ed. Philip J. Rossi. Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2016: 47-76. [Permalink](#). © 2016 The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy. Used with permission.

Seekers and Dwellers: Some Critical Reflections on Charles Taylor's Account of Identity

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In *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor writes that, "There is a question about ourselves – which we roughly gesture at with the term "identity" – which cannot be sufficiently answered with any general doctrine of human nature." He follows this claim with the lapidary sentence: "The search for identity can be seen as the search for what I essentially am."¹ Despite its apparent clarity, this sentence is deeply complex and problematic. The words "search" and "essentially" sit there on the page and the sentence poses more questions than it answers. How is the search for our identity to be conducted? What can it mean to claim that there is something I am essentially that is additional to my nature as a human being? What picture of human identity stands behind Taylor's assertion here? In Part two of this chapter, I will try answering these questions from Taylor's point of view, but also call into question his way of answering them. My larger concern in highlighting these questions is the way they interweave with Taylor's use of the distinction between "seekers" and "dwellers" as it relates both to the search for what Taylor labels "authenticity" and their relation to the institutional church. But, as part VI of the chapter will make clear, I have significant concerns about the notion of authenticity as Taylor (and others) conceive it, and that will have significant implications for how I characterize the distinction between seekers and dwellers. Hence in part VII, I will try to address the issue of seekers and dwellers as it connects to a search for meaning in life, while trying to do so without using the characterization of authenticity with all the metaphysical baggage it carries when Taylor talks about "what essentially I am." For now, I begin with a basic account of Taylor's distinction between seekers and dwellers before moving in parts II-V to an account of Taylor's narrative of modern

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 184.

gains. Along the way, I will be questioning some of the assumptions of his account.

Part I

In Taylor's contribution to *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, the very title of his chapter is striking: "The Church Speaks – to Whom?" The bulk of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of the apparently contrasting notions of "seekers" and "dwellers" on the one hand and on the other those "who believe still" and those who "believe again." And, in his typically penetrating way, he finds the crux of the issue to lie in what I want to describe as the way people "hear" the claims of the Church in contrast to the "voice" in which the Church speaks. A particularly striking example he uses in this connection is the voice of the Church heard when it speaks of homosexuals as "intrinsically disordered," when we all know homosexuals whose lives are finely ordered. There is, then, he points out a disconnect between the voice of the Church and the conditions under which we receive it today.²

Of course, Taylor does not think there is any way to go back to a time when we could hear things differently, nor does he seem at all nostalgic for such a time. He is clear that the moral sources that have become available to us in modernity represent "an epistemic gain" and the reason for this is that these moral sources "represent real and important human potentialities."³ These new moral sources are precisely the causes of the differences between the ways people hear the voice of the Church. What Taylor largely leaves unanswered in this essay, though, is an obvious way forward from this lack of attunement between what "we" hear and what "they" say. This is another method of being "out of touch" with our identity. He mentions Taizé communities as a way of connecting with seekers and clearly views this as a path to "believe again," but his more substantive suggestion, which given the purpose of his essay is understandably only briefly discussed, is to have us recall past voices

² Charles Taylor, "The Church Speaks – to Whom?" in *Church and People: Disjunctions in a Secular Age*, ed. Charles Taylor, José Casanova, and George F. McLean (Washington, D.C.: The Council for Research and Values in Philosophy, 2012), pp. 1-14.

³ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 313.

– the voices of those saints who have tried to describe, or point at, the “enigmas of existence” as opposed to the “surface appearances” that are articulated in the authoritative voice of the Church.⁴ It is here that Taylor and Augustine seem closer together than his usual narrative might indicate. As I show below in Part III, Taylor tends to “backslide” into a more robustly Augustinian view of identity than he realizes. Also, in this brief essay he notes he has provided examples of how this listening to past voices might work in Chapter 20 of *A Secular Age*. I shall return to that more extensive discussion below, but again his examples point towards a lingering attachment to Augustine’s notion of inwardness. In the next part of the chapter, though, I want to return to the questions raised by Taylor’s notion of the search for identity. How is the search for our identity to be conducted? What can it mean to claim that there is something I am essentially that is additional to my nature as a human being? What picture of human identity stands behind Taylor’s assertion here?

Part II

One way to begin answering these questions is to recall that Taylor sees this search for identity – as he conceives it – as first becoming especially prominent in the thought of Augustine, whom he views as having intensified the notion of inwardness as part of the notion of a search for the self. The long version of this argument is given in *Sources of the Self*, but there is a succinct summary in *The Ethics of Authenticity*. There he stresses that Augustine’s view is one “... where being in touch with some source – God, say, or the Idea of the Good – was considered essential to full being.” The initial inward turn, which in Augustine is a matter of finding “... the road to God as passing through our own self-reflexive awareness of ourselves” develops over time to the view that “the source we have to connect with is deep in us. This is part of the massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.”⁵

It is crucial to emphasize that Taylor sees the development of the notion of authenticity as an epistemic gain. He narrates a story about

⁴ Taylor, “The Church Speaks – to Whom?,” p. 19.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 26-27.

the advance of human inwardness, perhaps most originally present in Augustine's thought. In this evolution of the processes of inwardness, the evolving concomitant moral ideal (and epistemic gain) is one of "being true to oneself," and Taylor, following Lionel Trilling, names this moral ideal "authenticity."⁶ In *A Secular Age*, Taylor describes this culture of authenticity in the following way:

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 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.⁷

I take it that "realizing our humanity" here must be equivalent to the search for identity as the search for what I essentially am.

Since Taylor begins his narrative with Augustine's inward turn, it is important to think through what that turn means in Augustine. The paradigm figure for this search throughout Augustine's narrative in the *Confessions* is given in the Parable of the Prodigal Son. Peter Brown has brought out this aspect of Augustine's thought well: "The Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15: 11-32) has a special resonance for Augustine. More than any other biblical story, it serves as a consciously chosen mirror for self-understanding."⁸ It is especially noteworthy, and Brown emphasizes the point, that when Augustine recounts his encounter with the books of the Platonists, he echoes the parable "by saying that it helped him come, or return, to himself."⁹ Of course Augustine is careful to point out that this return was due to God's help, and it is this tension between returning unaided and only because of some prior movement in him of God's work that makes

⁶ Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, p. 15.

⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 475.

⁸ Peter Brown, "Introduction," in Augustine, *Confessions*, second edition, trans. F.J. Sheed and ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2007), p. xii.

⁹ Brown, "Introduction," p. xiii.

Augustine's story a mystery. It took the conjoined jolt of reading the books of the Platonists *and* God's action within him to lead Augustine into his inmost recesses. So, as a story about the importance of inwardness, it is crucial that we keep in mind that for Augustine God's assistance is a necessary condition for this inward turn. That interconnectedness of the parable and Augustine's return due to God's help explains why Brown can write: "Yet for Augustine, the story is as universally applicable as it is personally significant. Like all of Sacred Scripture, it is a type or figure in light of which the enigmas of our own existence is revealed."¹⁰ So, the search inward to find a source of our identity is one that leads us to our own enigmas of existence, a phrase, strikingly used, as we saw in Part I, by Taylor himself, but that journey inward, or return home, is instigated by God.

But if it is the meaning of our existence that is questioned by this parable, Northrop Frye has emphasized a larger point about the parable used by Augustine to lead us to a consideration of the enigmas of our existence, namely, that it "sums up, in epitome, the whole Christian story of the exile and return of man to his home."¹¹ This raises the stakes of the search considerably since it makes us question why one did not know that one was home in the first place and demands that we think what the sources of exile might be. Since the Christian story is in keeping with God's providential plan, both for each fortunate individual and for the world as a whole, one must confront not only the enigmas of the mystery of personal existence, but also the enigmas of the world's direction. At the same time we can ask of the parable the question why we would leave home at all. The prodigal son's brother did not. That, too, must be part of God's providential design and part of the enigma of the brother's existence. So, there's a part of both the personal enigmas of existence and the Christian story that needs to make room for staying at home. This is a real problem, though, since it shows a radical discontinuity between the possibility of searching within and the necessity of the Church's forward direction as a pilgrim church aiming in a providential direction.

As a result of Taylor's use of this narrative concerning inwardness and self-reflection, I want to take him as intimating that our search for

¹⁰ Brown, "Introduction," xiii.

¹¹ Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 134.

our identity often begins by denying it, by leaving behind a given identity that is “out of touch.” In the prodigal son story, there is a return to oneself *through* those experiences of deprivation and destitution; experiences graphically represented in Augustine’s own multiple uses of the story. But from Augustine’s story of exile and return, we know that the return is ultimately a happy one – it ends well, just as it does for the prodigal son and, in Frye’s account, the world as a whole. The Christian story, for all its challenges and pitfalls, is one in which in the end, all will be well. As Northrop Frye wryly explains: “The story of the salvation and redemption of mankind is a comedy because it comes out right and ends happily for all those whose opinion on the matter counts.”¹²

Here I become uneasy, because Frye certainly has it right. Most of us are not prodigal sons in the sense in which the Christian story and its use in Augustine would suggest – or if we are, we cannot be certain of our status. Augustine’s turn toward inwardness is teleological; even though he might not have been aware when he began reading the books of the Platonists that it was God acting within him and directing his life providentially, we as readers discover it was so designed. We have to take his story on faith. But my worry in Augustine’s portrayal of the background of providential assistance makes problematic the idea that our existence is an enigma. In one sense it might be, if we allow that God’s work within us is beyond our reckoning, but then it is only epistemically an enigma; it is not an enigma *simpliciter* because God knows what is essential to our identity and that leaves open the conceptual space for denying any genuinely open search for the enigmas of our existence that is not ultimately directed by God. That makes it seem as if Taylor is smuggling God into his story of authenticity and searching instead of showing that any genuinely meaningful life requires us to accept God’s presence. The coincidence of the same phrase appearing in both Brown’s discussion of Augustine and in Taylor’s invocation of the voices of past saints is in retrospect, unsurprising. If the voices of the saints articulate our enigmas and point to an inward depth, it is still likely that those voices will also use the teleological notion of providence

¹² Northrop Frye, “The Stage is All the World,” in ed. Troni Y. Grande and Garry Sherbert, *Northrop Frye’s Writings on Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, Collected Works of Northrop Frye, Vol. 28 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 448-49.

and the argument Taylor makes threatens to become vacuously circular. I will return to this worry in discussing Taylor's account of "past voices" in Part VI.

Part III

I want now to contrast two different kinds of searches and the kinds of seekers that they exemplify: one where we know the end point is a return home after years of self-imposed wanderings (those who believe again) and the other where we do not know the end point of the journey (pure seekers). Both seekers start from the same place – a confusion about where and who they are.

The first kind of search is exemplified in the *Divine Comedy*. The opening words:

Stopped mid-motion in the middle
Of what we call our life, I looked up and saw no sky
Only a dense cage of leaf, tree, and twig. I was lost.

This translation by Mary Jo Bang¹³ is not exactly literal, but it captures an important element of Dante's orientation, and one that fits well the contrast Taylor draws between human nature and identity. On the one hand there is the generic "what we call our life" (*nostra vita*) and on the other hand there is the intensely personal search in the words "I looked up" (*mi ritrovai* in Italian, literally "I found myself"). Coupled with this dialectic of general and particular, we find a metaphor that reveals a sense of entrapment, "a dense cage" (literally "a dark wood") coupled with a sense of despair: "I was lost" (the Italian is literally "the straight way was lost"). I shall return to this sense of entrapment soon. I want to suggest that this sense of loss and confusion that Dante experiences is one that, however arduous, is an inward search that leads him to a cosmic vision of order.

The second kind of search is one where we do not know the end point of the journey. Taylor talks about this in terms of "self-exploration," and it emerges in his discussion of a modern turn in Augustinian inwardness. It is striking, I think, that the passage with which I began this Chapter, which contrasted human nature and

¹³ Dante Alighieri, *Inferno: A New Translation*, illustrated by Henrik Drescher, trans. Mary Jo Bang (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2013), p. 15.

identity, is found in his chapter on Montaigne in *Sources of the Self*. The gap Montaigne opens up between human nature and identity is central to his thought, yet in Taylor's account, he is loath to come to terms with the more radical implications of Montaigne's view. For Taylor, Montaigne's self-exploration is a matter of "exploring what we are in order to establish ... identity, because the assumption behind modern self-exploration is that we do not already know who we are."¹⁴ This way of phrasing the matter raises significant questions and suggests that there is an identity that we merely have to discover through a process of exploration of the self, a self we essentially are. The account of providence may be gone from this modern turn, but the teleology is not. Nonetheless, there are elements in Montaigne's thought that belie Taylor's interpretation and I want to point to those in order to further develop the notion of a seeker who chooses not to "believe again" as readily as Dante's seeker does.

As Richard Flathman has noted, there is a "radical perspectivalism" in Montaigne's thought that "coexists with rather than contradicts or takes back Montaigne's repeated insistence on the ways in which our judgments and our dispositions are shaped and directed by custom, convention, and the opinions of those around us."¹⁵ I quote Flathman's judgment here for two reasons. First, it will prove important when we arrive at a discussion of Taylor's notion of authenticity. Second, it shows the Augustinian notion of inwardness at one of its pivotal points of change. Montaigne stands at a kind of hinge point in the development of the notion of inwardness. The perspectivalism is exemplified in Montaigne's essay, discussed by Flathman, "Of Heraclitus and Democritus" where, in speaking of the soul, Montaigne writes: "And she [the soul] treats a matter not according to itself, but according to herself." The priority Montaigne accords to the interests of the soul here is conspicuous. He continues: "Things in themselves may have their own weights and measures and qualities; but once inside, within us, she allots them their qualities as she sees fit."¹⁶ There is a real echo here of Augustine's repeated

¹⁴ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 178.

¹⁵ Richard Flathman, "Perfectionism without Perfection: Cavell, Montaigne, and the Conditions of Morals and Politics," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 114.

¹⁶ Flathman, "Perfection without Perfectionism," p. 114.

metaphysical claim, based on Wisdom 11:21, that everything has its “measure, number, and weight,”¹⁷ but unlike Augustine’s robust metaphysical use of this passage in his account of the people and things in the world, here these qualities are radically relativized. One more quote from this essay will exemplify the aspect of Montaigne’s thought that differentiates him decisively from Augustine and from Taylor’s account of Montaigne as self-explorer:

Death is frightful to Cicero, desirable to Cato, a matter of indifference to Socrates. Health, conscience, authority, knowledge, riches, beauty, and their opposites – all are stripped on entry and receive from the soul new clothing, and the coloring that she chooses – brown, green, bright, dark, bitter, sweet, deep, superficial – and which each individual soul chooses; for they have not agreed together on their styles, rules, and forms; each one is queen of her realm. Wherefore, let us no longer make the external qualities of things our excuse; it is up to us to reckon them as we will.¹⁸

These passages from Montaigne indicate that there is more to self-exploration than Taylor thinks. There is, in fact, room for self-creation – “it is up to us to reckon them as we will,” not to discover something essential about ourselves.

In what I have pointed at earlier in this chapter, I expect the reader to see how I want to complicate Taylor’s picture. In one sense, it seems the paradigm seeker for Taylor would be the Prodigal Son who, following Augustine and Dante, returns home, believing again. At the same time, the paradigm dweller would be the brother of the prodigal son, the one who did not seek and who believes still. But what the passage from Montaigne suggests is something more radical about seeking. I want to claim that Montaigne is attracted to the idea that there might not be an end to the search, that there might not be someone I essentially am. That means that the prodigal son might not

¹⁷ Augustine, *Literal Commentary on Genesis IV*, 3.7, in *The Essential Augustine*, ed. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: New American Library, 1964), pp. 103-105.

¹⁸ Flathman, “Perfection without Perfectionism,” p. 114. Note that Flathman quotes only part of this passage. The complete passage I have used is from Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), p. 220.

be able to return home, because he was never at home in the first place. At the same time, the brother becomes much more interesting as a figure. On the one hand, he could be as much of a seeker as the prodigal. After all, if there is no self he essentially is, his creation of himself could take place at home rather than through the travails of a journey. On the other hand he might be mired in some sort of self-imposed story about his identity as the dutiful son of his father, in which he falsely thinks that is who he essentially is.

As a result of Taylor's glossing over these sorts of complications in his discussion of Montaigne, then, we are tempted to miss an important aspect of seeking and dwelling. Seeking takes on the dimension of a never-ending search, not the dimension of the discovery of who one essentially is. While I do not want to overly simplify Taylor's thought here, I think in his discussion of Montaigne he falls victim to a parallel problem to the one I identified in his account of Augustine. Just as Augustine presupposes that his search for himself is guided by God's providential design, hence arrogating his role in the search, here Taylor's assumption that Montaigne is looking to discover who he is essentially pushes us to imagine that there is a preset essential or true self waiting to be discovered. The space for our thinking that Flathman identifies in Montaigne provides us with a new perspective, one that radically shifts the parameters of seeking and dwelling. I now turn to an exploration of those parameters, before returning to discussing Taylor's notion of authenticity.

Part IV

I want to continue exploring the phenomenology of seeking, and I will do so using an example that comes close to echoing Dante in the panic of being lost, but which describes the finding of oneself in a radically different way, building on the perspective of Montaigne. Emerson, at the beginning of his essay "Experience," provides us with the following image:

Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none. We wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight.

But the Genius which, according to the old belief, stands at the door by which we enter, and gives us the lethe to drink, that we may tell no tales, mixed the cup too strongly, and we cannot shake off the lethargy now at noonday.¹⁹

The relevance of this quote for my purposes is readily apparent. It points to a more extreme state of disorientation and panic than Dante's vision of himself trapped in the woods. For, as we know, Dante, though he too had to drink of the waters of Lethe in order to forget the journey through Hell he endured, also had reliable guides, first Virgil and then Beatrice. But Emerson has us waking up in complete disorientation and without a guide – even our Genius has been weakened since the lethe was poured too strong, so it does not help us out of our lost state or recover from our journey through Hell enabling, with Beatrice's assistance, our return home. Nor is Emerson's image comparable to the Parable of the Prodigal Son, since there is no evidence of God's working within us to help us find our way. Instead, the picture Emerson provides is one in which we have lost every sense of direction. No matter how bright the sun, we find ourselves in a darkness that prevents us from knowing the extremes, which might as well amount to thinking there is no end, no home. Here, a pertinent association is with Thoreau's *Walden*. Stanley Cavell has noted that rather than being an account of Thoreau's dwelling at Walden Pond, "Walden was always gone, from the beginnings of the words of *Walden*."²⁰ This complicated assertion points to the fact that any attempt to establish a dwelling, to be a dweller, perhaps leads us astray. I shall return to this point in Part VII.

For his part, Emerson continues:

Sleep lingers all our lifetime about our eyes, as night hovers all day in the boughs of the fir-tree. All things swim and glitter. Our life is not so much threatened as our perception. Ghostlike we glide through nature, and should not know our place again. Did our birth fall in some fit of indigence and frugality in nature, that she was so sparing of her fire and so liberal of her earth, that it

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Experience," in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 285-86.

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), p. 117.

appears to us that we lack the affirmative principle, and though we have health and reason, yet we have no superfluity of spirit for new creation? We have enough to live and bring the year about, but not an ounce to impart or to invest. Ah that our Genius were a little more of a genius!²¹

Here I want to linger over the notion of perception, for while we may live a ghostlike existence, perhaps evoking in us images of the spirits Dante encounters in his journey, the more important point is that we cannot see our way about. Dante could look up and, though he could not see the sky, he could see the obscuring woods around him and have, providentially, Virgil arrive to help him emerge from his sylvan cage. Emerson, by contrast, states flatly that the guides we might have, Genius and perception, are no help at all.

There is a resonance with Montaigne's perspectivalism here for sure, but with an added loss. Now we have lost even the power to reckon the external qualities of things. Indeed, inwardness seems to have failed us, and as ghostlike creatures unable to see in the daylight, we have no way either to discover ourselves or create ourselves. So, what remains for us to do on Emerson's account? He writes about inwardness and self-reflexiveness as follows: "It is very unhappy, but too late to be helped, the discovery we have made, that we exist. That discovery is called the Fall of Man. Ever afterwards, we suspect our instruments."²² So, there is no path back to innocence – call it finding who we essentially are – through inwardness and our ability to believe or believe again is suspect. Significantly, he adds a bit later:

The life of truth is cold, and so far mournful; but it is not the slave of tears, contritions, and perturbations. It does not attempt another's work, nor adopt another's facts. It is a main lesson of wisdom to know your own from another's. I have learned that I cannot dispose of other people's facts; but I possess such a key to my own, as persuades me against all their denials, that they also have a key to theirs.²³

²¹ Emerson, "Experience," p. 286.

²² Emerson, "Experience," p. 304.

²³ Emerson, "Experience," p. 308.

Two things stand out in this passage. The life of truth is one's own and does not trespass on another's. This might be thought to be a concession to a view of inwardness that discovers who one essentially is, but I am not so sure. The image of "a key to my own facts" needs to be analyzed carefully. After all, the fact is that Emerson calls the life of truth "cold." That makes me think that the noonday sun not only fails to illuminate a way for us, it also does not warm us. If this is finding out who one essentially is, it appears to be a kind of *via negativa*. For Emerson in "Experience," finding ourselves is not a matter of discovering a unique ground that each of us essentially is; rather it is a matter of coming to terms with an endless series of losses. As Stanley Cavell has put it, "Finding ourselves on a certain step we may feel the loss of foundation to be traumatic, to mean the ground of the world falling away, the bottom of things dropping out, ourselves foundered, sunk on a stair."²⁴ This thought connects to Cavell's regular way of reading Emerson as equating mourning with morning, and discovering that each new morning is a rebirth.²⁵

Emerson ends his essay strikingly: "and the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power."²⁶

Here I want to call attention to the word 'romance.' A crucial feature of Emerson's thought is well brought out by Stanley Cavell. I want to come at it from two perspectives. From one perspective, Cavell makes it clear that there is no such thing as a true (or false) self; hence he is disputing the notion, central to Taylor's work, of there being something that I essentially am. Cavell writes: "Such an idea [of a true self] seems rather imposed from outside oneself, as from another who has a use for oneself on condition that one is beyond desire, beyond change"²⁷ Cavell here is reminding us of that dimension of our modern notion of inwardness that is too often betrayed. As Flathman wrote of Montaigne above, "custom, convention, and the opinions of those around us" are ever present.

²⁴ Stanley Cavell, "Finding as Founding: Taking Steps in Emerson's 'Experience,'" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, ed. David Justin Hodge (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2003), p. 134.

²⁵ Cavell, "Finding as Founding," pp. 115-116.

²⁶ Emerson, "Experience," p. 311.

²⁷ Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. xxxiv.

Surely they play a role in shaping our notion not only of the way the search inward should proceed, but also in fostering a complacency about the search itself. Cavell is well known for picking up these themes in Emerson and Thoreau and I return to them below.

Right now, though, I want to note that from another perspective, rejecting the idea of a true self means recognizing that our self is always divided, "that no state of the self achieves its full expression, that the fate of finitude is to want, that human desire projects an idea of an unending beyond."²⁸ It is this divided self and unending goal that powers our romantic attachments to the world and others. This is most forcefully enunciated in Cavell's registering of a "passionate utterance," which he describes as "an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire."²⁹ In talking about the disorders of desire, Cavell is making the picture of our identity especially complex. Emerson in "Experience" had separated out the world from our selves when he stressed the transformation of genius into practical power is why the world exists. That the "why" here cannot be understood teleologically is clear enough. It might be thought that we might want to restrict ourselves to a modest sense of teleology in relation to identity and a "true self." Of course, there might be all sorts of smaller epiphanies along life's journey, which can be full of surprises and in which distortions and mystifications can be lifted from our ways of conceiving our identities.³⁰ In fact, though, I think that all that remains in an Emersonian/Cavelleian picture is whether or not there is a true self we are to become. But the important point to stress is there is never an end to that journey – true selfhood might be an ideal, but it is unachievable. The "why", then, paints a very different picture of our place in the world and our relation to it than Augustine and Dante provide of us as pilgrims, and hence not at home in the world. If we

²⁸ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 311.

²⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 185.

³⁰ For one intriguing discussion of the way we can hide ourselves, see Edgar A. Levenson, "The Purloined Self," *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis and Dynamic Psychiatry*, 15 (1987), pp. 481-490. But, of course, while we do this through what he calls processes of "experience mystified by anxiety," I see these as clarifications of anxiety, not a route to reveal a full-fledged "authentic" self.

are not at home in the world, it is our failure, not part of who we essentially are.

I have worked through, albeit briefly, some thoughts from Augustine, Dante, Montaigne, and Emerson to show a range of possible responses to our being lost and finding ourselves. The Prodigal Son returns home and Dante, with Beatrice's help, glimpses his true home. Montaigne finds within himself the ability to reckon the external qualities of things, that is, the ability to think for himself and for himself alone, and it is not too much a stretch to say he creates his identity there. Emerson works his way beyond Montaigne. He, too, creates an identity, but it is an identity that is always doubled. In addition, the world of facts he finds himself in is cold, and he does not know the way forward – does he go up the stairs or down the stairs? At the end he concludes that the only way forward is one that recognizes that there is no self I essentially am, but rather a continuous journey, though a journey without a guide. Indeed, one way of noticing just what is important in Emerson would be to note that point he is making is that guides are not to be trusted. Instead, we are moving in the disorders of desire, to use Cavell's phrase, picking up a way of interpreting the true romance of the world by acting in it.

I now want to return to the notion of conformity as diagnosed by Emerson and Thoreau. I do so to connect these topics to Taylor's ethic of authenticity and its relation to the activities and attitudes of seekers and dwellers. While I do not have the space to present passages in detail, I instead rely on Cavell's interpretation of the notion of conformity. I want to say that the notion of authenticity is compromised by its lack of political import. Here is Cavell:

You may or may not take an explicit side in some particular conflict, but unless you find some way to show that this society is not yours, it is; your being compromised by its actions expresses the necessity of your being implicated in them. That you nevertheless avoid express participation or express disavowal is what creates that ghost-state of conformity Emerson articulates endlessly, as our being inane, timid, ashamed, skulkers, leaners, apologetic, noncommittal, a gag, a masquerade, pinched in a corner, cowed, cowards fleeing before a revolution. These are among the contraries at once to thinking *and* to acting aversively; which is to say, by

Emerson's definition of self-reliance (namely as the aversion of conformity), contraries of self-reliance, in word or in deed.³¹

Given this devastating list of ways in which we compromise the creation of (a divided) self, avoid becoming self-reliant, Taylor's notion of authenticity begins to fall apart. We may all, in Taylor's words, conceive of ourselves as having to connect with a source deep within us, but the ways we fail to do so are manifold in the very process of thinking we *are* doing so. Hence, I want to say that both seekers and dwellers risk living in conformity and that one reason for this is a misconceived notion of the self as one with which we can connect. In the next part, I explore more directly one component of what I take to be missing in Taylor's account of seekers and dwellers.

Part V

I now wish to point to a potential problem with the claim that past expressions of the "enigmas of existence" can counter the voice of the authoritative Church today. As I showed above, the first problem is that Taylor has failed to distance himself from Augustine to the extent that he thinks he does. As a result, his method for countering the voice in which the Church speaks strikes me as a little too easy an answer. Despite his historical narrative and the crucial epistemic gains and moral resources that the notion of authenticity is intended to provide, Taylor's Augustinian allegiances inflect his account with a "timeless" dimension to the reception of those enigmas of existence. I do not think such timelessness is plausible, or is even what Taylor himself wants to think. In fact, Taylor himself is careful to distance himself from the "timeless" conception of the enigmas of our existence when he mentions the concurrent rise of consumer capitalism along with the notion of authenticity, as though it were causally connected with our currently available descriptions of seekers and dwellers.³²

He makes this point most strongly in *Sources of the Self*. There, as Ruth Abbey has aptly noted, "[Taylor] acknowledges in principle the

³¹ Cavell, "What is the Emersonian Event?" in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, p. 190.

³² Taylor, "The Church Speaks – to Whom?" p. 18 and *A Secular Age*, pp. 474-475.

role that changing material and institutional factors, such as those in the economic, administrative, legal, military, technological and political realms play in shaping identity"³³ But my point is that Taylor has only done this "in principle." He remains tempted to try to go back to earlier voices, but without accounting for the current situations of the hearers of those past voices. So, any attempt at retrieval of past descriptions of the conditions of our existence runs up against the fact that there have been momentous changes in the conditions of the possibility of hearing those descriptions. The duality of Montaigne's thought, in which he both supports a kind of adherence to convention but also develops a notion of self-creation, shows how even in the sixteenth century, the things Montaigne was capable of hearing might extend well beyond the scope of the voices of the Church. More generally, as Quentin Skinner has made clear, we need to recognize that in "learning more about the causal story" [of our present view of what is good], the effect is "to loosen the hold of our inherited values upon our emotional allegiances." Skinner goes on to write: "Haunted by a sense of lost possibilities, historians are almost invariably Laodicean in their attachment to the values of the present time."³⁴

I want now to extend Skinner's point in a slightly different direction. Cavell has noted that from Thoreau's perspective in the nineteenth century, "*Our* nostalgia is as dull as our confidence and anticipation."³⁵ This sentence can be read in the context of the denunciations of conformity present in both Emerson and Thoreau, but how much more must that be the case today? Skinner's formulation of his objection, "loosening the hold of our inherited values upon our emotional allegiances," does not apply only to historians in the way that Skinner intimates. In fact, it has been argued that this is a more general condition of human life as it is currently lived, especially in Western industrial societies, the societies that also concern Taylor in his narrative and in his conceptions of seekers and

³³ Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Philosophy Now Series) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 74.

³⁴ Quentin Skinner, "Modernity and Disenchantment: Some Historical Reflections," in *Philosophy in an Age of Pluralism: The Philosophy of Charles Taylor in Question*, ed. James Tully with the assistance of Daniel M. Weinstock (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 45.

³⁵ Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, p. 117.

dwellers. J. M. Bernstein, for example, has talked about this condition in terms of "affective skepticism." In his compelling interpretation of Adorno, Bernstein points to an analysis of twentieth century society that sees it as the result of an "ethical failure."³⁶ This contrasts with Taylor's apparently more ameliorative picture of our current ethical position as an epistemic gain. The modern turn identified by Taylor, though, does call into question the comedic aspect of the prodigal son story, as the notion of self-creation becomes more prominent than self-discovery, and the horrors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries make it hard to imagine that most people really do view their lives as comedies. Who would want to do so? While we may retain a nostalgic attachment to the idea of an inward "getting in touch," it is unclear from Taylor's description of the search for identity that the goal could return to its former prominence in our historical situation. How could we return given what we have witnessed. Who wants to go back to that home? Or, put differently, what kind of a person would want to do that? Is that what dwellers are doing?

Bernstein's account of our modern situation relies heavily on the conditions of the modern subject as diagnosed by Max Weber. Taylor, too, discusses Weber, so juxtaposing Bernstein's account with Taylor's is an effective way to explicate my concern with Taylor's more optimistic view of our epistemic gains and moral resources. Taylor's use of Weber tends to focus on the latter's account of the rise of an attitude to human life and work that can be viewed as affirmation of ordinary life. As Taylor puts it, this is characterized as "A spiritual outlook which stressed the necessity of continuous disciplined work, work which should be of benefit to people and hence ought to be efficacious, and which encouraged sobriety and restraint in the enjoyment of its fruits"³⁷ But another Weberian thesis of crucial importance is downplayed by Taylor, namely, Weber's thesis of the "iron cage" of rationality. In *A Secular Age*, Taylor makes use of this image in discussing the ways that we moderns organize time as a "precious resource, not to be 'wasted.'" The result, for Taylor, is that the time we live in is a "uniform, univocal, secular time" that "occludes all higher times, makes them hard to conceive." This sense of time traps us in a kind of routine that is best characterized as

³⁶ J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 4.

³⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, p. 226.

“banal.”³⁸ This is certainly an important aspect of Weber’s “iron cage” metaphor and it certainly fits with Taylor’s emphasis on the need for us to rediscover the “enigmas of existence” that can be vertical and not horizontal. But it fails to do full justice to the metaphor’s many dimensions. In bringing out an additional aspect of the metaphor, I want to help clarify the ways in which Bernstein’s use of the term and his diagnosis of our modern predicament is significantly different than Taylor’s. To say that twentieth century society is an ethical failure is to say more than that the sense of time has been flattened; it brings into question the epistemic gains in the moral concerns that Taylor sees as a sign of progress.

For Bernstein, it is not just that time has been flattened out. Instead, he wants to argue that “Modern, secular reason is self-undermining.”³⁹ So, rather than seeing the secular age as an epistemic gain, albeit with the downside of flattening out spiritual experience, Bernstein links together two aspects of contemporary secular experience in a way that shows that the process that Taylor describes as an epistemic gain has in fact led to a condition of nihilism. The first aspect Bernstein identifies is “the increasing rational incoherence of modern moral values and ideals.” This incoherence leads us to see the “practical inadequacy for the purpose of regulating – orienting and giving meaning to – everyday life.”⁴⁰ Bernstein focuses on the following summary passage from Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*:

But among the forces cultivated by morality was *truthfulness*: this eventually turned against morality, discovered its teleology, its partial perspective – and now the recognition of this inveterate mendaciousness that one despairs of shedding becomes a stimulant. Now we discover in ourselves needs implanted by centuries of moral interpretation – needs that now appear to us as needs for untruth; on the other hand, the value for which we endure life seems to hinge on these needs. This antagonism – *not* to esteem what we know, and not to be *allowed* to esteem the lies we should like to tell ourselves – results in a process of dissolution.⁴¹

³⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 59 and p. 719.

³⁹ Bernstein, *Adorno*, p. 5.

⁴⁰ Bernstein, *Adorno*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Bernstein, *Adorno*, p. 5.

There is a lot to unpack here, but the basic idea is clear enough. Secular reason has given us scientific truths, but because these truths are merely scientific, they are not effective at engaging us on an emotional level. At the same time, what would engage us affectively is not available to us because the moral resources we have at our disposal are not worthy of being valued. There is a clear echo here of Skinner's Laodicean attitude, but now extended to stress the divide between our highest value, scientific rationality, and the moral stories that we used to use to make sense of our experience. The resulting experience is what Bernstein names "affective skepticism:"

Affective skepticism specifies a situation in which agents can find no good reason, no motive, for pursuing a particular form of practice (intellectual or practical) that can be separated, at least in principle, from the question of the internal coherence of the practice.⁴²

That is, the moral resources available to us are inadequate to externally motivate us – to take us outside of Taylor's flattened time.

To be fair, Taylor himself recognizes the tensions I am invoking in his essay, "A Catholic Modernity?" There, in a trenchant discussion of secular humanism, neo-Nietzscheans, and those who acknowledge transcendence, he compares our current condition with the choices that confronted Matteo Ricci, the famous Jesuit explorer of China. Taylor writes:

He [Ricci] wanted to distinguish between those things in the new culture that came from the natural knowledge we all have of God and thus should be affirmed and extended, on one hand, and those practices that were distortions and would have to be changed, on the other. Similarly, we are challenged to a difficult discernment, trying to see what in modern culture reflects its furthering of the gospel, and what its refusal of the transcendent.⁴³

Here I think Taylor is asking the crucial question and challenging us in the right way. I remain unconvinced, though, that we have the

⁴² Bernstein, *Adorno*, p. 6.

⁴³ Charles Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in *Dilemmas and Connections: Selected Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 186.

ability to make this discernment in any kind of deeply reasonable way, though we might be able to count gains and losses from an external perspective. So, at the end of the day, we need to recognize that for Taylor this is going to become a matter of faith based exploration. As he states in this same essay, "This cannot be a matter of guarantee, only of faith. ... Now, it makes a whole lot of difference whether you think this kind of love is a possibility for us humans."⁴⁴

This returns us to the issue of the Church's voice and our ability to hear it, adding an additional level of complexity.

Part VI

To see why I think that Taylor's invocation of faith might be sufficient, for those who can hear it, and yet not sufficient as a *philosophical* response to the inheritance of modernity, it is necessary to confront two key aspects of Taylor's account. One is the stress he places on the moral good and epistemic gain present in the notion of authenticity. The other is the availability to us of the voices of the past, which spoke eloquently and differently about our existence in time. I have already invoked Emerson as a caution against the idea of authenticity as a self-discovery, showing how he advanced Montaigne's initial attempt to construct a notion of self-creation. I suspect it is clear that my sympathies more nearly align with those of Montaigne and Emerson, and the reason for that is my inability to accept Taylor's notion of authenticity as finding essentially who we are.

As my use of Skinner is designed to illuminate, the historical dimensions of where we find ourselves make finding ourselves extraordinarily problematic. Abbey's litany of what shapes our identity – the economic, administrative, legal, military, technological and political realms – opens up a vast project. How could anyone ever know enough to find their identity with such an array of formative influences? More importantly, it calls into question the "essentially" in our identity. What could be essential given the contingent circumstances of so much that shapes our identity?

Psychoanalysis, perhaps more than any other twentieth century project, has noticed this problem, and the dilemma we face has been

⁴⁴ Taylor, "A Catholic Modernity?," p. 186.

pressed by Adam Phillips, who writes: "... first, ideally, we are made to feel special, then we are expected to enjoy a world in which we are not."⁴⁵ He is speaking, of course, about childhood and adulthood, but the thought has a more extensive scope in that we realize the separation of the concerns of the world from our wishes, a point made strongly by Emerson at the end of "Experience." Elsewhere, he writes that authenticity is one of an array of examples of "a phantom-limb effect – an absence acknowledged through an apparent presence ..." and then asks, "... what can you be for if you are against authenticity?"⁴⁶ In this context, he considers Wendy Lesser's memoir of living in Berlin. Lesser makes a case for a certain ironic distance in our understanding of our self and contrasts that with the desire to do away with an ironic life "... so that something more – More what? More childlike? More authentic? More credulous? – something fresher and newer, at any rate, can be ushered in."⁴⁷

Phillips goes on to liken irony to a "distance regulator," which we are trying to escape. But, after all, what is wrong with a distance regulator? What allows us to see that as an attractive option? I think in what I have said above – from Emerson, Adorno, and Skinner – that an answer to that question is becoming clear. We can be for a distance regulator because any other scenario puts us at risk of being credulous, whether about the self, our modern circumstances, or the contingencies that shape our identity. In short, we do not want to be taken in. For this reason, Phillips takes the quest for authenticity to be regressive.⁴⁸ Elsewhere, he strikingly writes that, "Through understanding to the limits of understanding – this is Freud's new version of an old project. Freud's work is best read as a long elegy for the intelligibility of our lives."⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Adam Phillips, *Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p. xv.

⁴⁶ Adam Phillips, "The Authenticity Issue," in his *On Balance* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), p. 108 and p. 115.

⁴⁷ Phillips, "The Authenticity Issue," p. 43. While it would complicate the argument, it might be helpful to think of authenticity as a concept that is defined best by what it is not. But again, that just means we can never get at a clear conception of authenticity. For more on this way of thinking about authenticity, see, Eric Dussere, *America is Elsewhere: The Noir Tradition in the Age of Consumer Culture* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 4-11.

⁴⁸ Phillips, "The Authenticity Issue," p. 116.

⁴⁹ Phillips, *Missing Out*, p. 63.

But now, what about the enigmas of our existence? In Chapter 20 of *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes of those “who broke out of the immanent frame,” what earlier I was describing at the flattened time that Taylor sees in Weber’s description of modernity.⁵⁰ Central to his discussion of these exemplars are those who experienced some kind of conversion. Taylor’s narrative of the variety of conversions is rich and nuanced. I will take as my example for discussion, from the several given by Taylor, the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom Taylor views as having “... paced out an itinerary which is in more than one sense ground-breaking.” As Taylor summarizes his discussion, he recognizes that Hopkins “starts from a modern predicament, and also ends up in previously uncharted terrain.”⁵¹ Hopkins is resistant to what Taylor describes as a “religion of impersonal order,” that is, one that sets up a code or set of rules, a correlative set of disciplines that cause us to internalize these rules, and a network of organizations that are rationally structured in such a way that we carry out what the code demands.⁵² For Taylor, what is most remarkable about Hopkins is his dual conviction of the role of communion – not an obedience to rules, but a participation in God’s love – and the “deep connection between this telos of communion and a recognition of the particular in all its specificity.”⁵³ So, in this sense we can see that Hopkins begins from two points. On the one hand he is alarmed by the kind of challenge an Emersonian notion of self-creation presents to his image of the relation between God and humans, and on the other hand he perceives a set of social organizations that enclose us in something akin to Weber’s iron cage.

This description of Hopkins’s accomplishment is sketchy, but sufficient for my purposes here. While recognizing the virtues of Hopkins’s achievement, I want to raise a worry. In a similar context, Cavell has written of Eliot’s great poem *Ash Wednesday*. There, Cavell recognizes that Eliot begins correctly with a recognition of “the profitlessness of labor, the absoluteness of time,” what he describes as the “decisive experience of the truth of Ecclesiastes.”⁵⁴ But then Cavell

⁵⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 728.

⁵¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 764.

⁵² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 742.

⁵³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, p. 742.

⁵⁴ Stanley Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribners and Sons, 1969), p. 162.

enters a cautionary note. Eliot progresses through the poem to speak of the “joy of surrender; the direction is up.” And he continues: “But can it [the direction up] really be *taken*, or does Eliot’s assurance relay only on knowing his religion like a book?”⁵⁵ That is, is Eliot, and by extension Hopkins, really able to lay bare the enigmas of existence, or are they telling us what they already believe, what has been written down for them to believe? This question is much too large for this chapter to answer, but it is worth raising in the context of Taylor’s reliance on contemporary exemplars of conversion as voices that can counter the voice of the Church that so many seekers find alienating. And, raising this question now, in tandem with what I have written earlier, will lead to my merely preliminary phenomenology of seekers and dwellers.

Part VII

If we are bereft of authenticity, if our reliance on exemplars can be questioned, and if we need to recognize all the external forces that shape our identity, how can we ever make sense of the distinction between seekers and dwellers? Are not they both looking for something impossible to find? The seeker, in search of some experience that will bring her relief from the overpowering, stifling orderliness of contemporary society might well say that she is on an authentic search. But the concern raised above about the notion of authenticity and the Emersonian additions to Montaigne’s sense of self-creation cause me to pause in envisioning seekers in that way. In his essay, “Thinking of Emerson,” Cavell writes, parenthetically to a discussion of how we are to deal with life’s discontinuities, or as I would like to call them, all the barriers that stand in the way of a nostalgic sense of authenticity:

In Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, knowing how to go on, as well as knowing when to stop, is exactly the measure of our knowing, or learning, in certain of its main regions or modes, for example, in the knowledge we have of our words. Onward thinking [an Emerson phrase from his essay “History”], on the way, knowing how to go on [a Wittgenstein phrase from *Philosophical*

⁵⁵ Cavell, “Ending the Waiting Game,” p. 162.

Investigations §155] are of course inflections or images of the religious idea of The Way, inflections which specifically deny that there is a place at which our ways end. Were philosophy to concede such a place, one knowable in advance of its setting out, philosophy would cede its own autonomy.⁵⁶

Based on this passage, we can describe the seeker in two ways.

In one case, we have the seeker who is a philosopher, who does not know where she will end up; a condition we saw above Cavell describes as living life as an improvisation within the disorders of desire. Of course, the disorders of desire could be religious as well as secular, but for this type of seeker its region is not one where philosophy gives up its rights. Here the image might be of someone who is carrying on a dialogue with God and/or the Church, but does not know how it will end; or is exploring, in whatever groping fashion, for some understanding of the (ever evolving) enigmas of her existence. There is no known outcome here, only the search.

In the other case, the seeker is someone who does in fact know there is The Way but cannot seem to find it from where she currently is. Then she might need a guide, as Dante needed Vergil and Beatrice, and Augustine needed God's promptings. In this case, the seeker might use philosophy, but is not in the end a philosopher. In the former case, the seeker is not searching for her authentic self, but hoping to create a provisional one that will allow her some contact and evolving understanding of her enigmas of existence. In the latter case, to use the image Cavell used in discussing Eliot, the seeker is someone who knows what the book says but is having trouble seeing the way the book applies to her life, how she hears the voice of the Church. Chapter 20 of *A Secular Age* describes some of the ways that seekers of the latter type can cease to hear the voice of the Church or understand the words of the Book. I think this is an accurate description of the way that Taylor writes about most of his exemplars of conversion, including Hopkins. It also coheres with his mentioning the functional role of Taizé communities. But, and this is the crucial point, this kind of seeker knows what she is looking for and is failing

⁵⁶ Stanley Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, p. 18.

to find it. She is trying to discover herself (again), and believes there is a self there to be discovered. The causes of that failure can be as different as the various contingencies forcing conformity on her, with the resulting feeling of being worked on by forces outside her that keep her out of attunement, or it can reside in her lack of attunement with the voice of the Church due to her own idiosyncrasies.

With these images in front of us, though, it becomes more difficult to see how the seeker of The Way is significantly different from the dweller, beyond the fact that the dweller has never lost contact with The Way (or has found it again). Still I want to keep open the conceptual space such that we can perceive a significant difference between any kind of seeker and a dweller.

Cavell shows what he takes to be the decisive difference between Emerson's picture of philosophical seeking and Heidegger's notion of dwelling. He quotes Heidegger: "The *thanc* [thought] means man's inmost mind, the heart, the heart's core, that innermost essence of man which reaches outward most fully and to the outermost limits." The affinity between this thought and Taylor's notion of authenticity is sufficiently clear. After this quote from Heidegger, Cavell continues:

The substantive disagreement with Heidegger, shared by Emerson and Thoreau, is that the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving. ... For the significance of leaving lies in its discovery that you have settled something, that you have felt enthusiastically what there is to abandon yourself to, that you can treat the others there are as those to whom the inhabitation of the world can now be left.⁵⁷

This is not an easy passage to clarify, nor will I try to discover all its meanings. What is salient, though, for the purposes of thinking about dwellers and seekers is that seeking, in the philosophical sense, is a matter of leaving something behind. Aron Vinegar has accurately captured at least a minimum of what this passage is trying to convey: "... the word "abandonment" in Cavell's lexicon, ... [has] connotations of enthusiasm, ecstasy, leaving, relief, quitting, going onward, release, shunning, allowing, delivering, trusting, suffering,

⁵⁷ This and the previous quote from Heidegger are from Cavell, "Thinking of Emerson," in *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, p. 19. The quote from Heidegger is from his *What is Called Thinking* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1976), p. 144.

and binding."⁵⁸ What is important to note is that all these connotations are responses to some experience, an experience that has the shape of Emerson's disorientation in not knowing where he is. It is then up to us, in the improvisation of the disorders of desire, to discover not ourselves, but something out there to which we can abandon ourselves. Self-knowledge, recognizing the enigmas of our existence, becomes a response to that experience. Those who dwell cannot have that experience, because they have inhabited and settled. In the case of those dwelling in the Church, or those seekers of attunement with the voice of the Church, the self-knowledge is something to be discovered. The philosophical seeker, though, abandons and in abandoning, in discovering what captures her interest, learns about herself – perhaps continually – though not who she essentially is.

I conclude, finally, with two questions and a tentative answer. Can the philosophical seeker abandon herself to the Church? If so, what would that mean the Church would have to become? I think the answer to the first question is yes, and the answer to the second is that we do not have a clue, other than to say it would speak in a very different voice, one that was as improvisational as the seeker's. Can the Church be improvisational and remain a Church? Answering this question, I can do no better than evoke Cavell's poignant phrase at the end of his essay "Ending the Waiting Game:" "We hang between."⁵⁹ That is, we cede philosophy to religion or else we recognize that the Church must change in ways that allow seekers to seek (with no *telos* in sight) and dwellers to become seekers. This strikes me as the most urgent task of those who provide the voice of the Church today.

⁵⁸ Aron Vinegar, *I Am a Monument: On Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 20.

⁵⁹ Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," p. 162.